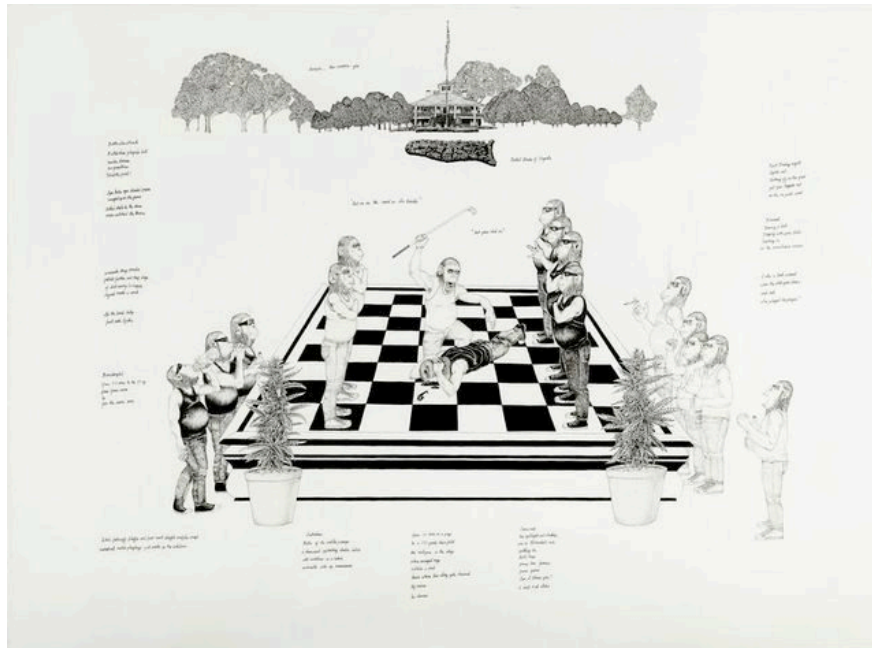


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HYPERALLERGIC Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

**Freestyling Animals and Signifying Rappers, by Alicia Eler
(October 30, 2014)**



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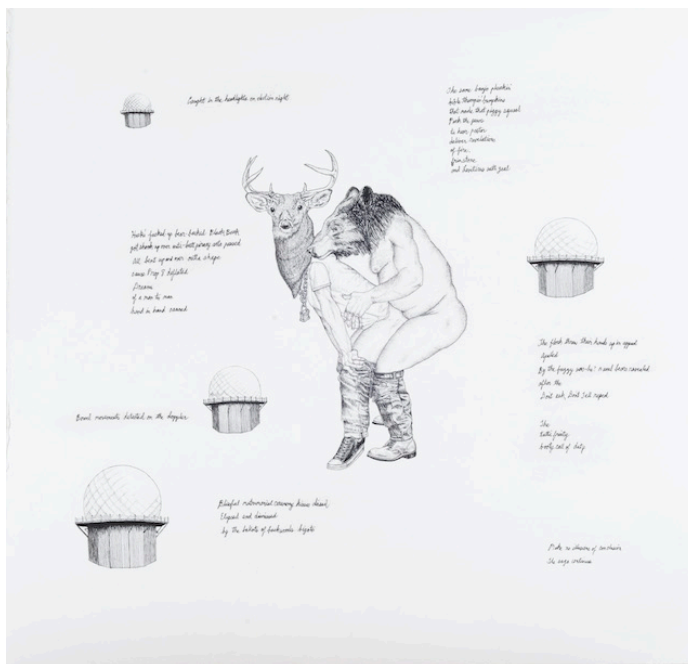
LOS ANGELES — Behind every face there is a mask. In Ray Anthony Barrett's solo exhibition *Word is Bond* at Diane Rosenstein Fine Arts in Hollywood, the artist investigates American cultural identities through the use of anthropomorphized masks. Dividing up the four walls of the gallery's project room, Barrett considers the masked identities of sexualities, the redundancy and spectacle of American mass media's 24-hour infotainment cycle, and contemporary iterations of Manifest Destiny as embodied through consumer culture's commodification of native figures like Crazy Horse and other American Spirits and "spirits."

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Barrett also wades into the billowing paradoxes of 90s hip-hop culture, playing with words much like rappers themselves. In the centerpiece of his exhibition, “Porchmonkey Pawns for Manicured Lawns Jockey For Position Without Inquisition (Battle Chess), (from *Porch Monkeys*)” (2014), an arrangement of figures that Barrett has named with the slur “porchmonkeys” line the squares of a giant chessboard, squaring off, arranged as they would stand on a basketball court or in a nightclub. Wearing shades, they stand with an unflinching gaze, watching one of their own get beaten with a golf club, a symbol of wealth and power. Barrett’s careful cursive above the chessboard brings it together with dry wit: “Get your club on,” he writes, as if egging the viewer on to further question the characters’ motives. The viewer just gazes intently, wondering who will take the crown.

Hyperallergic got in touch with Barrett to learn more about his nuanced social commentary and the way masks function in the contemporary mythologies that he creates by putting pen to paper, both lyrically and figuratively.

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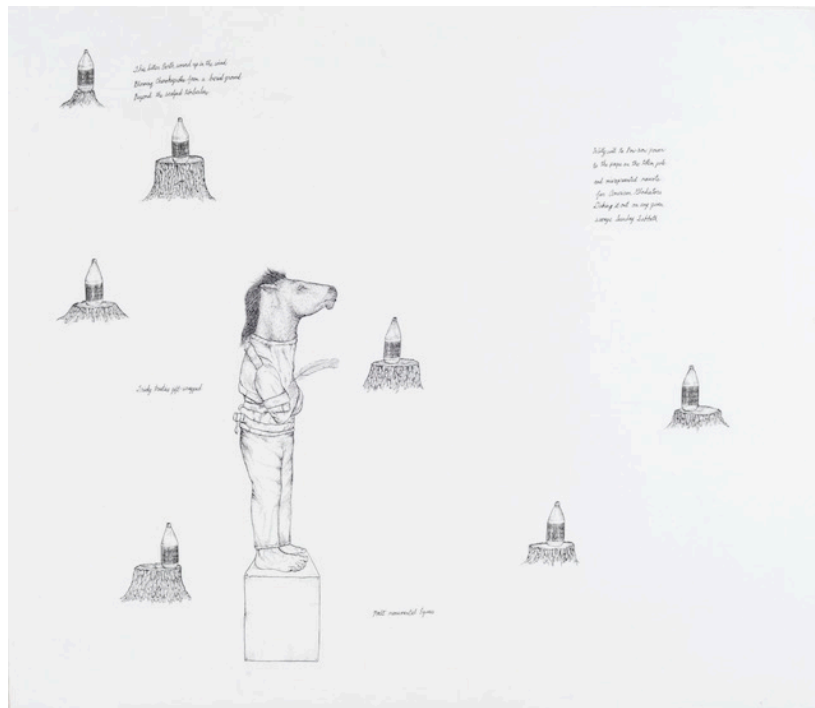
Alicia Eler: Each image is so time and labor-intensive, and at certain points I look at one and just think of the lost art of illustration, or at least using techniques of illustration. Tell me a bit about the process of each drawing, and why you use ink-on-paper? Talk a bit about the call-and-response technique you utilize in each drawing. To me it is like a visualization of the call-and-response technique in music, where one musician throws out a sound and the second one responds to it. It's interesting to think about call-and-response within the space of

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one artist calling out and responding to the work that he makes, which also acts as a sort of mirroring back-and-forth of ideas, like a conversation with one's own creative psyche that's all contained in a singular image. Tell me about the process here for you, your influences, etc.

Ray Anthony Barrett: I free-associate and write rhymes in pocket journals everyday. It's like freestyling. Instead of improvising lyrics vocally, my freestyle is a handwritten flow — a stream-of-consciousness, which is the source of all my imagery.

For instance, a word or line will stand out from one of these flows and I'll then draw in response to it — often as literally as possible. I'll write verses on the same page in response to the drawing, culminating in a pictorial rhyme, which is like a conversation with myself where I fulfill the role of both caller and respondent. I think there's something poetic in the process of a work that starts out as a line of ink on paper and ends up as lines of ink on paper — resulting in another form of mirroring.



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AE: *Animals! Why so many animal masks for each of the human figures in your works? A small baby becomes a puppy, a bull dyke on a bike becomes a bull dog (or dawg), the Crazy Horse figure is literally a man with a horse head, and the pawns on the chess board all become these sort of aloof chimpanzees. We've talked a bit about the social masks revealing more than they conceal, but I was also thinking about the language of corporate advertising — like Joe Camel, the Camel Cigarettes guy. In the 70s he was this handsome, rugged blonde man with one of those sleezy mustaches — an adventurer of sorts targeting "young urban men, ages 18 to 34, middle class with moderate liberal social values," which we could easily identify as an early hipster type. Joe Camel (Old Joe) took over in the late 80s, thus anthropomorphizing the Camel Guy of the 70s. So I'm seeing a through line between this advertising technique and your critique of the commodification of indie, countercultures, and subcultures. Talk about how this relates to your work.*

RAB: The animal masks are derived from the anthropomorphic language of the derogatory, the slur, the slander, the slight, and sometimes a historical figure, or a logo.

I think of it as a form of signifyin', which is a type of wordplay that is full of cultural references and metaphors that complicate meaning. It has links to the tactics employed by tricksters in African American folklore. I consider my Porchmonkeys and Jungle Bunnies to be part of a folk lineage that traces back to Br'er Rabbit and the Signifying monkey, and even further to their origins on the African Continent.

I think labels are like masks or totems. And identity is like a masquerade. We have been using animals to identify with groups for tens of thousands of years. Corporations that have animal spokespeople and mascots understand this aspect of our culture and exploit it to get people to identify with their brand.

AE: *I'm interested in the arrangement in the gallery — everything is at eye-level except for the drawing ". . . While Jungle Bunnies Hip-hop The Doom Broom (from Porch Monkeys)" (2014). Why?*

RAB: I used the rhythm in the drawings as a guide for the installation of the exhibition. Having that piece hung near the floor has two functions, it creates an interruption and it invites the viewer to get low. In Black music and African textiles there's a tradition of syncopation — an unexpected break in patterning. Often a dancer will respond to such a break in music by dropping to the floor.

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AE: *In each of the drawings, there's this clear flow of lyrics — they're quite poetic and definitely 90s hip-hop-inspired, which is fascinating to think about in relation to the way that corporations/big brands/advertising are slowly co-opting the language of counterculture, as usual, rendering it all empty signifiers, meaninglessness mass marketing as we see in this Gawker article about "the saddest tweet of all time" from Burger King's Twitter account. Can continuing to use hip-hop rap lyrics and poeticisms work to combat the homogenization of language, particularly on social media and in the urban dictionary?*

RAB: Yes, to an extent. Hip-hop is a trickster vernacular — it's full of hybrids, playful, always shape-shifting, and as soon as the society of the spectacle, to borrow Debord's terminology, gets a hold of it, it's already changing into something else — a new word is born from the source of the hip-hop lexicon and the old one remains an empty commodity to be consumed. Like jiggy it's got no juice anymore, and hasn't for a long time. With nearly eight million definitions, the open-sourced Urban Dictionary is an example of how the rules of "combat" demand more of a personal, micro-level engagement — like guerilla warfare, but with the alchemy of words.

AE: *There is a lyrical story you're telling through the arrangement and continuity of these works. What is it, and why is it important today?*

RAB: In hip-hop phraseology "word is bond" translates to "you have my word." In this sense, the story is a personal account of how I process a bombardment of images, language, and history. It's a point-of-view, or like Outkast said, "another Black experience." It's important because this poetic process leads to more questions than answers, which creates space for more possibilities to construct meaning out of myth.