

March 2007

Jeff Gabel

SPENCER BROWNSTONE GALLERY

YOUNG ARTIST THAT'S IN HIS STUDIO RIGHT WHEN HE FIGURES OUT HE GAVE UP EVERYTHING HE HAS FOR ART + DOESN'T HAVE ENOUGH MONEY TO MAKE HARDLY ANY MORE WORKS, AND HE'LL PROBABLY BE LONELY FOR A LONG TIME, SO HE JUST SAT DOWN IN A CHAIR AND STARTED CRYING. On a six-inch-square wood panel, Jeff Gabel pairs the scrawled caption of a 2006 pencil drawing with a fuzzy sketch of the titular sad sack slumped in despair against a blank white ground. The Brooklyn-based Gabel specializes in just this sort of compact but devastating personality profile, summing up in run-on sentences exactly what makes the individuals he pictures so obnoxious, egotistical, deluded, disillusioned, and generally all too human.

In his recent third solo appearance at Spencer Brownstone Gallery, Gabel juxtaposed fifteen such small panels with four larger works in pencil on canvas, and a thirty-one-minute video adaptation of Thomas Mann's *Gladius Dei*. Demonstrating a level of confidence and ambition that contrasts starkly with the childlike awkwardness of their visual aesthetic, the two-dimensional works frequently confront grand, universal themes and enlist historical and intellectual colossi; *Interregnum Master, or, a Right Wall of Creativity*, 2007, for example, outlines the script for a one-act play based on *Salwäre; or, the Magdalena of Bozen*, by Carl Zuckmayer, and *Full House*, by Stephen J. Gould, in which the artist debates the fluctuating occurrence of creative genius with Gould, Thomas Stolperer, Firmin, Dr. Schramek, Little Lemming, and Peter Insam. And in *The Pope*, 2006, we are treated—in response to an imaginary magazine competition—to Gabel's vision of what "the last pope ever" (to be chosen in 2118) will look like.

Gabel's sense of humor is sardonic and embittered, certainly, but it is leavened by a sensitivity to the absurd and the trash-cultural that allows him to pose—then answer in exacting detail—questions including "What if Don Johnson was God? What would the answer to a Protestant prayer go like?" He introduces his characters (which he claims are mostly imaginary, though one wonders) as "some guy from the 1970's," "some fucking woman in her 40's," or simply "a fucker," but the deftness with which he goes on to articulate their social situations and intellectual-emotional insecurities gives the lie to the notion that he is merely a cynic (though he plays with the possibility to disarming effect). And despite the finger-pointing, the work implies self-deprecation, too (a bespectacled figure in a 2006 drawing captioned SOME GUY TELLING THE INTERVIEWER ON A NEWS PROGRAM ABOUT SWINGERS THAT HIS BIGGEST FEAR IN LIFE IS THAT HE'LL TURN 80 AND REALIZE HE DIDN'T GET ENOUGH RAMMING IN DURING HIS LIFE, for example, bears an uncanny resemblance to the artist).

Perhaps it is simply because we hear it spoken, or because it is more sustained than elsewhere in the show, but it is in the narration of the video that Gabel's verbal ingenuity feels most remarkable. By employing an apparently casual and determinedly contemporary American idiom in the retelling of a story originally published in Germany in 1902, and adopting a deadpan but somehow still affecting delivery in conjunction with a series of still, drawn images, the artist achieves a strikingly successful and atmospheric interpretation. As is the case with Gabel's works on wood and canvas, the humor in *Gladius Dei*, 2007, initially veils but ultimately enhances a sincerity of intent, allowing him license to address whatever themes he chooses in almost whatever manner he prefers, and to make the idea stick. It would be difficult indeed, for example, to dismiss the promise contained in the description of protagonist Hieronymus's ill-fated encounter with a Munich gallerist: WELL, IF YOU'RE LUCKY, YOU'LL MEET ONE OF THESE WOMEN IN PERSON THAT YOU'RE USED TO SEEING THROUGH ART, ONE OF THEM RICH AND HOT CHICKS MADE OUT OF IMITATION TIZIAN-BLONDE ALL DONE UP WITH JEWELS WHERE SOME GENIUS PORTRAIT PAINTER MAKES HER HOTNESS SO IT LASTS TILL ETERNITY.

—Michael Wilson

Jeff Gabel, *Young artist that's in his studio, 2006*, pencil on wood panel, 6 x 6 x 2¼".



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