

WESTERN ★ PROJECT

Patrick Lee
Western Project
By Vonn Sumner
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This first solo show by Los Angeles artist Patrick Lee consists of 23 drawings, all graphite on paper. Each drawing is small (around 14 x 11 inches) except for what appear to be the most recent 3 drawings, which are about 2 x 3 feet. Most of the drawings focus on the face and neck of a solitary young man.

The men appear to be mostly white or Latino, quite muscular, and all of them are bleeding or bandaged or both. Some of the faces stare at the viewer defiantly, some stare off into the middle distance. A few smoke cigarettes. Tattoos on the head and neck read phrases such as "Bad Influence," "Kings Until Death," "Trust No Bitches," "Fuck All Haters," and "5150" (the police code for mentally unstable). Almost all of the men sport bussed haircuts and goatee mustaches. Some have stitches, cauliflower ears, swollen black eyes, dripping cuts and long scars. They could be prison inmates who get into frequent and violent altercations. They could be Ultimate Fighting Championship veterans, a couple of fights past their prime. Or they could just be tough guys who have had to scrap and brawl their way through a hard life.

The ambiguity of their identities and origins is a strength in the work: The subjects don't get pinned down as one specific person, but rather attain a more metaphorical, universal character. This challenges the viewer to ask questions and move beyond the work's fetishizing of the signs of physical brutality. Look longer and the ugly-beauty of the drawings begin to reveal an underlying humanity. Lee's subjects are, at first glance, people who might make a person very nervous if met alone on a dark street; but seen through the eyes of this artist they become vulnerable, almost saintly. Are the exterior wounds signifiers of the interior pain and suffering? Perhaps, but the men don't appear upset by their brutalized visages. Instead many of them seem content, even comforted, as if their bloodied state they have gained some sense of self-acceptance through the process of making their exterior match their interior.

A standout piece is a 24" x 26" recent drawing (*Deadly Friends (Comb)*) which focuses, vignette style, on a man's hand holding a comb, which is in the middle of a thick goatee. There is something intensely visually satisfying about the comb stuck in the beard and this large, heavy hand coming up from nowhere. The image is so specific, so distilled, as to become iconic. It is one of the most effective and well-realized coded for masculinity that I have seen in recent art.

The psycho-analyzing is really secondary to the drawings themselves. They are based on photos—the dominant convention of representation—but in translating the images to pencil on paper, they are transformed.

What is drawing but the recording of touch? The pencil is a deputy for the hand.

In the process of making these drawings, Lee is in effect caressing the surfaces of these brutalized men thousands of times. The pencil stops being graphite and becomes leathery skin, stubbly scalps, bushy goatees, bloody cuts and scars. There is a band-aid in one of these drawings rendered with as much care and intent as any Dutch still-life flower.

The 20th century painter Balthus likened representational painting and drawing to an act of devotional prayer. Lee's treatment of his subjects lives up to that description. These drawings allow the viewer to become intimate with the most menacing of strangers.

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For Immediate release:

PATRICK LEE

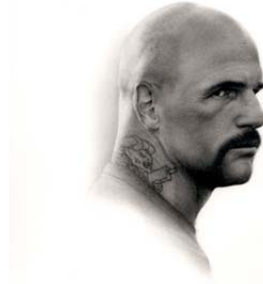
Deadly Friends

Drawings and Photographs

January 6 – February 10, 2007

Reception for the artist:

Saturday, January 6, from 5-8 p.m.



Western Project is proud to present the first solo exhibition by Los Angeles artist, Patrick Lee. Three years in the making, this show will include finished drawings and studies, as well as photographs from his *Deadly Friends* series. Lee's drawings are painstakingly crafted over months of refinement. Inspired by photographs he takes of men from the streets of America, they convey a unique insight into class and gender ideals. Many subjects are 'outsiders' or 'outlaw' types; mimicked by pop culture icons and contemporary heroic figures.

The technical mastery of his work is only exceeded by the artist's insight into the core of masculinity. It is the artifice of masculinity that is his primary theme – the characteristics men acquire for power, sex, money and basic survival. Lee has photographed hundreds of men over the past ten years, examining the nuances and complexity of this idea. Physical attributes such as tattoos, scars, body muscle, and facial hair are prevalent external elements. These superficial adornments often combine as beautiful idealized images, or sometimes fearfully hideous mirrors.

Lee uses a number of different sources for each drawing. The result is a composite rather than an actual portrait of an individual. His images are like masks, but include other intangible facets: arrogance, pride, strength, pain, and anger. Combining the internal and external qualities, Lee's work has the intensity of a grand scale yet is typically on 14 x 11 inch sheets of paper. It is the illusion of 'maleness' that Lee spikes, as a kind of temporary role, adapted, altered and expanded as men desire. It is the slipperiness of the male gender role that is disturbing in his work – the exposed closet of hair and clothing and attitudes which make it possible to challenge, mate, kill or control another human being. While DNA makes a man, it is the simple transient effects put in to place that create what we call, masculine.

Lee has exhibited at the Tang Museum at Skidmore College, the Weatherspoon Art Museum, Western Project and the Marc Selwyn Gallery in Los Angeles, and is in the collection of the High Art Museum in Atlanta and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. He is also a recipient of the Peter S. Reed Foundation grant for 2006.

For further information and images, please contact the gallery at 310-838-0609