

BEAUTIFUL/ DECAY

November 11, 2008 by [Sasha](#)



Eric Yahnker creates works that are too clever for their own good. He welcomes all sectors of popular culture, personal narrative, religion, icon and beyond into his studio as “fair game” for his visual fodder. At times, the works playfully traverse into taboo subjects and ideologies, like a naughty child sticking their finger into the socket or cookie jar, at once turning them on their head once again to reveal their inherent paradoxes and inconsistencies.

Humor plays a hugely important role within your works—a tactic that can be

incredibly difficult to achieve within visual art, if at all. How did the inclusion of humor within your works develop? I was always the class clown who could also draw.

Though somewhat ephemeral or indescribable of a concept, what do you think constitutes or goes into a piece of artwork or a joke to make it successful?

One word: truth.

Some of your works tread on “taboo” or “inappropriate” humorous grounds—for example your series “Helen Keller Jokes,” presents a series of visual pranks to play on a blind person, or your series that creates Swastikas out of hilarious materials, such as “Guacstika” (from Guacamole) or “Michelle Kwanstika.” What’s the reaction to these works?

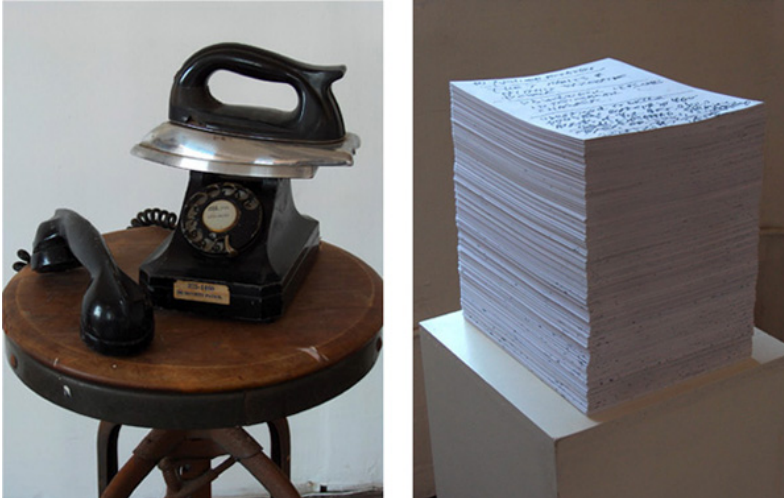
Everyone has a little devil in them, and they get hungry sometimes. I just hold the feedbag.

What do you think it says about the interplay behind taboo, humor and art?

There are only so many contexts that allow you to open-hand slap Helen Keller and earn praise.

Can you talk a little bit about your creative process, from the inception of idea to its completion?

I have a notebook where all my ideas are continually logged. From this I form an extensive queue. Then I literally pick them off one-at-a-time.



What sources do you mine for inspiration?

American mediocrity – earth’s most plentiful resource.

Can you describe 3 images, texts or points of reference that inspire you and how they manifest themselves in your works?

1. “Art is the concealment of effort.” – Charlie Chaplin
 2. Editorial Cartoonist Paul Conrad who is every bit a master as Leonardo DaVinci and Mister Miyagi.
 3. Fine Bourbon, my favorite easy chair, the warm, crackling alien timbre of The Beegees “Trafalgar” LP buttering my ear canal, a tear gently parting my bearded cheek.
- To illuminate exactly how this list manifests itself in my work, I can only say the longest journey I’ve ever embarked upon was to find the answer lying directly under my nose. Now I know a shortcut.

I noticed that you studied Journalism for undergrad—word play, puns (visual and linguistic) seem to play a large role within your works—often acting as the punch line. Where do you find inspiration for your facetious titles?

Some people count sheep to get to sleep, I find incongruities in the English language.

What role do you think language plays within your works?

Everything. I always hint my work is more to be 'read' than merely viewed.

One visual strategy I noticed you employ is to insert/overlay incongruous imagery into the historical canon of artworks or iconic pop culture references. One of the more hilarious manifestations of this is in "Liberace, You Sneaky S.O.B.," in which the figure of Liberace is inserted into Artemesia Gentileschi's famous painting, "Judith Beheading Holofernes." This image strikes me as a sort of mustache on the Mona Lisa/Duchampian gesture. In one instant, it displays your ability to recreate a masterwork and simultaneously subverts it. What was your thought process within this work?

Often my drawings begin with an existing image I am bent on drawing, and the 'interventions' are a convenient way to justify such blatant appropriation. In this case, Liberace fit the bill.

In a larger sense, what is your interest in working with recognizable pop culture imagery and recontextualizing it? Where do you mine for these images?

You say 'recontextualizing,' I say 'molesting.' Let's call the whole thing off! I've always been an avid mental collector of imagery and an astute observer of pop culture, I just didn't know what the hell I was retaining it all for until deciding to make art.



You also often play with interchanging iconic images for letters in a kind of odd visual pun/synecdoche—(such as inserting Siegfried and Roy as stand-ins for the letters A, R and M in KARMA) where does your interest lie in these visuals?

They're sort of like failed bumper stickers.

You also create hilarious sculptural work that take ridiculous premises to inordinately grandiose ends. For example, in “American Socrates” you actually re-wrote “The & Habits of Highly Effective People” with your foot, or in “Begeesus” you whited out all characters in the bible except that which sequentially spelled “Beegees.” Can you talk a little bit about these pieces and your inspiration behind them?

It was kind of reactionary in the beginning. I was trying to show certain people just how much I could completely waste my time in order to show them how much they were wasting theirs. I don't think they received the intended message.

Similarly in the piece “99 Rises, 100 Falls,” you stacked 99 books with “The Rise and Fall...” in the title, with the 99th book, “The Rise and Fall of American Humor” fallen to the floor. Where did the idea behind this piece come from? What was the process like of compiling these books?

I originally thought perhaps it was a bit too clever, but the only other decent thought I had was “Rising/Falling/Delivering” with the stack of ‘Rise & Fall’ books topped by a pizza.

The idea came to me after inheriting a collection of books (and 50-year old liquor) from my grandmother. Whatever enters my studio is fair game. I saw “The Rise and Fall of The Third Reich” staring at me for two years before I called its number, and subsequently hunted down its dog-eared colleagues. I knew there had to be enough ‘Rise & Fall’ books to reach 99, but I literally could've made it 999.

If you could create any project, regardless of price, scope, scale and had limitless resources at your finger tips, what would it be?

Find a way to elect Gore instead of Bush back in 2000.

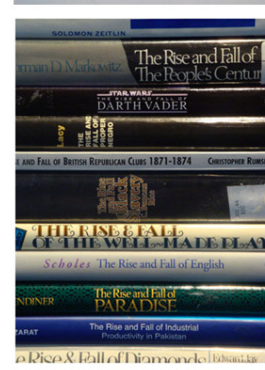
Where can we see your work in the coming months?

I have two shows up right now:

My solo show “Piano Man (For Guitar)” at [Jack The Pelican Presents](#) in Brooklyn, NY.

Also, a group show, [“LA Potential” at Hangar-7](#), Salzburg, Austria (curated by Roger Herman, Hubert Schmalix, and Lioba Reddeker).

Both shows are up through November 9.



For more of Eric's work, please visit:

[Eric Yahnker](#)

Image Credits:

Michelle Kwanstika, 2008

Images courtesy of the artist

KARMA, 2008

Liberace, You Sneaky S.O.B. #2, 2008

Colored pencil on paper

Graphite on paper

30 x 44 in.

62.5 x 52.5 in.

Helen Keller Joke #1, 2006

American Socrates, 2006

Toilet, plunger

Stephen R. Covey's "The 7 Habits of Highly

20 x 28 x 27 in.

Effective People" re-written with my foot

Helen Keller Joke #3, 2006

11 x 8.5 x 11.5 in.

Phone, iron, stool

Turdhat #1-5, 2007

15.5 x 34 x 15.5 in.

Graphite on paper

Helen Keller Joke #4, 2007

Each 44 x 30 in.

Glass cup, toothbrush, Preparation H Ointment

Beegeesus, 2005

6.5 x 3 x 3 in.

Bible completely whited-out except that

Absorption Cycle (Bill's), 2007

which sequentially spells 'Beegees'

Graphite on paper

13 x 10 x 10 in.

38 x 50 in.

background image: Suntitled, 2008

Melancholy Outer Space, 2008

graphite on paper

Graphite on paper

87 x 119 in.

82 x 83 in.

Guacstika, 2008

99 Rises/100 Falls, 2008

Colored pencil on paper

99 books

Each 10.5 x 10.5 drawing on 30 x 22 in. paper

installation dimensions variable