

Multimedia artist Jay Heikes's trip from rocker manqué to the Whitney Biennial

Of Parrots, Porn, and Death Metal



Jay Heikes, seen in his 'So There's This Pirate' video series.

By ROD SMITH
Images courtesy of Jay Heikes

Jay Heikes is of one-and-a-half minds: "I want to entertain," he says, whiskey-colored mid-length hair tumbling over one eye as he reaches into a canvas bag he has stashed on the Monte Carlo's floor, "but I don't want to just entertain and make people not think about it." The artist's deliberate ambivalence is sparking results nearly as spectacular as the popular culture that often informs it. With a string of recent group and solo shows in spaces from Portland to Berlin behind him, the former co-director of Minneapolis's Waiting Room gallery would be hot even if he hadn't been tapped by Walker senior curator Phillippe Vergne for the 2006 Whitney Biennial.

"Phillipe is incredible," Heikes says, pulling out his laptop and setting it on the tiny table, "way more down and dirty than your average museum curator. He visited my studio maybe five times. Every time he'd offer something seriously of value. I remember once, he came over, spent a lot of time looking at the work, and said, 'Do you just want to be an artist?' It was kind of a cryptic question, but at the same time, very provocative."

Like Vergne--co-curator of this year's Whitney shindig--Heikes has lately shuttled between Minneapolis and New York, where he has an apartment and a studio in Brooklyn. He seems

perfectly poised to capitalize on the all-but-inevitable gains that come with inclusion in the Biennial.

He boots up the computer and swivels it around, displaying one of a series of images from The Porn Name Drawings. On a black background, the legend "Ann Rasmussen is Spook Bluebill" blazes in silver. "You know the old formula for naming porn stars?" he asks, "where you use the name of your first pet and the name of the first street you lived on? It's a ridiculous way of going about things, but at the same time, it's kind of great because you get these really weird names. I just did that with a bunch of my friends and created these credits for a porn movie that never arrives."

Like much of Heikes's work, The Porn Name Drawings is both finished product and a potential part of a larger whole. His White Light video--a high-speed montage of bits grabbed from MTV's old 120 Minutes show and enhanced by his drawings--eventually found a place in Kill Yr Idols, an installation featuring the video, a selection of rock posters, and some of his death metal cutouts. (More on those in a minute.)

Music came first for the artist, who took up guitar while growing up in New Jersey. "I drew," he recalls, "and painted these really awful landscapes, but most of what I was attracted to was music related: design, graphics, the way bands looked. There were times when I'd be attracted to a band even if I didn't like its music, simply because of its visual presence." Even while majoring in art at the University of Michigan, his first love was rock. "Ann Arbor has such a rich history," he notes, "Stooges, MC5, all those bands people usually associate with Detroit. I loved being surrounded by it."



It was only when, in his senior year, Heikes took a class from artist Joseph Grigely that his priorities started to shift. "Joe's deaf, and his Conversation Pieces consisted entirely of the handwritten notes that had formed the basis of conversations with various people. I love the fact that he faces this challenge, then takes on language as his main topic. It really opened me up to art's possibilities. I also wasn't very good at playing guitar, which might have helped the transition."

Still, he held on to his gear through grad school at Yale. "Grad school was strange," he says. "I just made a bunch of stuff that I never would have made otherwise. I think that's the case for most people in grad school. Also I produced this talk show, with another guy and a woman. We'd

interview visiting faculty in front of this huge, glamorous backdrop of New Haven at night, which isn't glamorous at all. It was a real collaborative fiasco."

Once again, he turns the laptop around, revealing Candle, a profusion of cut-up fabric abstractions--death metal band logos, actually--draped over an oblong table. Some date back to Heikes's arrival in Minneapolis at the turn of the century. "I didn't really like death metal," he says, "but I love the fact that the bands make their logos unreadable. It's such a great subversive gesture. The only legible thing on death metal concert posters is the space between each logo. I remember doing a big paper cutout and having no idea who the band was. Then, a few years later, I looked at it, and was like, Oooh. Finally, I was able to read it. It turned out that I'd been looking at it backwards."

There's more to Heikes's work than pop culture. Another turn of the Powerbook yields what appears to be a section of standard-issue drop ceiling tiles splashed with diaphanous purple and brown. It's part of a series called "The Hill Upstairs," installation pieces inspired mostly by a close friend's brain tumor and recovery, and a little by the story of a full-grown tiger living semi-independently in a New York apartment building. The pigments are beet juice and coffee.

Heikes doesn't always play the observer, either. Harkening back to his talk-show days, So There's This Pirate posits artist as comedian and auto-cinematographer. Heikes, in front of a striped fabric backdrop, tells a very funny joke about a parrot who defies his pirate oppressor, even past the end of its life. "To me, the pirate's relationship to the parrot is like the artist's to his work," he says. "Even when you think you've got it saying, 'Polly want a cracker,' it always comes back with 'Fuck you, one-eye' at one point or another."

Time and time again, it seems. As Heikes returns his laptop to its bag, he mentions that the Whitney will be showing Return of the Parrot. Given his entertaining bent, the sequel comes as no surprise.



Don't clean the ceiling tiles, it's art:
An installation piece from Heikes's
"The Hill Upstairs" series