

The Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria is off the beaten path for both gallery and museum viewing. Situated directly across the street from Grand Central Station, the annexed museum space once known as Whitney Philip Morris has gone through a recent publicity-driven make over. Altria Group Inc is Philip Morris. Philip Morris, in order to shake the stigma of such things as cancer and dirty money has regrouped itself under the umbrella of a kinder and gentler name, thus diffusing any debate or protest of its trickle-down monetary contributions to the arts. The context of the name change and cultural whitewashing is the perfect situation in which to view Ivan Witenstein's two new sculptures, his best work to date.

The New Breed

Jason Murison

Witenstein is one of a new breed of political artists. What makes him different from the late 80s and early 90s artists such as David Wojnarowicz or Hanns Haacke is that Witenstein is not playing to any political agenda. Witenstein's predecessors are artists like John Miller and Mike Kelly whose work mounts cultural critiques. Witenstein's work, however, offers no corrective moral attitude: everyone is suspect. Witenstein, like the rest of us, is trapped in the middle of the culture wars and the works themselves are manifest with anger and contempt. Most often, he umbrellas conflicting cultural icons and references under a single sculptural image, attacking those on the left and the right of the political spectrum. The outcome is often ambiguous and because of the heroic scale of the work, perfectly palatable.

Witenstein's style is one of confrontation. Upon entrance to Altria, even the most casual art viewers will be stopped in their tracks by the 17-foot tall fiberglass sculpture of the Great Satan standing atop a mountain of piled rock. Directly below, Witenstein's second, equally giant, fiberglass resin sculpture of a dragon sprawls upon the floor while being consumed by four saddled ponies. Both sculptures speak to apocalyptic fantasies cloaked by the dagger game of cultural references for which Witenstein is known.

Witenstein has posed his Great Satan in a gesture that mirrors Mickey Mouse in Fantasia's "Night on Bald Mountain." In doing so, Witenstein conflates Mickey's emblematic representation of the United States with fundamentalist Islam's alternative representation: "the Great Satan." Witenstein creates a spiral of references, morphing Satan into Mickey

as sorcerer/conductor, conjuring up comparisons to America's involvement in the Middle East and the Iraq War.

The Fantasia model also stands in for Witenstein's favorite whipping boy: the baby boomer generation. In liberal circles, Mickey Mouse has always been a trope of 50s family values, with the Mickey of Fantasia identified as the hippie generation's makeover of Disney. Witenstein has a love/hate relationship with this generation's highly celebrated but empty political and ideological ambitions. Witenstein damns the generation of peace and love whose current government is anything but. He morphs the peace and love Mickey into a Satan who embodies liberal morals turned into Bush administration policy.

Below the Great Satan, Witenstein completes his narrative by mining historical references. Dragons and horses carry some of the same significances. They not only reference doomsday but have been used to symbolize a divine quest. In this case, Witenstein wants the viewer to think of a myriad of references: knight's crusade, impending evil, the four horsemen, manifest destiny, and the "pony-up!" cowboy mentality. Witenstein, a master of ambiguity, does not make clear what the saddled ponies are doing. The fiberglass skin of the dragon is being pulled up into each pony's mouth, making the exact nature of the feeding questionable. Does our nostalgia for Old World crusade nurse a desire for New World manifest destiny? How much is our freedom of will fed by fatalistic desire? Witenstein's titles rarely help,



as they are often suited for a teenage fanzine, but in this case he delivers an upbeat turn of phrase: *Light a fire so the world will be brighter, black knight, die and live free.*

If it were possible, Witenstein's pieces should be ripped out of Shamim Momin's ten car pile up of an exhibition titled "Fight or Flight" and be placed across the street in Grand Central's grand concourse. It would be apt to let the horned beast come to life like Mickey, conduct Grand Central's mural of the universe, lit and painted above, and shout to the throngs of commuter crowds below: "Fuck you, fuck you. Fuck. You." □

Ivan Witenstein, installation view: *Light a fire so the world will be brighter, black knight, die and live free*, 2004, fiberglass resin 44 x 120 x 120 inches and *Bad Habits die hard, I hope I die hard, Girl's song for a blessed sun*, 2004, fiberglass resin 194 x 60 x 60 inches