

Ivan Witenstein

November 14, 2014 - January 3, 2015

Opening reception: Friday, November 14, 6-8pm

Derek Eller Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of new paintings and sculptures by Ivan Witenstein. For this exhibition, Witenstein continues his practice of appropriating and re-tooling provocative, and often goading imagery to spur a dialogue. Confrontational in nature, these works bring to the forefront historic moments we would collectively rather forget.

Witenstein mines images from disparate sources, including paintings by Ferenc Paczka, illustrations by True Williams and Henry Louis Stephens, and the sculptures of Kathe Kollwitz. The result is a dizzyingly maximalist web of imagery, constructed with a variety of materials and methods, including oil painting and large wooden chainsaw carving. At times repulsive, but often comedic, these works utilize vernacular imagery and traditions to highlight the fictive nature of distinctly American iconography. By embracing this fiction, Witenstein disarms these icons.

In the painting *Rails to Trails 1*, a quintet of Woody Allen's clarinets play in the sky overlooking three band members who have marched out of an Ernie Barnes painting onto a railroad track. In the band members revelry, they have neglected to notice a train is coming towards them (this train is from the cover of the steampunk novel *Railsea*, whose title is written across the sky). All the while, an Elvis/Hitler hybrid plays guitar angrily across the tracks while overseeing a scene that Witenstein describes as "like Jail House Rock in a concentration camp".

A symbol of both national progress and racial oppression, the depiction of the railroad is a source of interest for Witenstein. He imagines these paintings and sculptures standing in opposition to Rails to Trails Conservancy, a non-profit organization devoted to converting de-commissioned railways throughout the United States to trails for walking or biking. As per their mission statement, the organization is committed to "connecting corridors to build healthier places for healthier people". Witenstein proposes a more sinister motive; a nation-wide conspiracy to erase an iconic object, and our collective memory of historic bigotry. Through this erasure, metaphoric journeys of life and death and memories of "The Gilded Age" are replaced with pedestrians in Under Armor or Lulu Lemon active-wear and their leashed dogs. Witenstein's perverse work offers an antidote to this selective amnesia.

Ivan Witenstein's work has recently been on view in *Disturbing Innocence*, curated by Eric Fischl at The FLAG Art Foundation, *The Neighbors*, at The American University Museum, Washington DC, and *Works on Paper* at Blondeau and Cie, Geneva, Switzerland. This will be his fifth solo exhibition with the gallery.

Derek Eller Gallery is located at 615 West 27th Street, between 11th and 12th Avenues. Hours are Tuesday - Saturday from 11am - 6pm. For further information or images, please contact the gallery at 212.206.6411 or visit www.derekeller.com