

January 8 to 31, 2009

Opening Reception: Thursday, January 8, 6pm - 9pm

Victor Romão

Reliquary

Victor Romão is a Canadian artist working and living in Windsor, Ontario. He is interested in a variety of practices mainly focusing on sculpture and printmaking. He has recently been exploring male sexuality, violence and self image through examining rural Canadian males and their activities. He holds a BFA from the University of Windsor and is presently enrolled in the University of Windsor's Visual Arts MFA program. The artist wishes to thank the Ontario Arts Council.

Luke Painter is an artist living and working in Toronto. Recent solo exhibitions of his work include *Phantasm* at Angell Gallery in Toronto and *New Work* at Bonneau-Samames Art Contemporain in Marseille, France. This year his work is being shown in a number of art fairs including: Slick Art Fair in Paris, Pulse Art Fair in Miami, Pulse Art Fair in New York and the Toronto International Art Fair. He is also an Assistant Professor at OCAD University and an instructor at Toronto School of Art and York University.

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Vincent, woodcut, 6" x 8", 2008



Gallery Hours

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Victor Romão: *Reliquary*

by Luke Painter

When I first laid eyes on Victor Romão's labouriously crafted sculptural and print-based works, I was taken with the absurdity and humour inherent in his renderings of human figures possessing animal heads. As I started to look further at these hybrid creatures, I was struck by the details employed in Romão's work. These figures are not one-liner jokes or simple composites of man and animal; they are, as Romão describes, "representations of male outsiders."

Although the heads of the men depicted in the *Self Portrait* series and *Vincent* appear fully integrated with their bodies, Romão clarifies that they can be read as masks. He explains that, as a man who has grown up in a rural area, he has felt pressure to walk and talk in a certain way, to fulfill certain roles that are traditionally masculine and in some cases, overtly macho. The animal façades Romão presents negate connotations we may have of the rural male, especially as their expressions are more docile and matter-of-fact than they are amp-up machismo.

Romão's careful rendering of attire on these figures denotes the type of outdoorsman look reminiscent of *The Red Green Show*, the iconic Canadian television program that mixed slapstick humour with parodies of home improvement television shows (i.e., *Bob Villa* or the incredibly irritating *Tim Allen*). While these television characters would actively give tips on handiwork or relationship advice, Romão's hybrids stand as static portraits for us to ponder. This man of the rural environment—as he appears in Romão's work—doesn't quite "fit in," as evidenced by the appearance of his bat- and dog-face.

To use animal visages is to look at our origins. As humans, we prune and shape our faces to distance ourselves from our animalistic origins. Cultural theorist Gilles Deleuze writes about this self-imposed distancing effect:

There is in no way a correspondence between animal forms and forms of the face. In fact, the face has lost its form in the process of being subjected to operations of cleaning and brushing which disorganize it and make a head burgeon in its place. And the marks or features of animality are moreover not animal forms, but rather spirits which haunt the cleaned parts...¹

Romão has reversed this process of homogeneity and cleanliness. On the one hand he emphasizes the maleness and animal nature of his figures, and on the other he provides us with passivity and friendliness in their expressions and body language. When looking at this unusual amalgam, we as the viewer are aware of our own normality. This invokes the sense of the "Other"—a member of society that is differentiated from "sameness" by gender, ethnicity, health, sexual orientation, etc.—also mentioned by Deleuze in a number of his works.

Romão's piece *Vincent* reflects the popular culture treatment of "Otherness" in the 1980's comedic film *Teen Wolf* in which Michael J. Fox plays the character of Scott Howard, an average teenager who discovers that his family has a rare condition by which they can transform into werewolves. Throughout the story, Scott has a hard time "fitting in" at school, and as a result of his condition must deal with simultaneous acceptance and



Self Portrait as a dick, digital study for woodcut, 11" x 26", 2008.

rejection by his peers. He is considered to be a virile alpha male by the popular girls, but an abnormal "freak" by the jocks, who are jealous of his advantageous beastly tendencies on the basketball court.

Although it seems like a fantastical tale, many of us are familiar with the still-popular carnival attraction of the "Wolf Boy" or "Hairiest Person in the World." There is indeed a congenital condition called hypertrichosis lanuginosa, a total-body growth of hair affecting both men and women. This condition underscores that humans are genetically related to animals; out of the tens of thousands of genes that humans and chimpanzees are thought to possess, there is just over a one percent difference in DNA between the two.² With this in mind, Romão's representations of fictive beings help us to understand our own prejudices towards the "Other."

Goya Reliquary is influenced by a recent trip to Europe during which Romão became fascinated with Christian reliquaries. The artist explains that he is interested in these containers for religious relics as metaphors for how men carry with them certain attitudes and prejudices that are specific to their individual upbringing. Often, male behavioral patterns are ingrained in a family setting and passed down for generations, psychologically rooted in tradition. Romão sees the cumulative history encapsulated within a reliquary as symbolic of this phenomenon.

Upon learning about the historical account of Francisco Goya's missing skull (the artist died in France while exiled from Spain; when supporters later transported his remains to Spain for burial it was discovered that his skull was missing), Romão decided to create his own reliquary for the missing body part. *Goya Reliquary* is interesting for a variety of reasons. Firstly, we can consider the reliquary as a signifier of a bloody Christian history, in which power, wealth, and male aggression are inexorably intertwined. Secondly, Romão suggests that the artist's head is worthy, along with distinguished popes and saints, of preservation and adoration. Although Goya is now recognized as a highly significant artist, particularly for his print-based works, his often-provocative artwork was challenged and his unique style set him apart from his contemporaries. In later life, Goya's failing health and political conditions forced him into exile, where as an outsider he produced some of his darkest works. In *Goya Reliquary*, Romão's subject matter suggests a narrative that interacts with the annals of history.

In his exhibition at Open Studio, Victor Romão investigates identity and gender politics in a personal and distinctive way. On one hand the artist presents us with representations of "maleness," and on the other he undermines our expectations by injecting these countenances with a passive and humble quality. Romão seeks to conflate historical and contemporary sources to create modern day reliquaries as conduits of the male experience.

¹ Deleuze, Gilles, et al. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) p. 19.

² The Jane Goodall Institute, (Dec 11, 2008), *Similarities Between Chimpanzees and Human Beings*. <http://www.janegoodall.org/chimp_central/chimpanzees/similarities/default.asp>.