



ZANE LEWIS MAKES ART BLEED

THE TEXAS ARTIST CUTS AND PAINTS OUR OBSESSION WITH FAME

Painter Zane Lewis is a distant cousin of James Dean. Although now that his hair is longer and a beard is growing in, he says he usually gets Jesus Christ or Charles Manson. The 26-year-old Texan is clearly comfortable around pop icons. In his first solo show in New York last November, the artist assembled the visages of Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, and Dakota Fanning around the gallery in his own update of the Garden of Eden (casting Pitt and Jolie as Adam and Eve, and Fanning, staring out with the same unreadable expression that she gave in a recent Marc Jacobs campaign, with paint pouring from her mouth, as the serpent). In the past Lewis has painted Paris Hilton, Pope Benedict XVI, Barack Obama, Kim Jong-il, Manson, and Christ. Currently he's at work in his studio in San Antonio render-

ing the Olsen sisters as Siamese twins.

Lewis's blaring wall-sized confrontations with faces that you usually encounter in the line at the check-out counter may, at first, read as the final union between high and low, between fine art and the gossip rags. But something much more provocative is lurking underneath his surfaces. "I was always interested in the phenomenon of the weeping statue," the artist says. "People come from all around the world to see the presence of God in an inanimate object. How do you make something so powerful, it transcends boundaries and hits people on a widespread level?" Lewis, naturally, tapped into pop culture, which also provides instantly digestible vessels of group worship, and he located a holy trinity in the three qualifiers that calculate into fame:

beauty, youth, and power. There may be some perverse satire in his treatment of these stars as deities, but it's hardly an overexaggeration of a culture dying to see the persecution and resurrection of their idols. If you think Hollywood shouldn't enter the gallery space, then you're also caught in the loop of regarding art as some sacred retreat from the real world. Either way, Lewis pegs his audience for worshippers, whether they like it or not.

Born in San Antonio, Lewis attended art school first in New York, then in Atlanta, back to New York, and then one more time in Atlanta, graduating from the Atlanta College of Art in 2004. By that point Lewis had already shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia (he was a sculptor then, using water, Gatorade bottles, and plumbing equipment). Lewis had intended to move back to New York to make his bid in the art world, but instead he returned to his native city with \$5,000 from Houston's DiverseWorks to produce whatever he wanted for a solo show. It is here in San Antonio that Lewis "grazes" for his appropriated imagery—in stores, dentists' waiting rooms, the airport. He first tweaks the celebrity portrait on his computer, meanwhile creating pools of spilled paint that dries on plastic sheets. The image is then traced on the paint, cut, and peeled "like a fruit roll-up" to be affixed onto Plexiglas (Lewis even goes so far for one of his skull "cut paintings" to use the same glass used for Chanel displays—he wants that connection to fashion to be very focal). For larger pieces, Lewis has his image converted into a gigantic vinyl decal that also adheres on the wall. "It's like putting up wallpaper," Lewis explains. "One mistake and you're through. Those paintings are a onetime deal because they don't come off. It's like the weeping statue. They can't cry forever." In other works, Lewis doesn't even reinterpret the portrait, taking Brad Pitt's *Details* cover or Brad and Angelina on the front of *InTouch* and applying swirls of acrylic paint straight onto the paper.

Ultimately, it is what oozes out of Lewis's icons that proves the most arresting. From the point in Manson's forehead where his swastika should be, a waterfall of red and yellow paint pours down his face and leaks in a puddle on the floor. Same for the matching seepage springing out of Christ's eyes and the Pope's mouth. Here is the weep, the way the artist activates his canvases, makes them move. Lewis compares it to stigmata, the crucifixion wounds on Jesus's hands that mystically appear on devout believers. The fact that he "cuts" his paintings (as opposed to applying) emphasizes that attempt to reach a vein. But at the same time, the beautiful abstract substance leaving the faces of these celebrities (people so extraordinary that their ubiquitous appeal has rendered their physical presence rather ordinary in our lives) hints at another meaning. Read another way, it's as if their personal selves—their individual identities—are evacuating their popular images. Paint becomes the libRARY material that escapes just before the public comes to adore. In an upcoming project, Lewis is planning a series of skull paintings in a room entirely made up of mirrors. "It's an infinite glamorous death as the ultimate reality," he says. He seems to have learned his lessons from Hollywood. "It's really about the transient nature of youth. That kind of fading glamour."

TEXT CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN

TOP: ZANE LEWIS IN NYC, NOVEMBER 2007

PHOTOGRAPHY PATRIK SEHLSTEDT

PHOTO ASSISTANT NIGEL PERRY

PRINTING MATCH MILL STOCKHOLM

BOTTOM LEFT: *STIGMATA MANSON*, 2007

BOTTOM RIGHT: *AFTER THE FALL*, 2007

ARTWORK ZANE LEWIS

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MIXED GREENS GALLERY, NYC