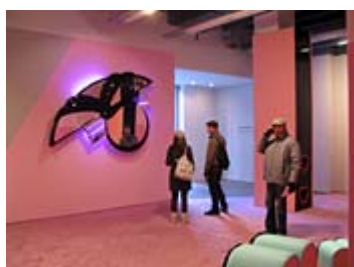


Print Article



Luis Gispert's *Smother* at Mary Boone Gallery



Installation view of "El Mundo Es Tuyo (The World Is Yours)" at Zach Feuer Gallery



Luis Gispert
Smother (still)
2008



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Smother (still)
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THE BLING GAME

by Ben Davis

Luis Gispert, "El Mundo es Tuyo (The World is Yours)," Jan. 12-Mar. 1, 2008, at Mary Boone Gallery, 541 W. 24th Street, and Jan. 12-Feb. 16, 2008, at Zach Feuer Gallery, 530 W. 24th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

Luis Gispert's new 26-minute film, *Smother*, currently on view at Mary Boone Gallery in Chelsea (with an accompanying show of sculptures at Zach Feuer gallery), is an impressive, avant-garde, pop-Freudian cocktail. It's one part Matthew Barney, clearly taking inspiration from the elder artist's dream-like, intimate narratives of mutation as it follows a young boy grappling with his own bodily functions, lust for his mother and transformation into a German shepherd. In an interview for Style.com, the artist tells Ana Finel Honigman that *Smother* is "semi-autobiographical, as an imagined past of Miami in the early '80s."

The other ingredient in Gispert's esthetic brew is more street-smart: *Scarface*. Of *Smother's* two lead adult actors, Steven Bauer actually played Al Pacino's Cuban mobster sidekick in the Brian de Palma classic, while Taryn Manning (of *Hustle and Flow* and *8 Mile*, among other films) is clearly dolled up to look like Michelle Pfeiffer's mob moll character. The major action takes place in a mansion, the style of which is aptly described by the press release as "opulent, decadent, narco-nouveau riche," à la *Scarface*. And the title of the show, "The World Is Yours," is a line from the movie (not to mention the subtitle of the recent *Scarface* video game). It's an "imagined past," sure, but it's not just Gispert's imagination; it's the past seen through celluloid glasses.

The mixture is about right for Gispert (b. 1974). Jersey-born, Miami-bred and currently Brooklyn-based, he graduated from the sculpture department of Yale in 2001 -- Barney's training ground. Gispert's art to date, however, has played as an intellectualized homage to adolescent culture, street culture and "bling": sculptures that incorporate gold hip-hop jewelry and massive speakers; staged photos of women in gaudy jewelry and cheerleader uniforms; and short videos like *Can It Be*, featuring a smiling cheerleader mouthing along to the sadistic, pornographic sketch from a rap CD, and *Bum Rush*, a close up of a woman's bottom in purple lame hot pants, jiggling to a soundtrack of bombs exploding.

Some of this recurs in *Smother*. The new film features ample images of giant speakers, for instance (it has a sparse, throbbing soundtrack by the Miami experimental group Phoenicia). More generally, however, the setting drips with Gispert's characteristic eye for low-brow, kitschy excess, while his interest in the intersection of fetishistic, juvenile sexuality and cryptic menace structures the whole thing.

We first glimpse our protagonist, a young boy named Waylon, as he flops on his back in an empty kiddie pool, fully clothed, clutching a cardboard stereo to his chest and apparently peeing on himself until the plastic tub fills with urine. In the following scenes, we meet his



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boozed-up, controlling mother (Manning), happy to call him into bed with her to describe her dreams, or to bring him into the bathroom to sit on her lap as she pees, all the while threatening him with castration if he doesn't stop his bed-wetting. There is no apparent father figure (the artist tells Honigman that the opulent mansion the two share has been left to them by a lost drug dealer father).

We then follow Waylon as he explores the outside world on his bike, sneaking into a sinister building to watch a leering butcher character, "Carl" (Bauer) slaughter a hog. Carl ultimately befriends the boy, and offers him a ride home. In the final part of the film, Waylon inexplicably becomes a dog and watches, in canine form, as his mom shares cocktails and flirts with Carl. The climax, more or less, comes when Carl picks up the pooch and plops him into a waiting pot of hot oil, a spectacularly surreal scene that features zigzagging, *Tron*-style lasers shooting from the animal's boiling flesh.

Smother plays out a tightly choreographed Oedipus narrative, charged with overtones of race and class longing. Everything in the film has a precise place in the symbolism related to the boy's painful separation from his mother and movement towards sexual maturity. Thus, the central dilemma of the film's early part is that Waylon can't control his bladder; in the last scene, he watches the sinister butcher character -- standing in as role model for the absent, sinister drug dealer father -- share drinks with his mother, thus offering the model of a mature, heterosexual relationship.

Similarly, at the beginning, we see Waylon toting a fake cardboard stereo, while in the Cronenbergian final moments, the boiled body of the dog pulses with electricity and gives birth to a real, gleaming metal stereo, which Carl yanks from the corpse in a flourish of guts, and makes off with. The boiling of the boy/dog thus represents our protagonist's painful process of separation from his mother into the "real world" of manhood (Gispert says as much to Honigman of the final scene: "In this way, Carl liberates the boy from his mother.")

All this dream-like symbolism is fun to decode -- but what does it actually mean? *Smother* tempts you to read it as a psychoanalytic exorcism of childhood issues, perhaps. But that's where the reference to *Scarface* intervenes. Among other things, that film revolves around its own queasy interfamilial romance -- Tony Montana's hopeless lust for his own sister. So at the least, you have to think that any "autobiographical" element in *Smother* is decisively interpenetrated with borrowed memories, strung together into a vivid, free-associative new form. And at the most, this indicates that the "Oedipus complex" is itself just a reference that Gispert is riffing on, every bit as much a knowing citation as Manning's Pfeiffer-esque haircut.

Perhaps the "autobiographical" emphasis should just fall elsewhere. Rent the DVD of *Scarface*. It comes with an accompanying Def Jam documentary about the influence of De Palma's classic on hip-hop style. So *Smother* may be, more than anything else, a kind of brainy, self-mythologizing origin story about this artist's own concern with "bling."

"Blinglike fashion is mostly surface -- a not very interesting, one-dimensional signifier," the artist tells Honigman, describing what interests him about the concept. More than just a description of a specific cultural phenomenon, Gispert seems to have generalized flamboyant flatness into an entire artistic program. Thus, *Smother* itself, with its involved intellectual choreography, makes a big show of meaningfulness. It seems to signify a wealth of personal meaning to be interpreted -- but the past it imagines turns out to be an impersonal symbolic game, drawing on borrowed references. All surface and no depth.

Luis Gispert
Smother (still)
 2008



Does *Smother* enact the twisted unconscious of pop culture, or show how pop culture has totally penetrated the unconscious? It's hard to say, or even to separate these two ways of looking at things in the movie's logic, where the most intimate personal drama is juiced together with larger-than-life Hollywood schlock. At any rate, it is Tony Montana who probably puts Gispert's creative philosophy best: "I always tell the truth," Pacino says in *Scarface*, in his terrible Cuban accent, "Even when I lie."

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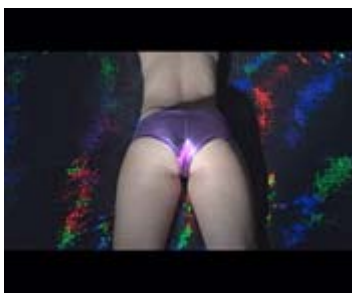
Luis Gispert
Smother (still)
 2008



Luis Gispert
Fucking Fake Flondes
 2005
 Zach Feuer Gallery



Luis Gispert
Untitled (Car Girls)
 2001
 Zach Feuer Gallery



Still from Luis Gispert's *Bum Rush*