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*Justin Lieberman: Self-Portraits*

McCaffrey Fine Art, New York  
April 3–May 1, 2007

A Jewish kid growing up on a Christmas tree farm in rural North Carolina loses an eye at an early age, gets his life threateningly addicted to hard drugs, burns a church down, does time, becomes an artist, goes clean, and develops a sustainable career.

It's easy to milk a background like this and form a plausible artist's career full of gothic, hipster adventures. The freak show / train wreck marketing pitch is easy; something like a redneck, heroin (without the chic), Yid Basquiat. All manner of angst-suffused artworks are possible. However, Justin Lieberman is too sophisticated and intelligent an artist to interpret with such a simplistic strategy.

In this regard, McCaffrey Fine Art is delighted to present *Justin Lieberman: Self-Portraits*, an exhibition of video, sculpture, painting, photography, and drawing. The exhibition will feature twenty works produced between 2003 and 2007, all of which are representations of Justin Lieberman in all his complexity, truth, deceit, bluster, provocation, and fantasy. *Self-Portraits* will run from April 3 to May 1, 2007.

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Lieberman is a complex, fecund, "hot" artist, and those accustomed to a more meager diet might be overwhelmed by the magnitude of references and media on display, with the artist doing everything all at once. However, on closer examination there is a strong personal narrative that runs consistently through the work as a guide.

The artist's extraordinary *Biography*, 2003, plays an important role in any Lieberman exhibition. A sample of the incidents are listed above, and it seems too good—or bad—to be true. Indeed, truth has been embellished with little exaggerations and outright lies that have been strategically slipped in, so that the legitimacy of the biography itself can be called into question. Fiction overwhelms fact ("It must be all lies," one thinks), and the result is the creation of two identities that I'd like to refer to as *Justin Lieberman—artist* and *Justin Lieberman—meta-artist*. The former stands front and center in the spotlight; the latter is offstage left, producing the show.

*Justin Lieberman—artist* makes calculated shock art that can be dismissed as a quick one-liner, by a hustling, self-publicizing "Page Six" artist wannabe on the make. Craving respect in both the Midwestern mall and the New York art world, he combines some of the folksiness and wholesomeness of Thomas Kinkade (*Self-Portrait as a Platypus*, 2004) with the earnest salesmanship of Patrick Mimran (*Diesel*, 2004). Because of low-end production values and "difficult" subject matter, one presumes he has failed in the mall, as any art that "my kids could have made" is successful only in the art world. And yet, by pursuing this career with both naked ambition and naïveté, he courts rejection there too, using all the wrong ways to break into the legitimate art world and pushing all the wrong buttons of the art world insider.

In effect *Justin Lieberman—artist* is set up by *Justin Lieberman—meta-artist* as a piñata for the critics to deliver a good beating to regarding what the limits of acceptable art are. This integration of critical reception into the art is a tradition that has spouted some of the most profoundly intelligent and important art of the twentieth century: Dada, Brecht, Heartfield, and Duchamp, who provoked controversy and skepticism while remaining behind the scenes, pulling the levers.

However, it is important not to think of *Justin Lieberman—meta-artist's* work as only a series of conceptual strategies and games about consumer culture and art reception. The use of farce has a strong tradition in twentieth-century visual culture, and Lieberman invokes this lineage, for example, in his tie-dyed *Klansfriends*, 2003 (Lieberman jokingly notes that they are something of a portrait of his North Carolina upbringing, where he grew up surrounded by either hippies or racist rednecks); and, married to existentialism, in his Beckettian, book-burning video *First Thought, The Sustenance*, 2006, featuring a Nazi SS officer, a crippled homeless drunk, and a feminist performance artist.

The punch delivered throughout is undeniable, and the subject matter is confrontational and disturbing. There are exaggerations, lies, and bravado, but beneath this there is a pathos indicated in experiences and portrayals that goes far beyond what can be culled from reading do-it-yourself manuals. The true impact of works such as *Crack Pipe*, 2003, *The Visitor*, 2003–4, or *Untitled (Lexapro)*, 2006, comes when the initial shock is left behind in order to meet with their transformation into deeply personal, troubling, and sometimes revelatory works of art.

Justin Lieberman was born in 1977. He holds a BFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and an MFA from Yale University, New Haven. Recent solo exhibitions have included: Zach Feuer Gallery, New York; Kantor / Feuer, Los Angeles; Me-di-um, St. Barth; Sutton Lane, London & Paris; Sorry We're Closed, Brussels; and Locust Projects, Miami.

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