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Art review: Jeff Sonhouse at Martha Otero

by Leah Ollman

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You can get a good sense of Jeff Sonhouse's prickly wit through the titles of some of his recent New York shows: "Pawnography," "The Panoptic Con." His first solo exhibition in L.A., at Martha Otero, carries a dark, dismissive title, "'Better Off Dead,' Said the Landlord," and hums with humor of a confrontational sort. The show amounts to a face-off between visitors and the outrageous, disarming characters in each of his six new painted portraits.



Who are these masked men? Each stares intently from behind a second skin that has more metaphoric potential than practical function. "Mateo Manhood aka Buzz Kill," for instance, wears a gleaming white head-sheath with cutouts that reveal his African American features. Clown, criminal, superhero or twisted minstrel, the man is a striking, complicated presence, a showman for sure in his bow tie and pinstriped suit, the crossing rays of Klieg lights behind him a luminous fanfare to this uncommon man.



All of the figures appear to be black and are dressed like slick dandies, even if (as in "Papi Shampoo") also wearing purple, Christ-like robes and thick wads of steel wool for hair. Other masks resemble the diamond patterns of harlequin costumes or striped hexagons that might be found in wallpaper or flooring. In "Hypermaskulinity Resuscitated," a punning piece from 2004 (the rest are from 2010), Sonhouse coats the subject's face in feathers, feminizing and punishing him in a single stroke.

In other paintings, tight rows of paper matches bulge to form the figure's head of hair, either ready to ignite or already burned and smoking. None of the works in this inescapably affecting show are easy to pin down, though all are more than amusing to look at. Sonhouse proves himself the most agile showman of all, summoning multiple types of power -- shock, spoof, sincerity, sacredness and stereotype -- and keeping them all in play at once.

Images: Mateo Manhood aka Buzz Kill (top) and Our Savior. Courtesy of Martha Otero.