

Starstruck

at Bellwether Gallery, April 19 - May 20, 2002

reviewed by Jennifer Coates

In "Starstruck" at Bellwether Gallery, the painters Fritz Chesnut and Bill Walker are paired together to create a kooky and biting commentary on the interdependent phenomena of fandom and celebrity in America. In the front gallery are Fritz Chesnut's photo-derived paintings of fans at various concert events around midtown Manhattan. Snapped at tapings of MTV's Total Request Live, The Today Show, and a Christmas tree lighting at Rockefeller Center, Chesnut's images catch a surprisingly wide sociological array of rapturous spectators. In "Total Request Live/Pink" an unexpected demographic—middle-aged, overweight, conservative—peers, blank and dazed, at the scantily clad woman we presume is gallivanting on the stage. In "The Today Show/Teenagers from Nebraska," a crowd of cold blond kids in red bandanas, bundled in blankets, and waiting for who knows what, stands listlessly behind a railing—clones from the heartland with badly painted fingers. Chesnut's fans evoke the ecstatic, upward-looking Christians of Mannerist paintings: eyes rolling back into the head and mouth agape, beholding a spectacle that we can only imagine. His somewhat awkward and cursory painterly style is superficially reminiscent of Elizabeth Peyton and Karen Kilimnick, yet the sense of painting-as-behavior, or painting from within a role is absent. Where Peyton and Kilimnick create devotional, adoring images of stars in the style of dreamy teenagers, Chesnut dutifully copies snapshots, preserving the photographic source and reminding us that he was among the throng, seeing what they were seeing, yet simultaneously distancing himself.

In the back gallery, Bill Walker is represented by four paintings and an installation of Raymond Pettibon-like black and white drawings. Using thin, shaky, black outlines, he depicts wan images of celebrities that clearly betray their origins in People magazine with their fake smiles, carefully pruned five o'clock shadows, or just-so belly-bearing, off-the-shoulder slutwear. Sometimes he suspends comic book-style dialogue bubbles over their heads, apparently verbatim quotes taken from the gossip columns. Brad and Jennifer, "The Pitts," stand happily in each other's arms, as Jennifer tells us "I made Brad wait 9 months before I slept with him." Heather Graham, looking bubbly if a little pinched, giggles, "It's good to have sex." Walker makes these people look like celebrity spokesmen who are selling themselves, their mock importance, their status as superstars.

The painting, "Pantheon," shows a coloring-book arcadia, populated with some of our more iconic celebrities playing the roles of Greek mythological characters. Bono as Narcissus complete with signature wraparound shades leans into a pond regarding his own image. Poor Woody Allen is a degraded Sysiphus, pushing a giant boulder and

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showing us full frontal nudity. Of course Michael Jackson has to be Zeus, perched atop the scene on a cloud, with pale skin, red lips, and a shrunken nose.

Walker shows us that in the nether zone of gossip magazines lurks a mythic underworld or purgatory where the fabulous people are consigned for eternity through their own egos and their fans awe-struck indulgence. As in Greek Mythology, we as mere mortals want to laugh at celebrity misfortune and disfigurement in order to feel better about ourselves, but at the same time we need to elevate, idolize, and obsess about them.

In the show's press release, author Cintra Wilson quotes her own book, "A Massive Swelling: Celebrity Re-examined as a Grotesque, Crippling Disease and Other Cultural Revelations," emphatically corroborating what Chesnut and Walker already know, that "we are pathetic, brainless sheep." A dim view of humanity perhaps, but one that this writer has to agree with.

Jennifer Coates is a writer and artist living and working in New York.