

## 4Columns

Mike Kuchar  
*Ed Halter*

*From naked Odysseus to the penis of Pegasus: pornographic fun at Drawings by Mike!*

Just around the corner from jewelers Harry Winston, that midtown Manhattan temple devoted to the rituals of heterosexuality, Anton Kern Gallery is hosting an artist whose work could make many a bride blush. Journey up a white marble staircase to the third floor, past the gallery's bathroom and some primly rendered wall text that warns "this exhibition contains graphic imagery," and you'll enter a world predicated on rather different fantasies of coupling.

Here, in a show simply titled *Drawings by Mike!*, are twenty-two neatly framed ink-and-felt-tip-pen cartoons of tousle-haired Caucasian bohunks engaged in a variety of joyously, nakedly homoerotic situations: skinny dipping, crotch grabbing, pec rubbing, tit sucking. Their bare asses are, without exception, spheric and shiny, like the juiciest apple you'd ever hope to bite. Their sparkling eyes appear glazed over, staring into daydreams even as the men lick and paw at one another's brawny bodies. Their expressive dicks are thick and veiny: some half-tumescent flesh-tubes flop lazily downward; others stab at the air, yearning toward some object of desire, dribbling semen like a salivating predator.

The eponymous Mike! is Mike Kuchar, best known as a pioneering experimental filmmaker and the surviving half of the fraternal directorial team of George and Mike Kuchar. The Kuchar twins began their careers in the 1950s by making whacked-out 8mm shoestring epics while still teenagers in the Bronx, and then quickly found themselves at the center of the New York underground film boom of the sixties, rubbing shoulders with fellow cinematic visionaries like Andy Warhol, Jonas Mekas, Ken Jacobs, Jack Smith, and many others. Filled with camp and kitsch, and edited to the overblown rhythms of Hollywood melodrama, the Kuchars' movies provided prime inspiration for John Waters's early micro-budget comedies. The brothers collaborated until the mid-1960s, after which they produced films independently for the subsequent decades. Though their work continued to bear



Mike Kuchar, *Pagan's Picnic*, 2017. Felt tip pen and ink on paper, 29 × 22.5 inches.



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many similarities—a wholehearted embrace of non-acting, a comic-strip palette, soaring soundtracks lifted from dime-store record albums—one of the most noticeable distinctions between the two was their attitude toward sex.

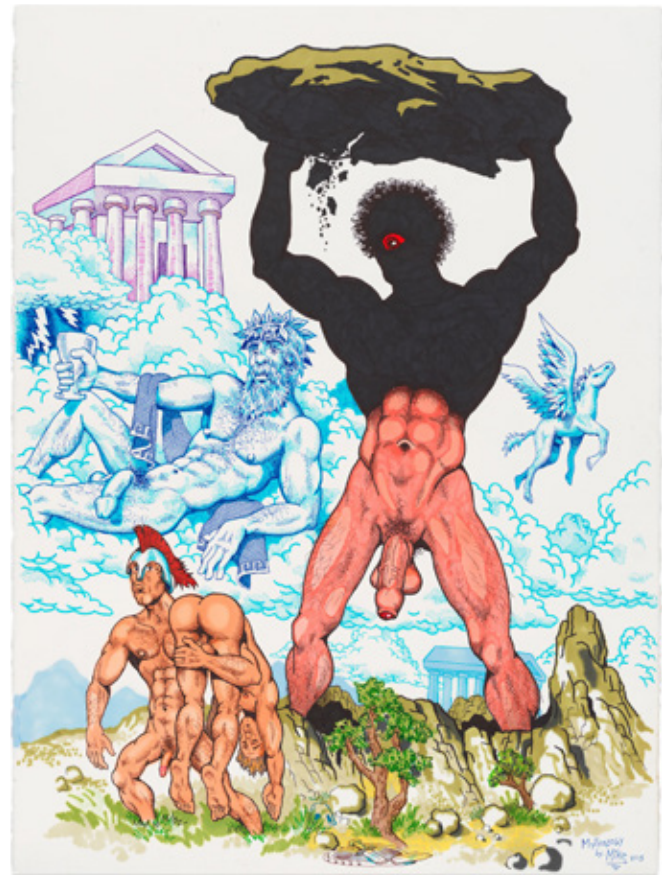
Both brothers were gay, but approached the picturing of their desires in different ways. George's work plays with self-deprecating sexual frustration by indulging in the muffled, ironic eros of a more closeted era. For George, sex is something silly, infantile, and—especially in his later video diaries—neurotic. Mike, however, depicts gay love in a more forthright and robust manner. In one of Mike's earliest solo movies, *The Secret of Wendel Samson* (1966), he casts a young Red Grooms as a hunky artist who's in a relationship with another man. Mike's later videos and films like *Seascape* (1984) or *Blue Vibrations* (2014) frequently center on solitary, largely unclothed ephebes, letting the camera drink in long moments of unashamed male beauty.

Both brothers drew cartoons, and ran in social circles with Art Spiegelman and R. Crumb in San Francisco during the golden age of underground comix. In this medium too, George's drawings veer toward the comedic and grotesque, while Mike's were always brazenly sensual, leading him to publish early work in some pioneering gay comics of the 1970s like *Gay Heart Throbs* and *Meatmen*, as well as gay porn magazines of the 1980s like *First Hand* and *Manscape*. While some cartoons included in *Drawings by Mike!* were done in the 1980s and 1990s, perhaps for publications like these, most on view at Anton Kern are more recent, made within the past couple of years. Yet Kuchar's style remains strongly consistent no matter the decade.

Many of the pieces here use scenarios reminiscent of movies and books that might have provided safe objects for a teen Kuchar's horny gaze, updated with an adults-only spin: Roman history and Greek mythology, Adam in the Garden of Eden, loin-clothed cavemen and Tarzan types, hirsute barbarians and lusty pirates. In *Pagan's Picnic* (2017), a beefcake Cupid shoots an arrow into the muscular chest of a nude shepherd, causing him to stare longingly at a well-hung, blue-eyed Dionysius lounging in the foreground. A naked Odysseus runs from a similarly unclothed Cyclops in *Mythology* (2015); here, the monocular monster's red eye is rhymed by the ruddy tip of its penis as it peeps out from its foreskin—Pegasus, flying in the background, wields his own hefty schlong. Even the more contemporary situations partake of stock fantasies: a daddy inspecting a male stripper's G-string, for instance, in *Party Time* (2016–17), or college frat boys indulging in a modern-day Bacchanalia for *Spring Break*



Mike Kuchar, *Spring Break Costume Party*, 2015. Felt tip pen and ink on paper, 24 × 18 inches.



Mike Kuchar, *Mythology* 2015. Felt tip pen and ink on paper, 30 × 22 inches.

*Costume Party* (2015). *Play Stations* (2015) shows two men engaging in bondage, within a grimy chamber. A blue spiderweb in the background recalls a similar ropy device used to trap the protagonist of *The Secret of Wendel Samson*, while the swears and cocks scrawled on the wall reference the degree-zero pornography of bathroom graffiti.

We are sometimes told that great art cherishes ambiguities and enigmas. Great pornography, however, achieves both its formal and erotic powers through the crystal-clear manifestation of desires that otherwise might remain unarticulated. Think how Sade's writing gave a name to sadism and Sacher-Masoch's to masochism, while Tom of Finland's images inspired real leatherman to walk the earth. Thus the most advanced pornographers produce authorial tics through the repetition of particular paraphilia. The selection of work in *Drawings by Mike!* evidences Kuchar's own fixation on a very specific male form. Virtually without exception, the men here are square-jawed and thickly athletic, with a dusting of hair on the chest, face, and legs. Their cocks are remarkably homomorphic: all of specific tubular heft, uncut, with shaved, low-hanging balls and a landscaped tuft of pubic hair above the base; these erections are mimicked by the men's swollen, pencil-eraser nipples, jutting out from slabs of muscle. Kuchar has remarked that he uses his mirror image as model when drawing. Perhaps then these men are his own ego ideal, multiplied and beefed up via the metamorphoses of fantasy.

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Mike Kuchar, *Pagan's Picnic*, 2017. Felt tip pen and ink on paper, 29 × 22.5 inches.