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TODD JAMES: BEAUTIFUL STRANGER

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By: Michelle Cheung

Todd James, *Don't Stop Get It Get It*, 2009. Courtesy of Gering & López Gallery, New York.

There's beauty in deciphering a stranger, but I didn't expect to find it from Todd James. Also known as the graffiti writer REAS, James is recognized for his sexually and violently charged illustrations with comical overtones. When he called me last week, a few days before the opening of his first Stateside solo show, *Make My Burden Lighter*, I had expected a Todd James that personified his work, one that was funny and maybe even a little bit crude. He was neither. Instead, he showed genuine wisdom that, with no exaggeration, moved me. I carried this wisdom when I visited his show a day later.

Make My Burden Lighter at the Gering and López Gallery shows a short retrospective of Todd James's art from 2007 to date. The thirty-six small works of gouache and graphite on paper plastered on one end resemble an overgrown child's bedroom wall. But, with subjects of naked girls, missiles, and death, Todd James is no child. Planted in the middle of his small works is *Blood & Treasure*, a hypnotizing reel of animation that you can't stop watching. It's the highlight of the show for me; as I believe, no other work expresses James's psyche as elaborately and as dynamically as this video. With accompanying music resembling blasting sounds of an amusement park gone wrong and cartoonish images of tankers and rockets playing with machine gun guitars, it's definitely not Nickelodeon. (But, who knows? With the realities of a war-torn world, this might just be the type of cartoon our children will be watching in the future.) The rest of the show—which mostly deals with global conflicts—highlights James's larger and more refined works on both paper and canvas, including the massive *Don't Stop Get It Get it*.

What I had not mentioned is that, before James and I ended our conversation last week, I asked him two simple but personal questions: one was what cracks him up and, the other, what turns him on. I certainly did not blame him when he answered with a bit of shyness, some reluctance, and a lot of ambiguity. It was sufficient that he explained, "It's easier for people to see [my personality through my work] than for me to explain it or admit it." So I was quite surprised when James called me again shortly after we hung up. "On your question about what cracks me up," he said, "well, it's all kinds of things. It's difficult to explain. Sometimes, it's what people don't want to laugh at like a kid falling off a branch of a tree or when somebody falls down. Just things you are not supposed to laugh at." And then an e-mail arrived in my inbox that same evening.

Hi Michelle

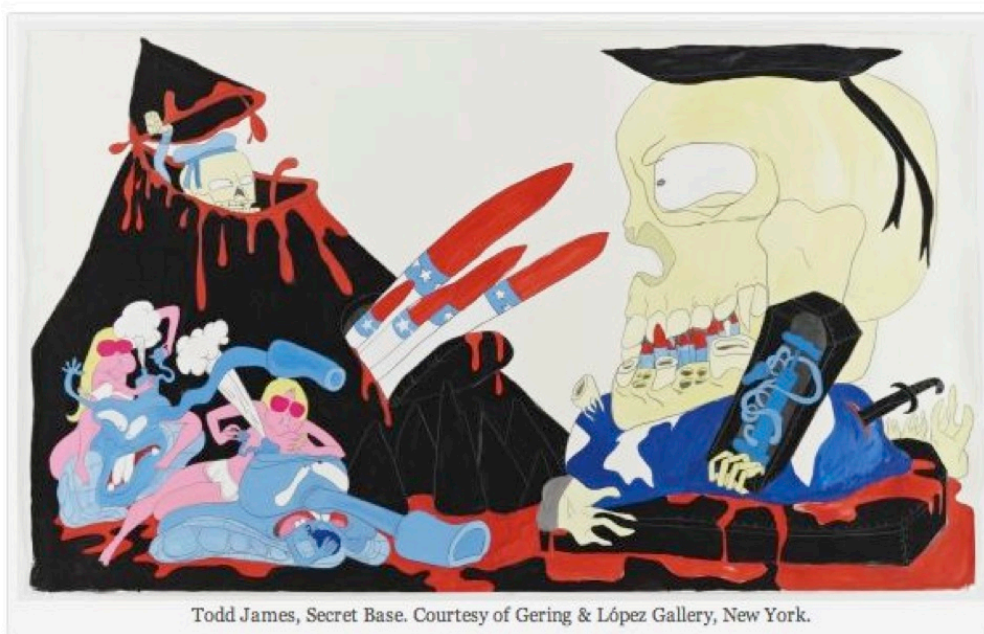
the reason i find things like this funny is because some times you need to laugh to keep from crying

ok thanks

ive said enough

Todd

These words of wisdom were weighing on my mind as I intently watched the looping video *Blood & Treasure*. That day in the gallery, I thought to myself, how do you make an ugly world beautiful? How do you make wars, disasters, and life a little bit easier to swallow? I saw the answer right in front of me. Sometimes, you need to laugh to keep yourself from crying.



Todd James, *Secret Base*. Courtesy of Gering & López Gallery, New York.

Todd James's first New York solo exhibition, *Make My Burden Lighter*, is open through February 20 at the Gering and López Gallery (730 Fifth Avenue NYC).