

# WESTERN ★ PROJECT

PRESS on **AARON SHEPPARD**:

## Las Vegas City Life

November 6, 2009

Amy Kingsley

### Bar room scrawl: A new comic captures Las Vegans drawing under the influence

BY AMY KINGSLEY >> [akingsley@lvcitylife.com](mailto:akingsley@lvcitylife.com)

Things that start in bars often end badly. Every drinker has a story about a near-death hangover, a night in the holding cell or a morning after he regrets.

But not every drinker has a way to put it on paper -- which is what inspired the graphic novel *Drunk: A Comic About Bar Stories*. Naturally, the idea surfaced over pitchers of beer and shared baskets of nachos at a weekly get-together of graduate art students.

"We were drunk at a bar and we thought, 'Hey, we should do stories about this,'" says Sean Russell, one of the three instigators of the book. "The seed was planted. It just took a while to grow."

He talks while he pours. The group, which numbers almost a dozen and meets every Friday, is into its second round of beers at the venerable Stake Out near UNLV, one of the group's regular hangouts and a minor character in one of the comics.

Jim Pink, the retired director of UNLV's graduate program in the visual arts, sits at the end of a column of tables. He started organizing the weekly outings in 2003, advised his former students during the making of *Drunk* and also contributed a piece that consists of characters based on the book's makers. All but two of the contributors are former students of Pink's.

"It's nice to see that something solid came out of all our drinking Fridays," Pink says.

Like most of the artists, Pink doesn't consider himself a comic book guy. He's familiar with R. Crumb and the other big names, but he started as a sculptor and taught printmaking and advanced drawing at UNLV. But his initiation to the world of art came via a neighbor, Norman Pettingill, whose proto-comical scene sketches appear in the book.

"Crumb is at UCLA right now giving a lecture on Genesis. Something like that adds a lot of artistic credibility to the world of comic books," Pink says.

Aaron Sheppard is a painter, performance artist and Friday evening regular who peppers his speech with references to painters. For his comic, he traded in his usual gestural style for disciplined line drawing influenced by images from *Alice in Wonderland*.

"You get to a place where you become comfortable and you have to break out of that. It's been an adjustment but it was one of the most eye-opening experiences I've had in a while," Sheppard says.

The artistic styles in the book range from the conventionally comic to indie autobiographical and almost painterly. Likewise, the stories cover the spectrum of intoxicated experience. Russell's comic is autobiographical, a fond recollection of the years he spent behind the bar of a VFW post in Menomonie, Wis. The piece contributed by Kim Deitch, on the other hand, is a chaotic account of alcoholic delirium populated by cartoonish hallucinations.

All but a couple of the artists live in Southern Nevada, a fact that contributes to the variation among the stories in *Drunk*.

"Because this is Las Vegas, most people who are here are from somewhere else initially. So you're going to get a wide variety of artwork when you're working with people who live in this city," he says.

Mike Ogilvie, one of the other masterminds behind *Drunk*, produced two comic books before this. One of the reasons he and his friends chose to do a comic dedicated to drinking is to change the way people think about comics.

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"Graphic novels are still very young and cater to a crowd that's below the drinking age," he says. "One of the reasons we did this is to show that you can read graphic novels if you're over 21."

Some of the bar stories are pure fantasy, but others are rooted in reality. Erin Stellmon, who works at the Neon Museum, wanted to do something that captured the unique history of downtown Vegas. Her comic features a former bartender at the Huntridge Tavern who has a way with unruly customers. A violent way. The comic captures her triumph over an abusive drunk three years her junior. Since the bartender left, the area and tavern have changed. Now it caters to the more upscale community that's begun to inhabit new condominiums that sprang up nearby.

"It's really a timepiece about the rich history of that area," Stellmon says.

Rich history aside, how does the Vegas bar scene stack up to other cities? Its 24-hour accessibility is a plus, but it's outweighed by the lack of public transit.

"When I came here as a tourist, it blew my fucking mind," Sheppard says. "We ended up staying here two or three times longer than we thought. But I prefer New York, because you can always get a cab, and get out and puke, and then call another cab."

In Vegas, the inebriates tend to park themselves permanently at the bar. That's where they stay, along with all the grand ideas that emerge from the haze of booze and cigarettes. Which is part of what makes *Drunk* such an interesting project to consider.

In the end, the most impressive thing about the book may be that it turned out at all. After all, most people go to bars to escape their responsibilities, not create more of them.

"You tend to get a lot of brainstorming done while you're drinking, and not a whole lot of execution," Sheppard says. "This book turned out to be a great marriage of the two."

The crowd around the table is already kicking around stories for the sequel, but Ogilvie doesn't want that getting out. After all, there are some things that are better left in bars.

*Drunk: A Comic About Bar Stories book signing and release party happens at 5 p.m. Nov. 6 at Frankie's Tiki Room, 1712 W. Charleston Blvd. Afterward, there will be an exhibition reception with original artwork from the book at Atomic Todd Gallery, 1217 S. Main St.*

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**View News**   *Las Vegas*   *May 2009*

***Artist combines elements from other works to recast them on canvas***

**By LAURA EMERSON - VIEW STAFF WRITER**

*Inside the UNLV graduate students' studio space on Tamarus Street, Aaron Sheppard sits in a beat-up rolling chair at a small table while working to make a deadline.*

It's Sunday, and he's drawing his first illustration piece for submission in a group project, which is a compilation of bar-related comics. He needs to have six of the drawings finished by the end of the week.

With his feet firm on the gray concrete floor that is splattered with excess plaster, remnants of tape and oil paint, Sheppard grabs a pencil to sharpen. He has a sharp razor blade in his right hand and a No. 2 pencil in his left. The artist brings the two together, because he says he can get a finer point with a razor. He also uses sandpaper to smooth out the edges.

"I'm going to turn some music on if you don't mind," Sheppard said.

He seems a little embarrassed when he says he only has one compact disc in the room, and then Chris

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Isaak comes through the stereo's speakers. His eyes are a little apologetic as he names the musician, but he quickly goes back to drawing.

Sheppard is making a collage of sorts, something he said he's been doing more of lately. He's taking elements from other artists, such as the work of Franz von Bayros, and making them his own by changing an aspect. He then incorporates these new but old elements in a piece to create something the world hasn't seen before.

Sheppard is wearing black boots with once-hot pink laces in them that had been the victims of a brutal artist. A string of tattoos runs down his left arm, and two earrings are stuck in his left ear. Sheppard, in the course of an hour or so, takes his shoulder-length light brown hair in and out of a low ponytail multiple times.

The last of Sheppard's paintings are on the wall, as he is getting ready to move out of this UNLV studio. With "Only the Lonely" playing in the background, Sheppard explains that his May 9 graduation from the UNLV master of fine arts program signals the end of his time at the studios on Tamarus Street.

While attending the university on Maryland Parkway, he was named Outstanding Graduate Student in the art department.

UNLV graduate coordinator Pasha Rafat called Sheppard a "terrific student," because he is open to criticism and different possibilities.

"He's been very prolific, and he's been very involved with the community," Rafat said.

The graduate coordinator described Sheppard as being helpful with other graduates and open to exhibiting in community shows.

The mixed media painting on the wall in the UNLV studio is itself a sign of the times in Sheppard's life. The stack of books he is working from on his table, then another in the back of the room on a work bench, also lend a hand in the explanation of Sheppard's new direction.

The artist is focusing on painting and line work, which is a shift from the performance art and large-scale installations in which he previously invested his time.

"This is a really new way of working for me," Sheppard said.

Sheppard's past lives have included playing in a fake punk/metal band for performance art, then actually putting a real band together to help fulfill a desire to be a rock star. Once, he and his fake band had a real group open for them at the infamous but now-closed New York City rock club CBGB, but were hauled off by mock police officers before they could play. Sheppard staged a similar rock show at Los Angeles' Viper Room, where again his pretend band didn't actually play.

At this point, though, he's focusing on stripping his art down and getting to the nitty gritty of his skill set, not so much on staging false arrests.

When referred to as an artist, Sheppard gets humble and says, "As my granddad would say, it's only a hobby unless you're paying the rent."

Whether paying the rent or not, Sheppard is an artist. His dad is one, and his sister is into jewelry making and photography. Creativity is in his blood.

The ultimate goal, however, is to pay the rent.

"My whole life is put into the work," Sheppard said.

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At 32 years old, the graduate is looking for a new studio in Las Vegas and has plans to stay in the city. He is involved with David Sanchez Burr's *Some Future -- Sometime* exhibit, which runs until Aug. 8 at the Reed Whipple Cultural Center, 821 Las Vegas Blvd. North.

He also is presenting his works in a group show at the Western Project art gallery in Culver City, Calif., this summer, and contributed to painting designs on benches in downtown Las Vegas for the Atomic Passage project.

"I'm looking forward to just working," Sheppard said. "I want to focus on the work and see where it goes."

After three years in the UNLV graduate school, Sheppard is looking to the future. If his luck is anything like the day he was accepted at UNLV, he can expect exciting things to come.

Sheppard went to the campus on Maryland Parkway as a fluke, and walked out with a full scholarship and a new mentor in now-retired UNLV art professor Jim Pink. He wasn't even looking to get into a master's program.

"I thought he'd be great for the program," Pink said.

Pink was drawn to Sheppard's variety of interests and said the artist is competent in multiple areas, which is unusual.

"I've never worked with anybody like Aaron," Pink said. "It's real interesting to see how his mind works. His work is really about storytelling."

In terms of his work, Sheppard said he likes to focus on how individuals engage with one another in society and what it is that forms individuals.

With a move out deadline in front of him, Sheppard is slowly but surely tying up loose ends. A small table saw on the gray concrete floor hints at the artist's time at UNLV, and other tools lie scattered around. It looks like the artist has his work cut out for him.

Before he can move anything, though, he has to finish those six collages.

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<http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2009/mar/31/artist-aaron-sheppard-struck-over-head-something-h/>

LAS VEGAS SUN : PEOPLE IN THE ARTS:

**Artist Aaron Sheppard 'struck over the head by something heavenly that fell to earth.'**

By Kristen Peterson - Tue, Mar 31, 2009 (2 a.m.)

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Image by Sam Morris

Aaron Sheppard, a Master of Fine Arts candidate at UNLV, would “love to be abducted by aliens and go into space.”

Name: Aaron Sheppard, artist - Age: 32

Education: Bachelor of Fine Art, Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C.; Master of Fine Art candidate, UNLV

The artist: The Nebraska born-and-raised Sheppard embodies remnants from his various lifestyles — construction worker, art student, drag performer (Barbie Q), rocker. The 6-foot-4 artist weathered the grit of Washington, D.C., wove through the New York underground scene performing in his band, Peter and the Pansexuals, and meditated with monks in Japanese temples. His long hair, mutton chops and eye makeup are a seeming amalgamation of a childhood spent in his grandfather’s lumberyard and his rock ‘n’ roll dreams. A subtle cowboy drawl lingers from childhood summers spent with family in Amarillo, Texas.

His work: Sexuality, individuality and gender identity are dominant issues in Sheppard’s performances and paintings. Multimedia works, pieced together from paint, wood, canvas and found objects, are raw, intense, guttural and emotional, a result, he says, of strategically purging his internal dialogue. He’s not just working through his own issues. His thesis exhibition, “lipstickaforkinme,” on display this week at the Donna Beam Fine Art Gallery, explores expected and realistic roles of women in today’s society via how they are represented and often exploited in media and popular culture, from fashion to porn.

As one of few artists in town active in performance art, Sheppard teamed with artist David Sanchez to produce “Lustre Flux,” a monthly performance art event at the Aruba hotel, and posed as a living sculpture (mannequin hanging in the window) in the “3Dementia” exhibit at the Contemporary Arts Center.

On being an artist: “I knew from Day One that’s what I was going to do because my dad’s an artist. He’d start throwing me into shows when I was 12. Without people knowing.”

Getting to Vegas: In 2006 Sheppard joined his family for a brief vacation in Las Vegas. He left New York with his portfolio and his band’s CDs because “you never know what’s going to happen. I always ran into John Waters in New York.” In Vegas, he called the entertainment director at New York-New York to see

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about getting a gig for his band, then headed over to UNLV, where he found a few students lingering on the campus during spring break. Ten hours later he had met several students and a few professors, was given a tour of the campus and local scene, and was offered a position as a graduate student.

On Vegas: While on a 30-day cross-country road trip with a friend in 2006, Sheppard fell in love with Vegas — “struck over the head by something heavenly that fell to earth.” The finding-Elvis road trip resulted in a multimedia exhibit at a Brooklyn gallery. His subsequent artwork with Vegas imagery — RVs, strippers, girls — sold out. Moving here never sullied his experience.

“I’ve had a hell of a great time being here. I love the weather. I love the palm trees. It’s the most romantic place I’ve ever been. There’s something you can have or do or be when here that’s been ingrained in your head even before moving here, a never-settling mystique. Vegas is floating. Even if I don’t actualize this fantasy in my head, at least it’s in my head, and that’s good enough.”

On art in Vegas: “I don’t think this town should be compared to other towns. Just let Vegas be what it is and it will take off. There’s a difference in attitude and aesthetic toward art here, which is good for me. You have to expose yourself in New York to survive. It’s what’s demanded because what else do you have to offer that’s unique?”

Other interests: Puppets (“I love Jim Henson and the Muppets”) and aliens (“I’d love to be abducted by aliens and go into space”).

Sticking around? “I haven’t made any plans. I’ll probably stay here. I do want to experience the city a bit more. I could be here three months. I could be here 30 years. I don’t know.”

Discussion: 3 comments so far...

1. By LVPaco

3/31/09 at 6:04 a.m.

Aaron rocks!

2. By Ginger\_Bruner

3/31/09 at 12:27 p.m.

A) I like Aaron's art and his willingness to participate in different kinds of art, from straight-on visual art, to performance art and music.

B) I agree completely that Las Vegas is its own animal. Don't compare us to other burgs because there is nothing else like it. Is that so hard to understand?

3. By kdn528

3/31/09 at 11:54 p.m.

I am one of the first grads from the UNLV MFA program (1991) . After reading this article in the Sun; I feel that the grad program has evolved and matured to a point where it has cultivated a genuine view of the new breed of artist that reflects the changes and realities of art in the 21 century.

Kathleen Dillon Nathan

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[http://www.lasvegascitylife.com/articles/2009/03/05/ae/art/iq\\_27280618.prt](http://www.lasvegascitylife.com/articles/2009/03/05/ae/art/iq_27280618.prt)

**Winners take all**

**CAC's 20th Annual Juried Show succeeds on every level**

by JARRET KEENE

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FOR all the journalistic tears shed over the recent demise of the Las Vegas Art Museum, perhaps there's a lesson to be learned from observing the Contemporary Arts Center as it continues to put on one modestly successful and relatively ambitious show after another without having to worry too much about pleasing super-wealthy patrons. What is the lesson? Not sure, but I expect it has something to do with emphasizing creativity over egos. Yes, there have been a lot of big changes for CAC in the last year, particularly with the appointment of Beate Kirmse as Executive Director. Her presence has reinvigorated the nonprofit, allowing for some interesting shows, including last year's *Beneath the Neon* (an "adaptation" of Matt O'Brien's nonfiction account of life in the Las Vegas storm drains). Also, exchanging the word "Collective" with "Center" is a subtle but crucial move suggesting there's less (messy) democracy under Kirmse's direction, which is a good thing. Too many cooks in the managerial kitchen is rarely, if ever, beneficial.

And CAC has benefited greatly, especially in terms of organization. Just for starters, the nonprofit's website is routinely updated, which means the moment I began to wonder what the new exhibit would be this month, all it took was a few clicks of the computer mouse to get excited about driving over to the Arts Factory. In case you haven't heard, CAC's 20th Anniversary Juried Show is now on display, and it offers so many great works that Kirmse has let the show leak into the anteroom outside the center's interior entrance, greeting visitors with visual treats before they've even found the door. Overall, I was pleasantly surprised by the show's consistent tone: pop yet thoughtful, lighthearted yet serious in terms of form, colorful yet fiercely engaged with life, surreal yet never lapsing into postmodern vacuity. Whenever I approached a piece, I could sense each artist's effort to please, instruct and disturb. Obviously, this isn't easy to do, but when something like food-obsessed Wendy Kveck's swirling, coruscating "From Roses to Roasts" grabs your eyes, there's no other way to describe the combination of impulses at work. Kveck lures in viewers with what on the surface resembles rose petals. It's only when you get closer that you realize these aren't flower-faced femmes laughing at you. They're meat-masked creatures that would make just as much sense on the cover of a death-metal album. Indeed, in the spate of single viewing, Kveck made me think about the organic thread that runs through vegetable and animal matter, about the dearth of humor in contemporary art, and about the vague sense that the artist is commenting on the hidden violence of both the culinary world and commercial gardening.

Another superb piece is Aaron Sheppard's "A Debutante's Eclipse," a dark portrait of a Cruella de Vil-like woman, her sinister gaze palpable enough to distract viewers from the self-inflicted (and labial-looking) wound oozing on her chest. The frame Sheppard fashioned for "Eclipse" is almost as interesting as the work it holds, with gothic flourishes that tempted me to reach out and touch. As far as sculptures go, Bryan Ambacher's "Meat Prince" elicited a chuckle. Inside a wooden box a stupidly grinning chubby boy doll -- blood smeared on his lips and fingers and a McDonald's fry container on his head -- watches as a fork-skewered cow bleeds to death in front of him. Meanwhile, a pile of cattle skulls threatens to topple over. There's more grotesque horror on hand in the form of Richard Gale's "Stages of the Heart," an acrylic-based painting in which smeared, bleeding hearts hang in space. Like the sweet, blurry aggression of a My Bloody Valentine rock song, "Heart" is a confrontation that retains a delicious veneer, and I had to stand in front of it for several minutes to determine how exactly he'd achieved this powerful effect. There's also Don Michael Jr.'s "Silence Gives Consent," in which a nighttime cityscape is interrupted by the

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presence of a giant human skull. Maybe it's all in the context, but the idea that looming foreclosures threaten to plunge the nation into the Great Depression II made me think Michael might be onto something.

Even work that might otherwise seem more academic-minded functions well in this space. Take, for instance, Elizabeth Blaus' two-part "Hydro-Tubes," which despite being acrylic renderings of tubular abstractions somehow holds its own amidst the glitter and doom. So, too, does the punkish pop of Greg Stahl's "Rock and Fuking Roll," a halo-ed Elvis Presley created with spray paint, and "Meathawk Revenge," in which a punk-rocker wields a Mohawk of, well, meat. Juror Shana Nys Dambrot deserves credit for selecting these works by Las Vegas artists; after all, the Venice, Calif.-based Dambrot has written for edgy art magazines like Juxtapoz and is currently an editor at flavorpill.com.

Whatever the case, CAC's juried show is a testament to the talent and imagination of the artists of Southern Nevada. In a moment when the Vegas scene seems to be suffering a series of terrible blows, it's important for anyone who appreciates visual art to experience this show. It will lift your spirits even as it troubles your mind with its ominous imagery.

20th Anniversary Juried Show Through March 24  
Contemporary Arts Center  
107 E. Charleston Blvd., Suite 120  
382-3886  
Free

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[http://www.lasvegascitylife.com/articles/2008/05/07/ae/art/iq\\_21366297.txt](http://www.lasvegascitylife.com/articles/2008/05/07/ae/art/iq_21366297.txt)

Freak scene

Aaron Sheppard's Midway conjures Coney Island sideshow vibe

by JARRET KEENE



THE DARK INFLUENCE of alternative beatnik musician Tom Waits on young visual and literary artists continues to be felt. His landmark carry-on-bad-acid album *The Black Rider* (1993) has done more to warp precocious minds than any number of Radiohead, Wilco and Postal Service CDs combined. Waits is the true touchstone for today's artists, mainly due to his un-self-conscious vision paralleling humanity and sideshows. The "living freaks" metaphor has never been more apt or more pervasive.

Aaron Sheppard has listened to too much Waits, but that's OK. He longs for an era he never knew, and one that will presumably never be marketed to the Urban Outfitters crowd. He lusts for the East Coast Coney Island of pre-World-War-II America, when three amusement parks competed for the attention of Brooklynites and Long Islanders hungry for escapism. Coney Island is a product of its time, and what Sheppard is saying by re-imagining it inside a gallery in the Downtown Las Vegas Arts District is beyond this so-called critic's grasp. Is Sheppard suggesting Vegas isn't freakish enough? That we need a "Tunnel

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of Truth or Consequences" in order to be a more satisfying entertainment destination? It seems pretty ballsy to install a miniature Coney Island in a town that makes yesteryear's parks look puny.

Word on the street is Sheppard tucked in his balls a bit in order to become a half-man, half-woman monstrosity during his show's First Friday debut last weekend. With one side of himself dressed like an elegant lady (complete with a fake breast) and the other dressed like a fashionable gentleman, the artist performed, according to a Contemporary Art Collective news release, as an "oddity within his own show." Sounds interesting, sure, but then Sheppard ruins the transgendered mystery. From the same release:

Now that he lives in Las Vegas, he is involved and concerned for his new community's future. He says, "The correlation between Las Vegas and Coney Island is progress. Today's trend to eradicate free expression for the sake of gentrification, convenience, and routine familiarity is causing an extinction of Americana."

Apart from his silly concern Downtown Vegas will become the next Williamsburg, it's even more absurd to call what's (not) happening in the city's core an eradication of free expression. Only when payday loan shops and 99-cent stores are cleared away and replaced by condos will installations like Sheppard's be more fully embraced. Artists may be pushed out by rising property values, yes, but their works will at least sell.

Then there's Sheppard's work itself. A giant paper-mache marionette ("Steeple Chase"), hands seemingly twisted among its wires, hangs from the ceiling, water shooting from its penis into the pool below, making it a kind of fountain. (A similarly constructed female marionette, "Luna," leaks water from her breast on the other end of the gallery.) These are great, grotesque works of which Sheppard should have constructed a parade's worth.

But these wonders are offset by inactive, static works like "Squid Boy" and the inert and aforementioned "Tunnel" (where a cart sits quietly waiting for either truth or consequence). The video loops of "Mermaid Parade 2007: Twins" and "Coney Island 2007: Wonder Work" continue to play with tiny boom boxes set up to produce a little midway noise, but the experience is utterly lacking. This is no funhouse atmosphere, but rather a gallery with multimedia artworks and a few carnival flourishes thrown in

The whole installation is as empty and forgotten as an abandoned amusement park. Is this the joke, then? If the work is meant to be absorbed during specific times, then shutter the gallery in between performances. Why allow viewers to wander around a park neglected by its creator's animating presence? In other words, if the work can't speak for itself, why display it at all? Leaving black-and-white portraits of old Coneygoers and a popcorn machine behind for us to puzzle over isn't enough reason to take this seriously.

Obviously a vastly creative soul, Sheppard completed an amazing amount of work all by his lonesome and should be commended for his attention to detail. But in order to make Midway a complete installation, it needs a spark of life, whether mechanical or otherwise. Even a carnival sideshow deserves more than two or three shows a month.

Midway

Wed.-Sat., 12 p.m.-5 p.m.

Closing reception: Thu., June 5, 6 p.m.

Contemporary Arts Collective

101 E. Charleston Blvd. Suite 101

382-3886 Free Last updated on Wednesday, May 7, 2008 at 8:32 pm

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<http://www.lasvegasweekly.com/news/2008/may/22/partys-over/>

The party's over

A haunting glimpse at Coney Island's post-spectacle landscape

By Danielle Kelly

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Aaron Sheppard

Midway by Aaron Sheppard

\* Contemporary Arts Collective, 101 East Charleston Blvd., Suite 101, Las Vegas

The May 1 opening of Aaron Sheppard's *Midway* at the Contemporary Arts Collective was quite the party, a vaudevillian extravaganza of singing, sparkles and skin. The evening's MC was the artist himself, dressed as half man/half woman, and the joint was jumping with beautiful ladies of every gender. Like on the Strip at sundown, fairy dust cast by the general fabulousness camouflaged any cracks, creaks and crumbling facades.

Don't feel bad—it's okay if you weren't there. If you live in Vegas, you are there every day. *Midway* isn't about the spectacle itself, but what happens after the spectacle: With the lights up, you can see the vomit in the corner and the stuff stuck to your shoe. Not unlike a casino at four in the morning—a little haunting, a little beautiful.

As an artist in New York, Sheppard toyed with forms of gender and sexuality at the intersection of underground or subcultural social customs. Via autobiographical paintings and performance, he inhabits the skin of fake rock stars and drag queens culled from personal history. Now a member of UNLV's MFA program, the artist has a rich new American myth to mine: Las Vegas.

Like posters at the circus luring visitors into the big tent, the gallery's street-facing windows showcase banners of "Mr. Murray Hill" and "Miss Dirty Martini," each ripe with side-show promises. The carnivalesque exterior belies the barren lack of festivities inside, as Sheppard has transformed the main space at the CAC into a midway ... after the show. The barker has gone, a refreshment counter stands empty, the game booth has no takers and a ride has seats waiting to be filled—literally. Although peopled with structures, the space is uncannily hollow, filled only with a distinct residue of the raucous human activity it promises to have once held. It's like an amusement park after closing, strangely suspended in time, by turns empty, menacing and a bit sad.

According to the press release, *Midway* addresses Sheppard's personal mourning of the pending death of Coney Island. The park is scheduled for partial demolition and refurbishment this fall with plans to be "modeled after the Las Vegas Strip experience ... [offering] rides, spectacle and glamour." It is in imagery based on the park that the artist most effectively sets his melancholy tone. Two sculptures, "Luna" and "Steeplechase," personify two long-defunct turn-of-the-century precursors to the park we know today. These monumental and forlorn fountains hover protectively over the orphaned Coney Island. The "statues" have a ghostly pallor and a clumpy, runny surface with a strangely erotic physicality. Like much of the work in the show, they appear as though they will fall apart at any minute. Water spurts from both

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bodies, emphasizing their fetishized sexuality as trickling water echoes cavernously through a room that seems much larger and emptier than it actually is.

Similarly doleful are two videos filmed at the park last summer, "Mermaid Parade 2007: Twins" and "Coney Island 2007: Wonder Work." The former depicts two women as Siamese twins dressed in an old-fashioned swimming costume, twirling in circles and dancing the Charleston, while the latter is an endlessly spinning Ferris wheel. Black and white, the videos are like memories, and their swirling imagery suggests both a party waiting to happen and time standing still.

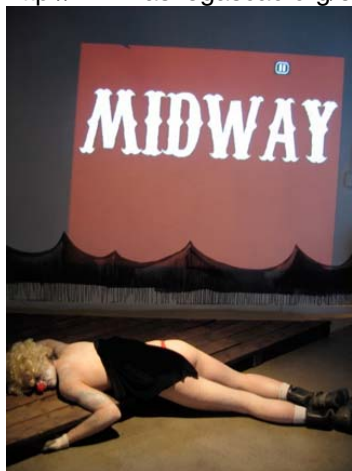
The installation is not without its flaws. Why is the music for "Mermaid Parade 2007" on a CD player in the middle of the room? The paintings and collages, while often achingly sexual and beautiful, seem an afterthought in the gallery's problematic back gallery. If the artist wasn't going to capitalize on the inclusion of two-dimensional work, why have it at all?

Still, the residents of Vegas should be particularly savvy to the exhibition's framework. We are acutely aware of the life cycles of cultural myth—it is our bread and butter, and we trade daily in resurrecting, destroying or manipulating iconic Americana. But it's misleading to access Midway via connections between Las Vegas and Coney Island. The real heart of the matter is a question posed by the work: What makes a spectacle? It is a contract between the performer and the viewer, but what happens to the spectacle when the viewer is gone? Or worse yet, the performer? Aaron Sheppard is this exhibition, and the silence of his physical absence is the most melancholy and deafening of all.

Thu, May 22, 2008 (midnight)

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<http://www.lasvegascac.org/exhibitions/midway.html>



CAC Gallery is pleased to present a new exhibition Midway by local artist Aaron Sheppard. Midway incorporates a cross over of art disciplines (painting, film, body art, writing...) that come together to recreate the essence of Coney Island, or rather, expose Sheppard's personal relationship with the historical amusement site. The artwork is reminiscent of circus propaganda; as interactive props living his narrative, puppets are an element directed before the viewer.

Although inspiration from Coney Island has been cumulating for over a decade when he first was introduced to the summer event known as The Mermaid Parade, documentation beginning June 2007 is incorporated here into Sheppard's latest experiment. Post summer 2008, Coney Island is slated to undergo transformation into a high-end resort destination. Plans have been described as modeled after The Las Vegas Strip experience, which offers rides, spectacle and glamour as well as security and hospitality. Sheppard witnessed the progression of Williamsburg Brooklyn while living there. Now that he lives in Las Vegas, he is involved and concerned for his new community's future. He says, "The correlation between Las Vegas and Coney Island is progress.

Today's trend to eradicate free expression for the sake of gentrification, convenience, and routine familiarity is causing an extinction of Americana." Sheppard will be within the gallery space of CAC at various times during the month of May while he engages his artwork. His feat, as a performing oddity within his own show, is to compile a short film, which brings together his art as object, as body, as

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abstraction, as reflection.

The exhibition is sponsored by TODD VONBASTIAANS with additional funding provided by THE NEVADA ARTS COUNCIL and The Arts Factory.

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Who said being good was easy?  
A group of artists wrestles with an eternal question  
By Susanne Forestieri



“The Princess and the Pea,” Jonnie Anderson.

Please note: “This show intended for mature audiences only,” but don’t get too excited. Curators Wendy Kveck and Danielle Kelly were determined to stimulate your brain, not your gonads. In *On Being Good*, their new exhibit at the Reed Whipple Cultural Center, they invited artists—all of whom lived in Las Vegas at one time—to explore their interpretations of “being good.” (Editor’s note: Kelly also covers art for the Weekly.)

*On Being Good*  
Through November 29  
Reed Whipple Cultural Center, 229-6211

In a more religious age “goodness” was the opposite of evil and was represented allegorically; but in our secular age, without universally understood symbols and with few moral absolutes, it’s not surprising that most of the artists dodged the big issue and dealt with more contemporary notions of empowerment.

You would think addicts and prostitutes shouldn’t feel good about themselves, but Jonnie Andersen demonstrates otherwise. Working as a barmaid in a Downtown country/western bar, she invited her new “friends” to get makeovers and be photographed. Her book, *The Little Chapel of Esoteric Cosmetology*, is the result. (Two enlargements hang in the gallery.) The battered and bruised women never achieve anything close to glamour, but their faces show a defiant joy that’s deeply moving.

We can’t see the women’s faces hidden behind Wendy Kveck’s signature food masks, worn by two scantily clad young women in a video satire of the perennial beer commercial featuring scantily clad young women. Kveck succeeds in subverting the notion of women as both consumers and consumed.

Laurenn McCubbin also addresses women’s empowerment. In her three-panel graphic short story, a woman assaulted by insults (e.g., “slut,” “bitch,” “dumb” and “FAT!”) is transformed by stages into a mermaid who utters the last word, “Shhh ...” I think McCubbin intended the work as a positive statement, but what does it say when a woman is exultant only after she has lost her pudendum? Do women have to relinquish their sexuality to be powerful?

**Aaron Sheppard lacks a pudendum, but photographed by Jill Fiore during a performance piece, his long silken hair falling gently down his back, he easily passes for a woman. The picture uses dark tones reminiscent of 19th-century “fine art” photographs. The deception calls attention to the lie of soft porn as “art.”**

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Thu, Oct 2, 2008 (midnight)

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<http://www.lasvegasweekly.com/news/2008/jul/03/badasses-heart/>

Badasses with heart

Local art handlers show off their own work

By Danielle Kelly



"Caping" by JW Caldwell.

The art handlers who work for MCQ Fine Art are badass—according to the postcard for their group show. The Difference Between Making a Living and Making a Killing is hardcore, and there's even a skull and crossbones to prove it. Don't let the act fool you, though. They may look tough on the outside, but these bad boys have filled the walls of MCQ Fine Art's Downtown salon with delicately beautiful and—dare I say it?—sensitive artwork.

What, you may ask, is an art handler? Art handlers specialize in the moving, packing, unpacking and installation of fine art, and they are often artists themselves. Translation: These guys hang really heavy, really expensive art all day. It is a great way to support yourself until—to borrow a phrase—you make a killing with your own work. Avid followers of the local art scene already know that our fair city is home to numerous terrific artists, some more well-known than others. Many of them are art handlers, and several are in this modest show.

The exhibition is not without its problems: For a show by a company that—among other things—installs fine art, the installation of the work is surprisingly flawed, and the lighting is problematic. Compounding the experience is what at first appears to be a collection of throwaway works; to be honest, I wasn't sure how seriously these guys were taking the venture. A second visit was more revelatory. A number of these artists took this exhibition as an opportunity to try something new. The best work signifies a shift in direction or some form of experimentation for the individual artists.

Small and luscious, Chad Brown's "Blues for My Baby" marks a new direction. An excellent local painter, Brown is known for deft, richly painted, almost abstract interpretations of the urban landscape; in "Blues" he has applied this same sensibility to a very intimate subject matter. An immersion into the psychology of the piece doesn't hinge on knowing what the image is, and I'm certainly not telling. Suffice to say that the artist has taken a simple, close-up portrait and transformed it into a bittersweet psychological landscape of cascading blues and floating grays.

More

The Difference Between Making a Living and Making a Killing

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Through August 29  
MCQ Fine Art Salon, 620 S. 7th St. 366-9339  
mcqfineart.com  
MCQ Gallery event information

Following on the heels of a recent series of black, white and gray paintings, "Mom, I'm Home" marks a welcome return to color for Mark Brandvik. The artist's impeccably reductive enamel paintings of personal and public Las Vegas landmarks are always terrific, but they are truly set apart by his agility with color. In Brandvik's hands, a neutral white façade is transformed via pale blues, pinks and oranges into a portrait brimming with hope and promise. RC Wonderly, an artist who normally embraces a fierce minimalism, has somehow managed to be simultaneously spare and baroque. While previous explorations with OSB (oriented strand board) have been more restrained, the artist has clearly invested more research into the potential of the material. For "Untitled," he takes OSB inlaid with resin and sends it through a planer, revealing the panel's intricate layers of pressed wood shavings. The result is a highly decorative finish covered in delicate curlicues. Juxtaposed against clean crisscrossing lines of resin, the effect is one of high tension that rewards close inspection.

The biggest surprise is "Caping," by JW Caldwell. The artist usually works in acrylic, employing romantic Western imagery that caters to the idea of the Old West (bucking cowboys, wild horses, etc.). But here, Caldwell becomes more personal, and his audacity pays off. The unpretentiously scaled "Caping" depicts a modern-day "cowboy" skinning what looks to be a deer. The zinger is that the piece is lovingly detailed in watercolor. The depiction of such a violent, brutal and (one might argue) necessary act in so refined a medium as watercolor grants the image an almost touchingly tender familiarity and unmistakable respect. This combination of specificity in subject matter and subtlety of medium makes for richness in content that blows the artist's previous work out of the water.

Work by David Ryan, **Aaron Sheppard** and Evan Dent and a really terrific small painting by Neil Linssen round out the exhibition.

Making a Living reveals the soft and creamy center to the tough-guy exterior, and proves that art handlers need love, too.

Thu, Jul 3, 2008 (midnight)

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