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GAGOSIAN GALLERY





THE RIGHT WAY TO DO WRONG, 2010. INSTALLATION VIEW. IMAGE COURTESY GAGOSIAN GALLERY, BEVERLY HILLS.

AARON YOUNG

ASSESSING CONTENTMENT THROUGH THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES

written by Maxwell Williams photographed by Chloe Aftel

THE EXEMPLARS OF THE AMERICAN BIKER BAD boy—a small sample comprises James Dean, Sonny Barger, and Captain America—are mythic wrong numbers comically Harley-ing away down red desert highways, gruffly posturing their way through close shaves with Johnny Law, a cigarette tailored between chapped lips. Sex is inherent; the taciturn, jeans-and-t-shirt-donning man's man, a revving engine between his inseam, rides through every good girl's dreams. The public's fascination with the ultimate figure of horsepower-driven free will can be traced to our hard-wired instinct to rebel, to find excitement in our structured societal norms, to dream of being cool and fucking the sexiest person you can. "Sex is better with bad boys?" Aaron Young cocks his head and drags on his American Spirit. "The thing with that is if I answer that question, then I'm already putting myself as the bad boy."

It's probably not fair to start the story that way—Young has been sidled with the dilettante image for a good part of his storied career—but it's not without merit. In one particular series of artworks, he creates virile, man-vs.-machine experiences, rippling with an interplay between a group of tire burnout specialists—who've been hired to spin their tires over metallic canvases to create circular abstractions—and Young's devil-may-care chutzpah. "I was the kid in the neighborhood that was the 'Mikey-will-do-it' kid," Young admits. "I've always had that thing in me: yes, I'll do it. I'm not interested in the bravado; I'm not interested in the hero-

ics. It's a little bit darker than that. I'm running around my studio with a motorcycle flipping and burning out and throwing rubber in my face and smoke down my lungs every day, and it doesn't really bother me, because I guess I still have that little kid's mentality of fearlessness or indestructibility. I always have that instinct, so I'm interested in that instinct."

Young has been flu-ridden for the past week, so he's looking worn and unshaven in his Chateau Marmont bungalow, but somehow it makes him look tougher, badder. He's youthful looking at 38—his birthday falling on the day of the interview—and he has a penchant for fashion. He bartered a motorcycle painting with menswear designer Adam Kimmel for a lifetime supply of suits, and his girlfriend runs a fashion boutique in Miami. "She dresses me," Young laughs, "although she dresses me in a lot of my own clothes." Additionally, his artwork is very in vogue right now, evidenced by his recent solo exhibition at Gagosian Gallery's Beverly Hills location, which attracted the likes of Liz Goldwyn and Chloë Sevigny to the opening. Consisting of a series of 24-karat gold-plated police barriers and razor wire, a few new burnout paintings ("The brass [panels are] plated in black nickel, so they look like the surface of a Judd sculpture"), and two wrecking balls made of hollow glass, which are filled with cigarette ash, naturally.

To fashion the wrecking balls, Young traveled to Murano, Italy's famed "Glass Island," and worked with the world's finest glassmakers. This impulse to work with skilled craftspeople is central to Young's work.

The riders, led by burnout superstar Wink 1100, are all on payroll from rapper 50 Cent, for instance. In other words, they're the expert motorcycle burnout riders to Murano's expert glassmakers. "It's just tapping into the specialty," says Young, "or to this clique or this subculture, and teasing something out of it."

There's a simple visual gag in the wrecking balls: an object that is known for destruction has been neutered of its power and turned into something beautiful and fragile. The destruction has been internalized and illustrated by the cigarette ashes, which, when the wrecking balls swing ever-so-slightly as they hang from the ceiling, cascade to the bottom and resemble an explosion. "I like something that's smooth, but also clumsy," Young explains. "I like to juxtapose those things. I think there's a great tension and a calamity. When things happen like that in life, it makes me laugh. Something blossoms out of that thought. If you put this thing together and you put this thing together, there's a bit of a train wreck of thought. The gestalt of it, when you put the parts together, you're just kind of like, 'Wow, that pushed me in a totally different direction.'"

Perhaps it's that attraction to the unexpected that allows him to enjoy watching reactions to his work. To this extent, Young turns positively twee. "I'm not around to spread glee," he says, "but I do enjoy when I can blow somebody away with what I'm doing. It's like watching a movie with somebody that hasn't seen it. You already know what's going to happen, but you're just watching them to see their reaction."