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Installation view of "Pawnography" at Jack Tilton Gallery

Jeff Sonhouse
The Sacrificial Goat
2008
Jack Tilton Gallery

Jeff Sonhouse
Condoleezza Rice
2007
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PAWN SHOP CONCEPTUALISM
by Ben Davis

Jeff Sonhouse, "Pawnography," Nov. 6-Dec. 23, 2008, at Tilton Gallery, 8 East 76th Street, New York, N.Y. 10021

The contemporary art world is so anything-goes that it is easy to miss what makes a painter like Jeff Sonhouse (b. 1968) such a genuine oddball.

Certainly, the small gathering of his works currently on view at Jack Tilton Gallery shows off a style that is instantly recognizable. New York-born and -based, Sonhouse received his MFA from Hunter College in 2001. He appeared in the "Frequency" survey of contemporary art at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2006, and is currently in "30 Americans" at the Rubell Family Collection in Miami. His work focuses almost exclusively on portraits of African-Americans, in the past mainly African-American men. These figures are almost always stiffly posed, blankly staring out at the viewer. Sonhouse uses a flamboyant palette, and likes to clash fields of flat color up against planes of wallpaper pattern or harlequin-esque diamond print. He often adds collage touches to his cartoony portraits -- a signature Sonhouse move is to use layers of painted matchsticks or clumps of steel wool to convey the kinky texture of African-American hair.

This style has, in the past, led his interpreters (in the catalogue Tilton has published with the current exhibition, for instance) to dub his paintings homages to the idea of the "Black Dandy" -- George Clinton, Jimi Hendrix, Superfly, et al. This is fine as far as it takes you -- wheeling colored starbursts meant to represent stage-lights feature in many of his backgrounds -- but the new show undercuts this reading a bit. Its most prominent works involve African-American public figures of an altogether more sober cast: Colin Powell, pictured testifying to the United Nations to get the go-ahead for the Bush Administration to invade Iraq, and Condoleezza Rice, represented via a scowling, truncated rendering of her head floating atop two colored spotlights (Sonhouse's Rice portrait -- his first picture of a woman, to my knowledge -- is an interpellation of another painting of the Secretary of State by Luc Tuymans). Roger Toussant, the New York Transit Workers Union head who led a bitter strike two years ago, also gets a canvas. He is pictured in a snappy yellow suit and tie, with diamond-checked, yellow-and-gray skin.

We'll come back to the meaning of these pieces in a second. In general, what makes Sonhouse's work seem distinctive is the way that it deliberately falls between two art-world stools. He is a painter, and clearly has a real affection for color and texture, but his work doesn't display the self-conscious painterliness of, say, Kehinde Wiley, who shows off his spectacular technique with every brushstroke even as his pictures play with cultural stereotypes. If Wiley is referencing the preppy bravado of David and Ingres, Sonhouse seems to channel the stiffness of folk art and the simplified modeling of comic books.

Jeff Sonhouse
Condoleezza Rice (detail)
2007
Jack Tilton Gallery

Jeff Sonhouse
Tougher Than Two Muthaf%#@ers Roger Toussant
2006
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Jeff Sonhouse
Tougher Than Two Muthaf%#@ers Roger Toussant (detail)
2006
Jack Tilton

On the other hand, as is the case with the work of many African-American artists, the demand to read Sonhouse's oeuvre as a "statement" about identity pushes towards a kind of de facto conceptualism. Sonhouse himself touts such a reading by titling his show "Pawnography," framing these newer compositions as some sort of investigation of the "concept" of the "pawn," that is, the ways that African-American public figures are and are not tools of the powers-that-be. It's the kind of reading that makes formal properties supporting players to message. (From the press release, a thesis statement: "In Pawnography, Sonhouse examines what it means to be a pawn within the context of politics and within the realm of particular individuals.")

Yet it is important to note that even when Sonhouse is at his most programmatic in discussing the work here, he recoils from drawing out a truly this-equals-that kind of narrative. "So who is really the pawn? Who's really doing the pawning?," the catalogue quotes him as saying, summing up his current enterprise. "In this way, my work is meant to be open-ended. Everything is up for interpretation."

The genius of the work is the way that this ambivalence is translated into formal terms. Sonhouse has dubbed his works "composites," seemingly an attempt to position them in a no-man's-land between 2D composition and the rebus-like bric-a-brac familiar from high-concept installation. In this light, the characteristic flatness of his painting style seems a deliberate attempt to clash with the three-dimensional elements he tacks onto them. By such means Sonhouse achieves a kind of formal uneasiness, an unresolved, neither/nor kind of esthetic -- neither painting nor collage. The individual elements are given a feeling of being *out-of-place*, an affect that seems relevant given that the topic of his work is African-American figures as objects of public scrutiny.

A small work on paper hung near the gallery entrance is emblematic: It depicts a mouth, nose and sunglasses floating in the midst of white space, the wisp of a characteristically Sonhousian diamond pattern seeming to have been begun around the forehead area. It appears half-finished. The floating features, however, are famed by a crown of hair made from matches, which have been lit and extinguished, thereby giving the mane a pronounced materiality and leaving a wispy jet of soot streaking up off the paper onto the white wall above it. The incompleteness of the face is complemented by the explosive hair that literally bursts off the page.

Tilton's upstairs gallery offers a canvas depicting a boy's choir, stiffly posed, in purple and orange suits and bowties, with mask-like, diamond-checked visages. Tendrils of paperclips project out of their painted mouths, jutting stiffly out into the gallery. In its way, this device is a kind of key to what Sonhouse does: It neither depicts something literally, nor offers a "commentary" on it. Rather, it is an example of the artist straining to convey visually and texturally not an idea, but a sensation.

Performance is a recurring theme in Sonhouse's work, indicated by the constant presence of stage lights and the incessant suggestion of masks. Perhaps his portraits are allegories for Sonhouse's own position, expressing the inherent weirdness of having his work scrutinized as a "statement" about race in general, the sense of performing a role rather than being received as an individual artist.

Maybe so. But then this interpretation presents a question: If in general his portraits are figures for the artist, do his newer paintings really represent a sense of solidarity with the "pawns" they depict? Are his new paintings really meant as sympathetic -- even in a tortured, conflicted way -- towards the likes of Condoleezza Rice, a

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Untitled
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Jeff Sonhouse
Too Small to Succeed (detail)
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woman whose response to Hurricane Katrina was to go shoe-shopping at Ferrigamo?

The answer is yes and no. A series of small studies for the Powell painting tell the story. They are variations on the same scene, going from Powell testifying alone, face blacked out, to Powell with a dopey grin flanked by two scowling white male figures, to a simple black-lined cartoon of Powell alone, gesturing forcefully. The completed canvas has Powell's face obscured by a disfiguring mask of glittery slashes, as if the various senses of the scene could not be resolved. Overall, the works are best read not as definitive pronouncements on Powell, but as Sonhouse's own working out of an ambiguous feeling, a contradictory sense of identification and repulsion (the painting is titled *The Sacrificial Goat*).

The point is this: It is mischaracterizing the work to say that it "examines what it means to be a pawn" in any analytical way. Its center of gravity is more subjective, more inward-directed. It hinges on feelings Sonhouse projects onto the surface of his subjects regardless of their political status, rather than because of it. This is why Sonhouse's subjects vary so much -- from a mandarin like Powell to a labor leader like Toussant, or an anonymous blind man in a flamboyant coat -- even as the essential style and emotional tone remain the same.

Of course, the whole point of Sonhouse's neither/nor position, finally, is that despite his essentially subjective, esthete's sensibility, he also cannot quite escape his work being read as a larger statement either. His works are indeed "pawns" of a discourse that projects a conceptual reading onto them. It is this feeling of being made to testify despite oneself, finally, that may be why the most formally ingenious, textually complex and all-around satisfying work in the show -- a small facial portrait of a man with yellow-and-orange diamond-checked skin, yellow Koosh Ball-like hair and tiny blue-painted shells for eyes -- is given the jarring label *The Spirit of a Hypocrite*.

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