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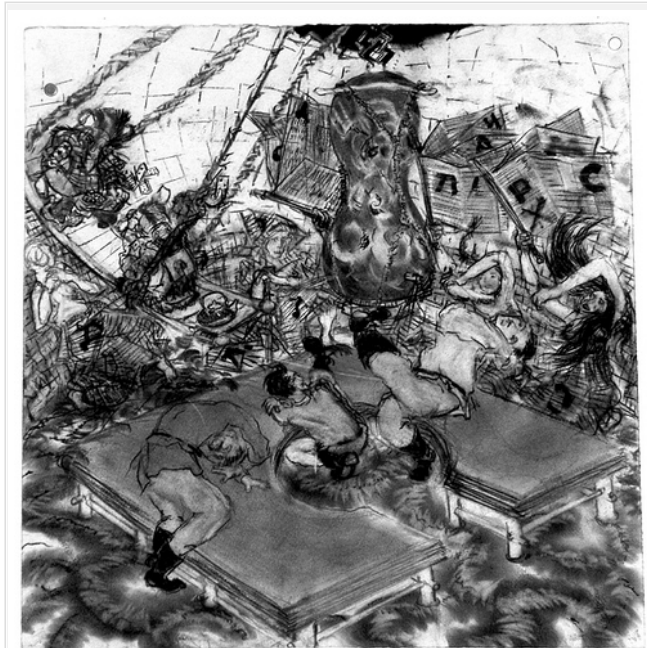
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CAMOUFLAGED OPERA DRAWINGS

Posted on May 20, 2009 by revieweditor

A review of Russell Ferguson's new work

Russell Ferguson, "Elemosynary Mycronitor Smothered by Marx," is part of "Camouflaged Operas," on view through the end of the month at telephonebooth, which is open Saturdays from noon to 5 p.m. or by appointment. Image: Tim Brown photo

[telephonebooth](#)**Kansas City, Missouri****April 11 — May 30**

by Blair Schulman

Jackson Pollock, the Big Daddy of Abstract Expressionism, took spontaneous thoughts and feeling to a canvas, creating works of visible energy. Conversely, Kansas City artist Russell Ferguson generates electricity from drawings referencing opera and its high-season melodrama. As the title implies, this intensity and subterfuge is clearly visible in his current solo exhibition at the small gallery on Troost Avenue in Kansas City, Missouri.

The works of charcoal on paper like *Garth Like Kayo Sleeping* or *Emotions of the Norge* have the makings of a good opera, channeling jealousy, age, and sex. Like a musical quicksand, individual drawings filled stem to stern with imagery from Commedia dell'arte (*Elemosynary Mycronitor Smothered by Marx*) and the like engage the sensation of dipping a toe — but soon enough, we are covered to the neck in the forceful plot lines.

These 13 drawings are arias unto themselves, and the exhibition leaves the viewer a bit out of breath at the finish.

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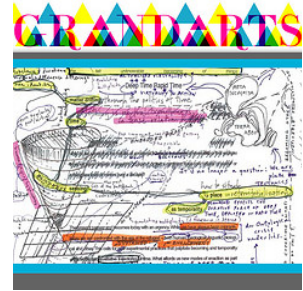
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Russell Ferguson, "Minotaur I or Bully Pour le Chef Chinoise." Image: Tim Brown photo

Ferguson's process of creation is improvisational. As a self-described "bricoleur," this director of the School of the Foundation Year at the Kansas City Art Institute begins by putting himself into the right frame of mind; to "articulate the rearrangements and associations that lead to this type of work." It starts with one organic thought, and by not denying himself, Ferguson allows the structure of each drawing to continue building until entire stories emerge. He first needs to "feel good about other human beings to feel free enough to organize these kinds of drawings, which as an entertainment or amusement diversion, can seem less urgent."

The drawings illustrate the patronage of saints and sinners and their debaucheries as "interacting movements of implied animation." Running rampant are thoughts of Moliere, the 17th-century French playwright, but as Ferguson says, "great theater can't be recorded, just as snapshotting a landscape weakens it as a memory." So figures hiding in or riding atop cannons in what could be described as a perverse factory of wizardry (*Minotaur I or Bully Pour le Chef Chinoise*) or seen from an eagle's-eye view atop a rendition of either a sadistic library maze or an interpretation of the Globe Theater (*Minotaur II or The Blind Lovers*) are merely fleeting passages.



Russell Ferguson, "Minotaur II or The Blind Lovers." Image: Tim Brown photo

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Individually, Ferguson's drawings are tales unto themselves, but within telephonebooth gallery can seem graphic and intense. The gallery itself is an oasis of reverse snobbery. The neighborhood is slowly being rejuvenated by residents, merchants and artists alike. With the vehicle and pedestrian traffic that ambles past, the gallery could easily be at home in New York City's East Village, or pre-hipster Williamsburg (Brooklyn, New York). Enhancing that illusion is the very small space, and while the work is always paramount, it is the conversation and the personalities that often show up to visit owner Tim Brown that give the gallery the *gemütlich* feeling of a salon. The vibe is intelligent, stimulating, and wholly without artifice. Within this setting, Ferguson's work is perfectly matched.

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