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Sam Gibbons

Organized Chaos
By Jennifer Pappas

Sam Gibbons isn't letting you off the hook. Sex, violence, religion, ego—everything comes together in colorful palettes unrestricted by shape or form. His rare, vibrant paintings are teeming with images both familiar and grotesque, and they're demanding some careful attention. Think whirlwinds of manga mixed with the sordid humor of *South Park* for a fantastic cartoon orgy, organized into a symmetrical form, and you might be a little closer to knowing what to expect.

Gibbons graduated with an MFA from Hunter College in 2005 and was quickly swept up by local gallery owner, Claire Oliver. Gibbons' technicolor, cartoon-like style first caught the eye of another artist at one of Hunter's open studios. That artist's enthusiasm for Gibbons' work eventually led him to Oliver, who on the verge of opening a new space downtown, was looking for new talent. Gibbon's blend

of perversion and innocence, along with a unique technique of painting on three-dimensional, cut-out wooden panels seemed to hit the mark.

Cakehead, Gibbon's first solo show opened in December 2007 at the Claire Oliver Gallery in New York City. The exhibit consisted of a series of new pieces as well as a pop-up-like installation, transforming the room into a giant symmetrical painting. The show was well received and changed the way a lot of people thought about the fun-loving nature of animated characters.

Gibbons has always been fascinated by cartoons, dropping many infamous names as major sources of inspiration. "Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to do something with cartoons. I wanted to be a comic book artist or an animator. When I



started college, I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do, so I got into the fine art program. Because of the imagery I was into, I got turned on to people like Philip Guston and Peter Saul, people using cartoon imagery in their paintings and fine art. But I still loved Robert Crumb and Peter Bagge, so I kept working and drawing and eventually inflated the two worlds into something of my own."

Symmetry is an integral part of that world. Looking at a typical Sam Gibbons painting, I imagine a multitude of simple forces at odds with one another. Like one side of the face competing with the other, the right hand making a fist at the left, or two lines of identical children engaged in a fierce

game of tug-of-war. The equilibrium is stunning. *Sickhead*, for example, is an onslaught of ominous images done in rich tones of teal and grey. Snouts, pitchforks, big bad wolves and mouths agape make up a complicated landscape that only increases in intricacy as it culminates near the center. At the focal point of the piece is a Mickey Mouse-looking head, split down the middle, housing a tentacle creature I can only assume is diabolical in nature. It's strange and surreal, yet seems to make sense.

"My early work was more narrative than it is now. Not so much that I would have recurring characters but it was cartoony and dealt with personal stories. Since then, that's sort

of changed. I didn't want the narrative to take over the work, so I had to think of a way to negate that. Putting the scenes into a symmetrical design sort of negates the narrative, and makes it more about shape and color, or size and form.

A big reason I started the symmetry thing was because of a painting I did when I was first starting grad school. It was based on a famous work by Jan van Eyck called, "The Ghent Altarpiece." It's a symmetrical piece depicting several different scenes: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the annunciation of Mary... I did a piece based around that about the relationship between male and female, and good versus evil. I started seeing the





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possibilities of things I could do using symmetry."

The ornate quality of the drawings as well as Gibbons' penchant for iconography and symbolism is reminiscent of another Dutch painter from the 15th century, Hieronymus Bosch. Bosch's work is heavy on depictions of debauchery, hedonism and mankind's constant moral failings. His most famous work, "The Garden of Earthly Delights," is a convoluted comment on the fragile line between good and evil, a display of human innocence somehow unaware of consequence, not unlike Gibbons' work. "Bosch?" Gibbons says, "Yeah, he's great. His characters are messed up too."

Satire is another strong, underlying factor in Gibbons' paintings. Saccharine demons wielding guns mingle with docile-looking dogs in a piece titled, "Bone Hero." A female politician raises a salutatory arm in front of a graveyard full of bones in "Flag Wizard." Not to mention the obvious allusions to sex, violence and pop-culture.

"My paintings are partially, but not wholly, satirical. My own personal narrative is in there as well. The last series I worked on, there are flashes of U.S. flags, and people copulating and violence but it was also a rough time in my life when I was painting those. My mom was diagnosed with cancer and actually died around the same time I was working on

that series. So I sort of went on autopilot and just kept painting. Now, when I look at them all together, I can see that there was a lot of death in the work. I don't set out to make a comment on certain things in particular but they sort of come out in their own way."

Popular culture often makes its way into the pores of personal interpretation, provoking inspiration in unusual ways. "I watch a lot of cartoons. A lot of the Adult Swim stuff like *AquaTeen Hunger Force*, *Ren & Stimpy*, *South Park*... I don't know if that's inspiration. I like looking at other artists too. As I mentioned before, I like Peter Saul, underground comics, Peter Bagge's *Hate* comics and this character he created, Buddy Bradley. Bagge has a real wild gesturing of characters; they get real angry and real exaggerated. The character's teeth get real sharp when they get angry, and that's something that's showed up in my work. A lot of sharp teeth. Just little things like that."

Ren and Stimpy aside, another important aspect of Gibbons' work is his decision to snub traditional canvas. Opting to work on medium-density fiberboard cut out to fit the exact outline of each painting, the result is a carnival of spontaneous shapes and characters, unbound by borders.

"I was using rectangular canvas but the drawings were becoming more involved, and the edges of the work were getting forced into these enclosed spaces. At the

time, I was working for Frank Stella [an abstract painter and printmaker currently living in New York]. A friend of mine got me the job and we were commissioned to build these large, supporting panels for his smoke collages, the giant paper collages he was making with irregular edges. He needed something to support them, so we cut out large panels with a jigsaw, put them on supports and mounted the paperwork right on them. I thought, 'Hey, this could work for the drawings I'm working on.' At the time I was considering my thesis project too. Working with Stella made me realize I could translate the method to paintings mounted on the wall."





The process is time-consuming. Gibbons works on the drawing first, transfers the outline to the wooden panel and cuts it out. He then prepares the piece with gesso, transfers the actual drawing and finally begins to paint. Each 4'x4' painting takes around three to four weeks to complete. "The work is monotonous, perfecting the shape, figuring out color. I try to paint as flat as possible, but it is sort of taxing after a while. I've been doing symmetry for a few years now, and it makes me go crazy sometimes. You know, back and forth, back and forth. A piece I just finished has corresponding parts but it's not as asymmetrical so it was a little easier on the brain."

It would be easy to categorize Gibbons' work as shocking, whimsical or even lowbrow, but classification isn't really the point. We live in a visual world; no one can contest that. We live in an epoch of instants, automatics and nows, bombarded by streams of information wherever we turn. Solitude has indeed become the rarest commodity I can think of. It's no wonder we find comfort in over-stimulation. And while Gibbons' work can certainly be construed as over-stimulating, the difference is that it dares us to confront the frenzy, peer into the mess and emerge with something meaningful—something that required contemplation. By negating narrative and letting the images speak for themselves, Gibbons challenges the

viewer to surmise their own interpretation. He wants those who see his work to stop, think and process that which overwhelms.

Gibbons can concur, "It's a huge part of our society right now. Everyone is over-stimulated. Everyone has a place to be and no one's sitting back and thinking what's best. I'm probably a victim of that more than anyone. It seems like I'm always go, go, go and this and that. But I try, and I think we all should try to take time and think about what's best. I don't know if the work is a symptom of over-stimulation or a symptom of my own obsessive personality. It's probably a lot of both."

While enjoying a comparatively quiet life in Baltimore with his wife, the upcoming year has much in store for Sam Gibbons, including a new show at Claire Oliver in February 2009, a July 2009 exhibit at the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut, and inclusion in the book, *Beasts! Volume II* by Fantagraphics.

"In the newer series, I was thinking about bringing together a lot of different elements, Goya being one of them. I want the new pieces to be more eclectic, which is why they aren't as symmetrical as before. They still have beings that correspond with each other, but I think I'm beginning to move away from symmetry a little bit. I want to keep it in the repertoire though; I don't want to get rid of it

altogether. Basically, I want to work hard, concentrate on this next series and make it as good as possible."

It's been said of Gibbons' that "these works summon our natural association"—and I can't help but wonder if it's the element of mimicry that people find so fascinating. Familiar things are comfortable things. It's all there in each painting Gibbons creates; one side mimics the other, characters mimic the gestures and expressions of recognizable cartoons. The pieces themselves mimic how human beings relate to the world. For at any given time, on any given day, how many of us aren't thrilled, excited, distraught, confused or frightened? Like the eerie tranquility inside the eye of a storm, Gibbons' takes the frenzy of everyday existence and puts it on mute for just a moment. One might call the paintings violent, erotic or fatal, but in truth, they are portraits just like any other. They are portraits of the state we are in, both personally and how we appear mirrored against the rest of the world. †

