

Art in America

Jeff Sonhouse, *Pawnography*
By Casey Ruble, February 2009

In chess, the lowly pawn once past enemy lines, can assume power equal to that of a queen and ultimately decide the game. Yet pawns are relatively expendable figures that are popularly understood to serve the purposes of others who are more powerful. This ambiguous, shifting identity seems a key theme in “Pawnography,” Jeff Sonhouse’s third solo show at Tilton.

Sonhouse’s mixed-medium paintings have for several years consisted of frontal portraits of black men of indeterminate identity outfitted in masks of glitter, feathers or matchbook strikers and hair fashioned from steel wool or rows of layered matches. The seven paintings in this exhibition follow that pattern but also include recognizable political figures – a move that further hones the work’s critical edge.



A somber tone was set on the gallery’s ground floor with *The Sacrificial Goat* (2008), a large painting of Colin Powell addressing the United Nations on the invasion of Iraq. Flanked by two stern, maskless white men, Powell raises a gloved hand to pinch together his thumb and forefinger as if to emphasize a point. Dark glasses made of thick translucent varnish shield his eyes, and the painted harlequin patterned mask covering his face is obscured by a dense smatter of glittery “reflective rays” (as Sonhouse describes them) made of rhinestones and acrylic gel medium. A suite of five watercolors that was shown nearby, loose variations on the forceful Powell almost looks Caucasian; in another he appears as a faceless, suited mass of dark flesh with one arm missing.

As anyone with any exposure to the media for the past year knows, the line between politics and sheer entertainment has all but vanished, and this was apparent on the second floor of the gallery, where the party really got started. In the paintings there, a pimped-out Roger Toussaint (president of New York’s Transport Workers Union) sports an impossibly shiny lemon-yellow suit and matching gold-leaf halo; six spotlighted, Motown-looking singers spew paperclips from open mouths; a blind man opens a fur coat made of matches to reveal fuchsia lightning bolts embedded in the lining; and a walle-eyed Condoleezza Rice, the lower quarter of her head sliced off as if she were sinking in water, is tinted a sickly blue and yellow by two circles of light painted across her matchbook-striker-masked face.

“Pawnography” opened the same week that the U.S. elected its first biracial president – a man who embraces his multi-faceted identity and whose campaign largely hinged on the importance of transparency (and just months after David Duke asserted that Obama “is a visual aid for White Americans,” a sign that “we have lost control of our country, and unless we get it back we are heading for complete annihilation as a people”). Conspicuously avoiding direct reference to our nation’s new icon of racial unity, this show was a reminder of the complexities inherent in the ever-evolving relationship between race, power and politics.

Image: Jeff Sonhouse, *The Sacrificial Goat*, 2008