

FRIDAY, MAY 5, 2006

## Art in Review

### Ivan Witenstein

Infidelicious

*Derek Eller Gallery  
615 West 27th Street, Chelsea  
Through May 20*

For his second solo appearance at Derek Eller, Ivan Witenstein has delivered one very strange show, formally raucous and democratically offensive enough to register on practically any political-incorrectness meter. In his large sculptural groups of the past few years Mr. Witenstein has worked with certain emblematic figures from popular fiction: Huck Finn and Jim at Eller, and the wizard Gandalf from "The Lord of the Rings" in a piece made for the Armory Show.

All three are back in sculptures and paintings, with their forms much changed. Huck is now a punk rocker. Jim is a show-girl-style Aunt Jemima showering herself with syrup. Gandalf is a devilish cartoon sorcerer. And they have been joined by yet another mythical figure, the abolitionist martyr John Brown, wild-eyed, foul-mouthed, poetry-spouting and accompanied by a swarm of bad-dream freaks that his liberationist zeal seems to have spawned. These include zonked-out hippies, pornographic performers and Boschian beasts, along with sprinklings of swastikas, rainbow-colored mushrooms, monstrous insects, pop stars (Bjork, Beyoncé), racist cartoons and biblical references.

I don't know exactly where Mr. Witenstein is coming from with this material, nor do I know where he is taking it. But if his intention is what I think it is, to stir up a moral ruckus, he has succeeded pretty well.

As the work of artists like Nicole Eisenman and Kara Walker has already demonstrated, this is a worthy and often fruitful ambition. And John Brown's suicidal battle against slavery at Harper's Ferry is a useful tactical model: charge in with all guns blazing; burn all bridges behind you; go to the gallows cursing everything and repenting nothing.

HOLLAND COTTER