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whitehot | February 2010: Todd James Make My Burden Lighter



TODD JAMES, *Hot Dogs & Hamburgers*, 2008, Gouache & graphite on paper, 51 1/2 x 70 inches, Image courtesy of Gering & Lopez Gallery, New York.

No graffiti artist's education is complete without Todd James (aka, REAS). Since making his name as a small-time thug tagging in the subway stations of Eighties New York, James has steadily evolved his craft from basic vandalism to shocking social satire. In his newest show, *Make My Burden Lighter*, James' profane cartoons of loutish warmongers and bikini bimbos reflect government and media at their worst.

Graffiti continues to be a mainstay of James' decades of work, which reached international prominence in 2001 when *Street Market* was selected for the Venice Biennale. In 2000, this seminal collaborative project between James and fellow artists Barry McGee and Stephen Powers premiered inside Deitch Projects' 18 Wooster Street Gallery in Soho. It featured a bodega, a liquor store, a car-service dispatch office and a check-cashing operation under flashing billboards and streetlights. The collaborators had spent the better part of a year scavenging Gotham's scrap-heaps for street signs, storefront signage, and other slum debris in order to contrive a *mise en scene* that would conflate urban fantasy and urban reality. The leit motif of James' graffiti was streaked across McGee's murals, metal sculptures and the battered trucks, capsized on the exhibition floor. *Street Market* later travelled to the Parco Gallery in Tokyo, earning James an international reputation that led to headline shows at the Tate Museum of Liverpool, the Lazrides Gallery in London, and the V1 gallery in Copenhagen.

Even as Todd James' name has gained currency in select artistic circles, he hasn't lost his connection to the streets as evidenced by *Make My Burden Lighter*, a randy collection from his last three years of work, on display in Manhattan's Gering & Lopez Gallery. In "Hot Dogs & Hamburgers," food groups are greasing up for an orgy. Grotesque cartoon images like this were common coin on inner-city buildings in the Seventies and Eighties, the roots of James' artistry, and now they're making their resurgence in gouache and graphite on paper. Throughout "Make My Burden Lighter," armaments often look like hotdogs, which in turn look like penises. This is tasteful compared to James' "Fresh Milk," where pink-hued Pamela Anderson types lactate with glee from their ginormous jugs. These same ladies also bound across the "Don't Stop Get It, Get It" drawings, where they're holding many of the same WMD hotdog/penises that appear in "Hot Dogs & Hamburgers." Within eyeshot of this wanton sexploitation are images of grim reapers, diabolically skulled generals, and scimitar-wielding tanks, which harkens back to the Cold War-era graffiti that dominated the urban America of James' youth.

Does Todd James' work in *Make My Burden Lighter* also offer images of peace and social reform? No. But are our elected leaders offering brave and viable solutions to the most crucial issues of our time? Few that have passed congress. With gallows hilarity, James' work under scores the violence and dehumanization rampant in this contemporary dystopia that Ray Bradbury warned about more than fifty years ago.

The Gering & Lopez Gallery in Midtown Manhattan is presenting "Make My Burden Lighter" until February 20th. Collectors act fast! At the rate these pieces are selling, James' oeuvre may be one of the last bull markets in today's bear market economy.

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