

DEREK ELLER GALLERY

For Immediate Release:

Ivan Witenstein

September 5 - October 11, 2008

Opening Reception: Friday, September 5, 6 - 8 pm

Derek Eller Gallery is pleased to present new sculpture by Ivan Witenstein.

For this exhibition, Witenstein seeks to magnify the impact of stagnation in American political thinking. Working from series of editorial cartoon catalogs from the 1970s and 80s, the artist found striking parallels within the current political climate. He states, "The 2008 presidential campaign is posed as a list of historic firsts and never-before-seens, but when using the lens of these editorial cartoons, one is struck by the identical themes, ideological fault lines, and regional conflicts from the Carter-Reagan era to today."

Witenstein further considered the ways in which the satire of these political cartoons differs from propaganda art (such as socialist realism), viewing each at opposite ends of a continuous spectrum. Witenstein employs the vehicle of appropriation to draw from a variety of artistic influences that could be placed along the trajectory of this spectrum, including the work of baroque sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini, 19th century satirist Honoré Daumier, traditional figurative sculpture of the American west, and cartoons of 21st century animators Tex Avery and Ralph Bakshi. In his sculpture, Witenstein collapses the entire continuum between satire and propaganda as a way to generate new forms and create a way out of an intellectual/political conundrum.

Witenstein uses a variety of materials and methods, including cast epoxy and resin, terracotta and carved wood and milled foam. His sculpture, comprised of both human and animal forms, combines historic and contemporary personalities with literary and cartoon-like characters. These figures interact with one another in various groupings, and are often imbued with symbolic or allegorical meaning. Reflecting the imagery of Ralph Bakshi and Tex Avery, he uses pigs as stand-ins for cops and anthropomorphized animals as sardonic human caricatures posed as buddies in various misadventures. Some of Witenstein's figures are arranged in stacks and piles while others include one figure riding on top of another like the iconic western horse and cowboy. This archetypal image of American destiny, immortalized by turn of the century sculptors Frederic Remington and Charles Russell, becomes more urgent through Witenstein's reconfiguration. In other works, the artist continues his exploration of the Mark Twain characters Huck Finn and Jim. One sculpture, which depicts Jim as an 8 foot tall basketball player throwing a tantrum on the floor evokes the sentiment of Twain's provocative novel which has been both condemned as racist and celebrated as an attack against racism in America.

The exhibition will also feature a selection of terracotta heads based on the editorial cartoons of former president Ronald Reagan. The exaggerated features and absurd expressions are reminiscent of Honoré Daumier's *The Parliamentarians*, a collection of clay busts created as models for his satirical lithographs. Additionally, a provocative three-tiered, figurative sculpture, carved from wood, evokes a fountain or an architectural ruin, symbols of the heroic rise and inevitable fall of great civilizations.

This will be Ivan Witenstein's third solo exhibition. His work has been seen in *Fight or Flight* at the Whitney Museum at Altria, *Art Rock 2005* at Rockefeller Center, and The Armory Show 2005, where *Uncle John's Band*, a sculpture commissioned by The Public Art Fund, was on view.

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 visuals, please contact the gallery at 212.206.6411 or visit www.derekeller.com.