

## Rock 'n' Raunch by Pedro Velez



Jay Heikes  
Candle  
2002

"Use Your Illusion," July 26-Aug. 31, 2002, at Vedanta Gallery, 835 West Washington Chicago, IL 60607

The year of 1991 saw the rise of a rock 'n' roll masterpiece, Guns N' Roses double-disc extravaganza, *Use Your Illusion*. Today, Rap Metal and boy bands rule the airwaves. Sadly, all that's left of Guns N' Roses is the promise that legendary frontman in retirement, Axl Rose, will rise to the occasion and return to save Rock n' Roll.

While Pop music waits for Axl, Vedanta Gallery has come up with an antidote of sorts, a raunchy show about sex and rock 'n' roll with a lineup of young and upcoming art stars. The show, "Use your Illusion," has been organized by Vedanta's own Kristen Van Deventer (who runs KDP, a video resource service found at [www.k-d-p.com](http://www.k-d-p.com)) and Julia Fischbach.

Joshua Okon, one of the founders of alternative space La Panaderia in Mexico City, could be considered the Axl Rose of contemporary American art. Loud and aggressive, Okon uses the violence of his immediate surroundings to conjure short narratives that offend any moralistic perspective. In *Cockfight* (1992), a two part DVD projection priced at \$6,000, two young girls curse and make obscene gestures at each other. At times, it seems that Okon's actors are directly confronting the gallery-goer. *Cockfight* also pokes fun at the machismo inherent to Latin American culture by providing the girls with the foul language and extreme behavior associated with Latino men.

Also by Okon are two large size C-prints in which the two Latinas make vulgar gestures -- one shows off her ass to the camera and the other makes a piggy face. Reminiscent of the classic Realism of Gustave Courbet, Okon's dramatic photos possess a distinctive personality and attitude worthy of rock-icon status.

Jay Heikes, an artist based in Minneapolis (and who was recently included in the collections of Altoids and the Walker Art Center), uses Gothic or "Death Metal" lettering to design images that he works into collages, sculptures and video. The structure of the lettering is altered to the point of abstraction, forcing the viewer to regard the text as decoration. Heikes' transformative act is an ironic gesture, since

Death Metal logotypes are purposely designed to be unreadable.

In *Untitled (Behemoth)*, a cutout of the word "behemoth" is imposed on the top of a picture of a lake, creating a sort of melted image that's creepy and fun. *Behemoth* looks like a homemade poster for a *Friday the 13th* movie. In *Candle* (2002), a grouping of cut wool, felt and denim lies flat on top of a low white pedestal. The cutout text is loosely based on the lyrics found in *Candle*, a tune by rock band Sonic Youth. The texture of the different fabrics, mixed together with the color and the drip style of the cutouts, forms a sculptural collage that looks like a bird's eye view of a Jackson Pollock painting.

Also by Heikes is *White Light*, a one-minute animation of drawings made by the artist on top of '80s music video footage. The animation is a nostalgic tribute to videos that have been put out of rotation at MTV.

"Use Your Illusion" the art show, just like the record, has its share of b-sides. L.A. artist Benji Whalen paints nightgowns on top of the naked bodies found in the glossy pages of porn magazines. The good thing is that the paintings do not aspire to be anything else than what they are, pretty pictures. This honest approach makes the girls in the paintings look so cute and innocent that passing judgment on them or in Whalen's paintings would be a crime.

Another b-side is provided by recent UIC graduate student Melanie Schiff in the series "Sleeping Boys." In a sort of performance, Schiff invited a selected group of young men to spend the night at her place, and in the process, managed to photograph them in their sleep. The large-scale color portraits of the boys, wrapped in white sheets, are slick, sweet and really beautiful. But the problem with "Sleeping Boys" is that the images lack vital visual and conceptual information that could be helpful to the viewers. And one is left to wonder whether the work is intended to be a feminist view on the idea of the male gaze, or just a simple exercise in cool decorative photography.

Confusion is also found in a series of three photos of record covers mounted behind Plexiglas. Among those photographed are the Beatles's *White Album* and *Loveless* by the group *My Bloody Valentine*. The photos are not of the original record covers but of reproductions made by Schiff. Although the artist channels Sherrie Levine, the outcome is pure academic trickery that can't help to justify why in the world Schiff makes art of what's already great art. And I'm not just talking about the cover art but of what's inside the covers, the music, which is even better art.

Even though at this point Schiff's work feels young -- the artist does have the attitude and skills of an artist with a lot of promise.

**PEDRO VELEZ** is a Chicago-based artist, critic and curator.