

The Raunchy Splendor of Mike Kuchar's Dirty Pictures

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AS AN ILLUSTRATOR, MY AIM IS TO AMUSE THE EYE AND SPARK IMAGINATION, wrote the great American artist and filmmaker Mike Kuchar in *Primal Male*, a book of his collected drawings. TO CREATE TITILLATING SCENES THAT REFRESH THE SOUL...AND PUT A BIT MORE "FUN" TO VIEWING PICTURES — and that he has done for over five decades. "Drawings by Mike!" is an exhibition of erotic illustrations at Anton Kern Gallery, one of the fall season's great feasts for the eye and a welcome homecoming for one of New York's most treasured prodigal sons.

As boys growing up in the Bronx, Mike and his twin brother — the late, equally great film and video artist George (1942–2011) — loved to spend their weekends at the movies, watching everything from newsreels to B films to blockbusters, their young minds roused by all the thrills that Hollywood had to offer: romance, drama, action, science fiction, terror, suspense. As George remembered in their 1997 *Reflections From a Cinematic Cesspool*, a memoir-cum-manual for aspiring filmmakers: "On the screen there would always be a wonderful tapestry of big people and they seemed so wild and crazy....The women wantonly lifted up their skirts to adjust garter-belts and men in pin-striped suits appeared from behind shadowed décor to suck and chew on Technicolor lips." For the Kuchars, as for gay male contemporaries like Andy Warhol and Jack Smith, the movie theater was a temple for erotics both expressed and repressed, projected and appropriated, homo and hetero, all whirled together on the silver screen.

In high school, the brothers studied commercial illustration at the School of Art and Design in Manhattan. After finishing his degree, Mike supported himself retouching fashion photographs for the likes of the *New York Times* and *Vogue*, but in the off-hours he and George pursued their shared passion for film, each writing and directing his



Blue Eyes, 1980-2000's



Sympathy for the devil: Mike Kuchar's Rescued! (2017)

very own lo-fi genre pieces — seedy, hilarious takes on the cheapest Hollywood epics. The Kuchars shot most of their pictures in and around the Bronx, recruiting friends and neighbors to join their stable of stars.

Sexual desire and its romantic counterpoint, love, were themes both Kuchars returned to over and over again. Mike's *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1965) is a dystopian sci-fi vision of a world in which robots have become the vessels for feeling. ("Where humans fail to find love," the movie's narrator exclaims, "machines have succeeded!") His *The Secret of Wendel Samson*, made that same year, stars artist Red Grooms (alongside his then-wife, painter/sculptress Mimi Gross) as a man struggling with his homosexuality, running to and from various lovers' beds. In *The Craven Sluck* (1967), Mike directs the lustful adventures of an unhappy housewife, which come to an end when UFOs attack New York. Without knowing it at the time, the Kuchars would become two of the most revered figures of the American underground cinema. (Side note: A teenage John Waters first learned about the Kuchar brothers by reading Jonas Mekas's "Movie Journal" column in our very own *Village Voice*. "Here were directors I could idolize," he wrote in his introduction to *Reflections From a Cinematic Cesspool*, "complete crackpots without an ounce of pretension.")

Alas, even a master of underground cinema can't quit his day job. When George was hired to teach at the San Francisco Art Institute, Mike followed him, and for decades the brothers split their time between the Bronx and the Mission District. It was on the West Coast that Mike found work in the underground comix scene, which included the likes of R. Crumb and Art Spiegelman. In the mid-1970s, pioneering writer and publisher Larry Fuller hired him to illustrate stories for *Gay Heart Throbs*, the first adult gay comic — and it was a match made in heaven. Mike's hand was the perfect partner for Fuller's giddy tales of steamy hookups featuring men with bods to rival those of Greek deities. Mike's cover for the third issue features a muscular, half-clad hayseed leaning against a tree, his thumbs tucked into the top of his high-high-high-cut jean shorts. "Hi Dwayne. How are you today?" a handsome leather daddy asks him. "Horny," Dwayne replies. For two dollars, readers could take home a copy and learn what happens next.

Kuchar's drawings were a hit, and from then on he continued to illustrate for other pornographic publications, always signing his artwork simply "Mike" — no last



Brave, Bold and Bare, 1980-1990's



Facing One's Own Demons, 2015

name given. "I considered this my extra sort of career," he told artist Matt Borruso and writer Gordon Faylor in an interview for SF MoMA's *Open Space* in the summer of 2016. "My little secret career." The twenty-some pen-and-ink drawings on view at Kern are from more recent years, and seem to possess no secrets at all. (Mike, now in his seventies, continues to draw, and taught filmmaking at SFAI in George's stead for a time.) In fact, they're adamantly open and effusive — as irrepressible, joyful, as they are unabashedly lewd. The types are classic: gladiators, farmer boys, characters of classical and

biblical descent. The bodies are nude, or nude-adjacent, their packages thick and uncut. Yet there is a surprising sweetness to Kuchar's dirty drawings, too. For lack of a better word, they're infused with *feeling*, expressed from a tender, lighthearted spot located somewhere between raw libido and romantic ideal.

In the poster for the show, a dreamy beefcake — his hot, taut buns popping up through the surface of a pond — locks eyes with a frog...perhaps his handsome prince? *Poster Boy* (1980–2000s) features an oiled hunk in a cut-off tank top, his erect nipples piercing its fabric as he poses to show off his tan line and other virtues. In *Party Time* (2016–17), a silver fox peers down the G-string of a fellow reveler; *Pagan's Picnic* (2017) depicts a man with a pan flute, cupid's arrow shot right through his heart for the naughty-looking blue-eyed man reclining on the ground. An eye might easily be distracted by the “prurience” of Kuchar's drawings and miss the fact that the artist is not only a singular illustrator, but a masterful colorist as well. Pay attention to the way he handles light on flesh, for example, how the hues shift from, say, sunburnt rose to softest pink depending on the size and contour of a muscle, the subtle layering of pigment giving depth and richness to the skin of his erstwhile cartoonish men. If the devil is in such details, then Mike Kuchar is blessedly damned to hell.



Play Stations, 2015

Mike Kuchar: 'Drawings by Mike!'

Anton Kern Gallery

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Through October 7