

Art Review:

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'Sometimes I'm surprised at how good I can paint and at other times I'm surprised at my ineptness' Alex Katz

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PRETENDERS TO THE THRONE:
30 ARTISTS FOR TOMORROW
SELECTED BY

ALLORA & CALZADILLA / MICHAEL BRACEWELL
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LIAM GILLICK / MATTHEW HIGGS /
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Florian & Michaël Quistrebert

Galerie Crèvecoeur, Paris
13 December – 30 January



Untitled (Flow Eagle Flow), 2006, oil on canvas, 130 x 90 cm. Courtesy the artists and Galerie Crèvecoeur, Paris

Comparisons to Jake and Dinos Chapman are inevitable: two brothers, graduates of the same art school (in this case the Beaux-Arts in Nantes), who cheekily embrace 'bad' art, draw from a wide range of influences and share authorship of the singular works resulting from their collective efforts. The difference, however, is that the Chapmans cannily exploit the aesthetically dubious, while the Quistreberts unreflectively revel in it.

With their wildly weird assemblages of nineteenth-century Romanticism and zombie biker goth (if Auguste Rodin had run a headshop, this is the work he might have produced), the French brothers don't so much challenge artistic assumptions and categories as take them at face value and make them their own.

Unlike the Chapmans's work, there is nothing controversial or irreverent in their balpoint doodles, oil paintings and bronzes, which, though gothic and grotesque, are primly presented. No porn or politics, nothing overtly parodic or sceptical, just an unalloyed, unabashedly adolescent enthusiasm for the materials in play – feverish gobs of paint, dark forests of black-ink scribble and heavy-metal blobs of blackened bronze.

Here, surface is all. The hackneyed horror phantasmagoria – bats, skulls, gravestones, paleo-futuristic dreamscapes, crepuscular seas and craggy peaks – are wholeheartedly celebrated. Graced with almost enough art-school smarts and compositional intensity to escape the constricting half-pipe of skateboarder art, they retain just the right amount of authentic stoner slackness to remain resolutely vernacular.

As painters, the Quistreberts owe something to contemporary naïfs like Karen Kilimnik and Jason Fox; pictorially and thematically, however, they are indebted to William Blake, Henry Fuseli, Gustave Moreau, Thomas Cole and their fellow Nantais artist, the Impressionist painter Maxime Maufra, whose stormy Breton seas are revisited in crudely executed oils. In one of these, the waters sweep away Fried Face, a smudgy redheaded biker who, along with what the boys describe as a 'looser' (a common French malapropism) named Sad Sack, is a recurring figure. The protagonist of an artist book by the brothers (*Fried Face Stories*, 2007), Fried Face appears most notably in a larger canvas (*Untitled (Flow Eagle Flow)*, 2006), where he lies lost and hugely out of proportion upon the rocky summit of a vertiginous mountaintop. The effect is somewhere between a Carolingian illumination, *Métal Hurlant* cover art and Caspar David Friedrich on crack.

More comic and curious still is the unrepentant Americana running throughout the Quistrebert's oeuvre. The 'looser' biker freak trope, for example – part *Easy Rider*, part *Chopper Zombie* and part Johnny Hallyday – is a rich conceit, ripe for pathos and full-blown farce, yet despite the arch absurdity of planting him in front of Hudson River School backdrops, he hardly seems ironic here. He just is – another face value, and in this case, fried. *Christopher Mooney*