



## Print Article



Shaun El C. Leonardo's performance "Steel Cage Match" at LMCC Swing Space, 2006



Still from Shaun El C. Leonardo's *The Highlights* (2004-2007), at March



Shaun El C. Leonardo's *Self Portrait Icon (Painting 4)* (2007), with dealer Kate Werble



## MAN AND SUPERMAN

by Ben Davis

Shaun El C. Leonardo, "The Whole 'Dam Show," Sept. 8-Oct. 5, 2007, at March, 83 Vandam Street, New York, N.Y. 10013

Even in the modest-sized show at Soho's newish March gallery, you can sense Shaun El C. Leonardo's artistic will to power. The Queens-born Leonardo (b. 1979), a 2005 graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute, has an emerging buzz around him. He's already been highlighted at a variety of venues, from Connecticut's Real Art Ways and el Museo del Barrio's current "(S) Files" show to last year's Art Basel Miami Beach.

Dramatically buff, he is known for exuberant performances as a costumed wrestler. In New York last year, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council funded a piece where he built a steel cage, then staged a bruising wrestling match with himself. He opened the March space in May with a performance where he wrestled 12 real opponents. The current show features video evidence of events -- an hour-long piece where he strides the streets of Peekskill, N.Y., in character with an enormous red cape and face paint, as well as an energetic montage of his various staged wrestling matches with himself, collectively titled "El Conquistador vs. Invisible Man." But the show focuses mainly on his graphic projects.

Leonardo says he is tackling themes of "masculinity," of a particularly adolescent, comic-book kind, playing with the role models and images that have shaped his self-perception. Thus, one wall at March features large plywood cutouts in the form of superheroes, painted in a spotty, cartoon style using sign enamel. One of these depicts a hulking muscleman, legs spread, sporting a macho headscarf, knee pads and gold gladiator boots; another, a sagging Thing-like character; a third, the fragmented couple of an ape-man wrestling some kind of helmeted warrior. All, supposedly, incorporate elements of exaggerated self-portraiture.

The second series of works, most connected to Leonardo's performances, are large photographic portraits of himself as "El Conquistador," bare-chested and with a mask familiar from "Lucha Libre," the popular, oft-parodied Mexican counterpart to WWF wrestling. At March, four large photos depict a masked Leonardo flexing his muscles in various settings, from bank vaults to a field of snow in Warsaw. Each work has been outfitted by the artist with a heavy, gaudy frame.

In the back gallery, a final series consists of six framed drawings depicting a matador in contest with a charging bull, in an animated but sketchy style. Once more, the preening bullfighter at the center of the action is supposedly a self-portrait (the drawings are titled "Self Portrait Corrida").

The assorted series do not represent a development; they are simultaneous and parallel projects. Taken collectively, a couple of things register. The first is an overriding flat emotional tone. The second is that the various types of work on view hit all the bases,

**Shaun El C. Leonardo**  
*Self Portrait Icon (Painting 1)*  
 2006  
 March



**Shaun El C. Leonardo**  
*Self Portrait Icon (Painting 3)*  
 2006  
 March



**Shaun El C. Leonardo**  
*Portrait of El C. (2)*  
 2007  
 March



Left to right: *Portrait of El C. (3)* and  
*Portrait of El C. (4)*

media-wise -- photo, painting, drawing, plus the videos -- even as Leonardo's concern -- his own image -- remains single-minded. The specific objects all reflect us back to the importance of the man's own self-invented persona as its core (the "El C." Leonardo insists on inserting into his name stands for "El Conquistador").

The "masculinity" spiel is a bit of a ruse -- the important thing about Leonardo's various avatars is not just that they are manly, but clearly that they are all objects of media adoration, whether the meticulously styled bull-fighter or the prancing pro-wrestler (and it must be said that, if his masturbatory wrestling matches mock the staginess of Lucha Libre, they also make it look fairly cool anyway). They are proxies for an artist hungry for the center of attention.

In short, if the works are about superheroes on the surface, their real object of identification is with the "superartist." The most obvious "role model" for Leonardo is not Superman or Thor but Matthew Barney, who launched his career with athletic performances focused around his own gleaming bod, then went on to develop an elaborate personal mythology.

The idea of the "superartist," however, designates more than just one influence; it is a contemporary artistic type, characteristic of figures whose personality is more important than the specific objects they produce, to the point that their oeuvres become a celebration of the power of their celebrity to mobilize others and catalyze interest. Superartists tend to have less a style than a single theme that they wield as a kind of brand -- what "death" is to Damien Hirst or Japanese cartoons are to Takashi Murakami, "masculinity" is to Leonardo. The rise of the superartist is intimately linked to speculation and hype (for this reason, the Chinese are the avant-garde in the production of superartists; think Cai Guo-Qiang, Ai Weiwei, Xu Zhen. . .). But it is also an actual style of art with an esthetic all its own, a fact that its echo in a still-developing career like Leonardo's proves.

Murakami's upcoming retrospective at MoCA L.A., with its inclusion of a fully functional Louis Vuitton boutique, is a reminder that branding and design are an organic part of the superartist enterprise, and not just peripheral concerns (in fact, the current cover of *Art + Auction* -- Murakami's gargantuan head orbited by bubbles containing his art, his Kaikai Kiki entourage, fashion models wearing his designs, etc., all on the same level -- is a perfect illustration of the concept). Leonardo, of course, does not design bags, but he is already self-merchandising -- thus the March show is also graced by a life-sized decal of himself as a lunging wrestler on the storefront window, yours for \$800 while the rest of the works are \$5,500-\$12,000.

But the ur work at March, in this respect, is free. It is the invitation card for the show itself, which features the artist posed against a burgundy background. He looks very GQ -- jacket open, tie slightly undone -- even as his posture -- reclining imperiously, hands casually flexed on the arms of his chair, legs open, gaze cocked towards the camera -- recall one of his own superhero self-portraits, *Painting 4*. Draped around him are his three March dealers, Niki Cosgrove, Esther Kim and Kate Werble, in black cocktail dresses and heels.

Now it is true that this image is "about" themes of masculinity, playing off of a kind of Latin playboy image. Like his photo portraits as "El Conquistador" with their gaudy frames, there is a slightly mocking air. But this ironic distance from his theme is also the space where Leonardo can slip himself in, to assume the role at the center of the spotlight. Thus, the photo is at the same time an homage, in the mode of superartist elder statesman Jeff Koons, to the power of raw charisma to propel art, and the way that play-acting at being a



Drawing from Shaun El C. Leonardo's  
"Self Portrait Corrida" series

celebrity can deliver the goods in real life, creating its own reality. It is a portrait of Leonardo as both mensch and Übermensch.

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**Shaun El C. Leonardo**  
*El C. Portrait*  
2007  
March



Invitation to Shaun El C. Leonardo's  
"The Whole 'Dam Show" at March