

## New York

### Ivan Witenstein

Derek Eller Gallery

For young adult readers, the enduring appeal of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—that is, in school districts that have neither banned nor burned the book—resides in the mutual exchange of self-knowledge that the two main characters obtain as they float down the Mississippi. In Twain's classic, Huck becomes, with every passing steamboat, a little bit more like Jim. And Jim becomes, as he sees again and again the preferred treatment his white raft-mate receives, a little more like Huck. A satisfying psychological parity is achieved, if only temporarily, yet the text has continually been used to justify everything from school desegregation to, one must conclude, the persistence of the *Lethal Weapon* series.

Every bi-racial team-up, it seems, from Chris Rock and Anthony Hopkins to Robert DeNiro and Eddie Murphy, seeks to strip away the ethnic badinage and vernacular armor to reveal the same beating sentimental heart, the same red blood coursing like a stream of wondrous epiphanies in an ABC After School Special. This strikes me as replacing a suburban stereotype—say, all African Americans are carjacking, drug-dealing pimps—with another,

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Witenstein is more concerned with dredging up from that soupy quagmire not crystal-clear explanations as one might expect, but incredibly scrambled allegories. The well, in Witenstein's vision, is murky, roiling, and possessed of a darkly opaque surface.

I mention Huck Finn because Witenstein, like Twain and Conrad before him, has arrayed his cast fiberglass and epoxy resin sculptures as if they were floating or sinking in some surreally haunting La Brea tar pit of the mind. Whereas allegorical rivers in literature tend to flow one way— inexorably toward redemption or damnation, depending on the

the kamikaze headband that Witenstein's figure wears references the infamous Russian Roulette scene in *The Deer Hunter*, where Christopher Walken blows his brains out in a "game" with his Viet Cong captors. The steroid-pumped ectomorph that anchors this piece, was inspired by the black superhero Mr. Terrific, and, if convention holds, he is no doubt an avenger of the oppressed and downtrodden, not to mention a seemingly invulnerable role model for adolescent people of color. A large embossed tattoo on his arm reads "FAIR PLAY," in case the truth and justice angle is unclear. Arrayed as an alien roadside

holds up his little buddy like Gilligan cozying up to the Skipper. Unlike Twain's conclusion, though, where Huck and Jim, in banding together against a common enemy—namely, anyone who would step in the way of their freedom—learn to put aside their petty differences in favor of a weightless existential drift, Witenstein's tragi-comic human gargoyles bear the pop-cultural weight of generations of fragmented associations. Never the smoothest of voyages, existential or otherwise.

—David Hunt



Ivan Witenstein, *Here Comes the Son*, 2002. Fiberglass and epoxy resin, 84 x 67 x 40 in.

more pernicious (because more commercially veiled) urban marketing stereotype that not only are we all born equal underneath our verbal tics and homegrown fashions, but that same equality can be homogeneously repackaged to better serve fickle focus group tastes or to exert a measure of bland, but effective social control. Art, and especially sculpture, is able to short-circuit this, because it acts as a well and not just a mirror. While the metaphor typically suggests depth, Ivan

political climate—Witenstein's river has multiple tributaries that all seem to spill into a single capacious basin. His estuarial imagination is best exemplified in *Here Comes the Knight* (2002), where the striated torso of a body-builder becomes a pediment for a gangly, bug-eyed boy balanced precariously in the Kung Fu crane stance. Consider the twisting Möbius strip of racial and ethnic implications: Ralph Macchio, an Italian-American who played *The Karate Kid* (which I'm told this piece references), was taught by Pat Morita, a Japanese-American, who, in the movie, plays a Vietnam vet. Additionally,

attraction—not, one imagines, at your typical Frontier Village or totem-poled Quonset hut—*Here Comes the Knight* could be guarding the entrance to a particularly tricky hole on an antique chip-and-put or standing as a menacing lawn sentry on Jerry Bruckheimer's country house.

Most likely, though, the two figures, which seem to embody stealth and strength in equal measure, are guarding each other. They've literally bonded, both through the pale yellow resin which strips them of individuating racial color while collapsing their personalities into one, and in the fraternal way that Mr. Terrific