

REVIEWS

LAFAYETTE, LA

Stephen Collier

ACADIANA CENTER FOR THE ARTS

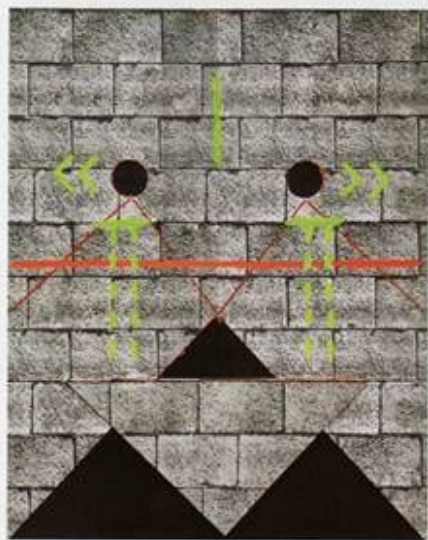
A cofounder in 2008 of the New Orleans–based collective Good Children, Stephen Collier is central to a local scene that has spawned a number of artists' groups and off spaces—enough to position the Crescent City in recent years as a bastion of DIY possibility. True to form, the art that Collier makes is deeply invested in the myths, violence, and cult activities that constitute the dark underbelly of the American imaginary.

In his spring show at Acadiana Center for the Arts in Lafayette, Louisiana, Collier homed in on the razor's edge separating mystic from psychotic, the millimeter of difference between affirmation and negation. Here, five weird *Untitled* painting/sculpture/print hybrids, all 2013, acted as something of a centerpiece. For each, the artist fused a slab of Sheetrock to a black-painted layer of plywood with circular "eyeholes" carved out so that the underlying black was visible. Wall-papering the Sheetrock was a xeroxed black-and-white image of a brick wall, onto which Collier applied geometric/tribal dabs and airbrushed makeup, giving each painting a unique "face."

Viewers may have recalled that Cady Noland also employed a brick-wall motif in her work from the early 1990s. Memorably silk-screening

the image of a wall onto aluminum, Noland intended the motif to function as the ultimate freeze-out, a hard-ass end of the road. Further, Collier's circular peepholes are strongly reminiscent of, maybe to a fault, the big-bullet voids riddling Noland's great *Oozeswald*, 1989. But the younger artist's frost isn't quite as cold. His objects possess a sentimentality, if masked by irony, that Noland assiduously avoided.

In one of Collier's paintings, for example, a triangular shape removed from the Sheetrock below the "eyeholes" forms a "mouth." But it is overlaid with the excised triangular slab, now inverted, to create a Star of David–like form. Meanwhile, Collier has painted the rims of the painting's eyes a demonic (or bloodshot?) reddish-orange, and down the work's "cheeks" he has applied neon-



Stephen Collier, *Untitled*, 2013, oil, acrylic, enamel, photocopy, Sheetrock, plywood, 60 x 40".

lime "tears." Other canvases in the group appear to be crying, too; the most distraught of the bunch sports rubber eggs in its eye sockets. Are these our facsimiled contemporaries? Duplicitous, shape-shifting demagogues? Emotive carnies? Tough to say, but Collier's fusion of Noland with something like Ashley Bickerton's mid-'80s alien disaster packs makes for work that is genuinely strange—if not bizarrely evocative of macrosocietal manic depression followed by escape via extreme makeover.

Even more numinous were a pair of glazed ceramic *Purification Clubs*, 2010–11, which Collier had set neatly on a blanket tie-dyed a putrid shade of crimson. But the eerie ur-object was *Helter Skelter Door*, 2011, a pink plank scrawled with re-created graffiti—ALL GOOD CHILDREN, HELTER SCELTER, and other scary-hippie stuff—from the infamous door to the Manson Family's Spahn Ranch compound. Given this hermetic code, viewers likely found it hard not to be simultaneously affected and assaulted by *Group Activity*, 2012, a video showing nothing but the blank face of a wall, followed by bottle after green bottle breaking against it with startling pops, the accumulating glass filling the floor like a gorgeous rug.

For Collier, humor is a tool and one he uses effectively, often infusing his comedy with the pathetic. This is especially true in *Lost Female Boxer*, 2013, a replica of a trampled lost-dog sign. But Collier's affect is not without an honest aura of unease. Psychopathic intimidation is

implied everywhere—Manson, glass throwers, nasty hippies—as is the desperate attempt to engage: leaders, followers, runaway dogs, higher powers. "Tune in, turn on, drop out" was Timothy Leary's "metaphor of the present." And scads of artists have romanticized American rebels and dropouts ever since. But the era of America as great rebel nation has withered since the Summer of Love, and Collier is scooping up the remnants. One man's sage will always be another man's nut job. But in the end, Collier's recent work isn't really about shamans and believers, but about the banal logistics of humans fumbling around in the dark for other humans: It's about the pathos motivating many to follow one or even just the melancholy of one soul seeking another.

—Nick Stillman