

ARTnews

Todd James

Gering & López

Todd James's flat, vivid paintings in "King of the Wild Frontier" had much the same kind of power as Matisse's late cutouts. But these weren't depictions of dancing nudes or flowers—instead, they described Somali pirates clutching automatic weapons and rocket launchers. Still, the rugged bandits here had their lighter side, which was best expressed through James's use of such delicate colors as mauve, canary, lavender, pistachio, and turquoise. We want to like these guys.

In *King Cobra*, *Locals Only*, and *Trade Agreement* (all 2012), lone figures stand before top-heavy cargo ships like hunters posed with their trophies. Even though their facial expressions are concealed by head scarves, their proud stances hint at wide smiles beneath the fabric. Sometimes, the outlaws can seem downright dainty—with their svelte bodies, coy postures, and cups of tea. The curvy sniper in *Earl Grey* (2012) appears especially effeminate, squatting under a pink sky with a yellow rifle in one hand and a teaspoon in the other, an orange teapot propped on a nearby stool.

The renegade spirit continued in the installation *Vandal's Bedroom* (2012),

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which James, a former graffiti writer, originally constructed for last year's "Art in the Streets," show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Here the vibe got a little more juvenile, though no less empathic. It's a reconstruction of a graffitiist's cramped bedroom, complete with markers on a desk and aerosol cans at the foot of a mused mattress. Viewers could peer into this private scene through a window and notice that all the walls and the ceiling are papered with fantasy drawings conceived to be spray-painted in public somewhere, someday. While anthropologically riveting, *Vandal's Bedroom* doesn't quite match the pizzazz of the pirate paintings.

—*Trent Morse*



Todd James, *Earl Grey*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 72".
Gering & López.