

# ARTFORUM

## George and Mike Kuchar

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From Auguste and Louis Lumière and Warner Bros. to Ethan and Joel Coen and the Farrellys, brother acts have had a mighty influence on the history of film. Commadeering the foundational basement of the frat house of cinema, twins George and Mike Kuchar have long wreaked havoc, creating fetid splendors too numerous to list, the titles of some of their earliest collaborations (*The Wet Destruction of the Atlantic Empire*, 1954; *A Tub Named Desire*, ca. 1956; and *Pussy on a Hot Tin Roof*, 1961) providing only a glimmer of the kind of sexy delirium that would influence Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, John Waters, and David Lynch, among many others. Certainly this tales is by now well known in the experimental film world, but in the art world?

While the Kuchars were making their mystic, mischievous movie (and video) magic out of and in response to the gamut of Hollywood genres, the brothers were, especially during the 1970s and '80s, creating parallel worlds of marvels in oil, watercolor, pastel, acrylic, and ink. George has said he made his work "ambiguously", because he liked painting; Mike liked to draw, but his work was, as Eileen Myles confirms in a sharp essay published to accompany the show, "largely commissioned": "A roommate had a friend who needed art for some gay publications. Mike did a few for them, got paid, and the word got around that he was good." Myles notes that George told her "he learned about oil paintings from the Walter Foster books you'd find in Woolworth's as a kid."

Mike's mid-1970s to mid-'80s drawings (all pen and ink, felt pen, or watercolor) are gonzo allurements that do for all the paradoxical curvaceous va-va-voom of the well-built male physique what R. Crumb does for his dames' bosoms and booties. In these works, Mike escapes into a bawdy fantasy of pirates taking shore leave for a raunchy romp (*Island Interlude*, 1988) or of one uncircumcised Tarzan swinging another Tarzan, pietàlike, through the jungle (*Jungle Jeopardy*, 1985). With huge cocks, used nipples and taut musculature, the dudes are hirsute brutes. But in one strange, seemingly innocent idyll, *Take Me to Your Leader*, 1985, a tyke in loose striped T-shirt and shorts pauses, a teddy bear snug beneath his arm, a toy rocket cocked in his hand, as a willowy tree bends its limbs to embrace him. Desires, even those too nascent to name, are simultaneously naturalized and interspecies.

In George's watercolor *The Jersey Devil*, 1982, under the glare of a firestorm, a bat-winged goatish creature, his fur glistening, jet, purple, crocus, and smalt, gets ready to make a ginger buxom beauty in a purple halter top and green shorts reclining on a picnic blanket his Leda. Somehow a beach ball marks the ominous, unlikely, and yet ribald horror-movie vernacular George both mimics and turns strangely poignant. For *Going to California*, n.d., vibrant tempera cutouts of George reading a book, his faithful dog, Bocko, and a mountain view seen

through a window are fixed on a plain brown paper; black outlines turn it into a train cabin. For *Bocko*, 1970, George's pet happily snoozes - hind legs splayed, setting off his pert, plum balls, his coat a palomino storm - tuckered out from playing with a reddish-orange toy ball, which echoes his testicles and the earthquake-cracked pinkish-orange wall. Whatever hues this inverted Bresson of hotel rooms, potent stinks, and shadow realms used, it's as if his brush were also dipped in pure soul - which sounds like a strange and highfalutin conceit, given all the bawdy Kuchar fun, but it's exactly that unexpected soulfulness amidst the erotic (so-called) gim-crackery which makes him and his brother two of the most important artists this country has ever produced.

- Bruce Hainley