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HERAKUT Installation @ RedFlagg

By [Lily Alexander](#) | May 21, 2009 . 9:48 pm



"Herakut: *No Placebos.*" Installation in Progress. Courtesy of RedFlagg, NY.

When I walk into the open doors on 28th street, the gallery is in a state of complete, artistic, creative chaos. Cardboard lies abandoned, strewn about the floor. Wrapped canvases lean haphazardly, and spray paint drips in various places from the gallery walls. Three people are seated chatting on the floor, taking a break from the huge task of transforming this space through paint and collage in only three and a half days. Two of these people are the German artists Jasmine and Falk, who together form the duo Herakut. They rise to greet me, and Jasmine, a strikingly beautiful, young woman, takes me into the adjoining room which has progressed farthest at this point - Tuesday at mid-day.

One wall, only partially finished (what Jasmine calls their history wall because they have collaged on elements from previous work) is swathed in a lurid yet luscious dark pink, crisscrossed with spaghetti strings of fluorescent green, white. But it is the wall directly in front of me which captures my attention. Here an enormous monster – almost human, but covered in vivid, carefully detailed eyes – sits, bent over, in palpable anguish. His own eyes – done in a looser, less realistic form than those eyes that cover his back – are large and dark with grief. Here the colors are subtle, earth tones. This is partially due to the cardboard he is constructed of – which creates a rough, matte quality. But the swirling, dancing lines of paint which wrap his form bring him to life. The monster’s head is bent, caressed by the hand of a young girl who comforts him. Aside from the emotional energy that exudes from the figures, there is a physical power due to the size (the monster takes up almost half the wall), and the sculptural quality of the work, owing to the cardboard, which literally rises out of the walls. The monster’s bent leg stretches into the room, and the girl’s dress stands in contrast: light and delicate, layers of paper which drift from the wall. Jasmine tells me this monster’s “story.” He is covered in eyes and has no hands, or metaphorically, he has seen too much, spent his life analyzing, and has lost the will to live, or to create (he no longer uses his hands). The little girl responds with her hands, those hands which denote creativity. She is young, pure, untouched, and through her touch she infuses the monster with hope.

Jasmine paints figures – often women and children. These figures with their agitated lines, and their moody palette, immediately bring to mind the work of artists such as Edvard Munch, or the German Expressionists such as Egon Schiele. While they have facial dimensions (such as large heads) which make them somewhat alien, they are simultaneously almost exaggeratedly human through their tangible emotion. Jasmine explains that after an intense study of anatomy, she moved beyond the need to paint faithful copies of the human body because she had figured out her own way to infuse them with life. Non-specific forms, she found, also functioned as better vehicles for stories. Falk’s painting is characterized by a sort of realism – heavily painted (as heavy as spray paint gets), carefully modeled elements which adorn the strange figures of Jasmine’s creation. His method is meticulous– he takes magazine images or photographs of women, eyes, skulls, and other various subjects, for inspiration. Taped up to the wall, he magnifies these images in a style that, while not exactly Photorealism, definitely draws comparison with this style. Jasmine describes the opposition of their individual approaches, saying that Falk does things which are specific. People recognize these on the walls and they are pulled in, so that the total energy and power of the wall can be unleashed upon them. She believes that together, she and Falk unite male and female visions of the world.

But while Herakut does work that may bring to mind German art movements of the 20th century, art history is not one of the primary inspirations or subjects in their work. Jasmine says that they see their paintings almost as stories – stories about contemporary life. Often the images are accompanied by quotes. They are socially engaged artists – not political, because they are not interested in big statements which act as propaganda. It is smaller social issues which concern them, and they see their creation as a way to make people happy. They are inspired by poetry and the lyrics of music, such as those of hip-hop group Atmosphere. They see their work as a constant dialogue between them, marked by a personal symbolism – even when they talk they use imagery to describe things to each other. But their symbolism, like that of children’s stories, is accessible to the thoughtful. For example, the animal heads that crown many of their figures

function as the various animals do in Aesop's Fables. They convey certain characteristics of that animal which can be attributed to the human. The woman who wears a bird's skull with a beak is empty inside, like the skull is now empty. And she has forgotten what it means to be a bird: in other words, how to live and fly free. While some might consider symbolism a commonplace artistic modus operandi, in this case it is used in conjunction with the magnetic power of an unusually vivid expression (the expressive power of their painting) combined with an alternative and commanding form of communication (the wall) which gives the language new meaning.

The pair have been recognized to some degree by the mainstream contemporary art world. They were featured in a Saturdays @ Phillips auction earlier this year, when they made a commissioned work for charity. But of course, although there are some extraordinary street artists shown at contemporary art galleries, there is still quite a subculture of street art. Jasmine tells me that she does not like their work to be designated as "Street Art." And often they actually work by commission or on canvas (although it is their enormous installations which are far-and-away their best work). They have actually declined gallery representation because they do not want to be forced to work constantly on canvas. In truth, their work is not about some sort of rebellion from the gallery. They are contemporary artists, and Jasmine's figures for example, have much more in common with the work of an artist like Swoon who is represented by Deitch Projects here in New York, than a typical graffiti artist. They do not reject mainstream art, and they respect and find inspiration in much of the work that covers the walls of galleries (She mentions the Picasso show at Gagosian and his use of cardboard – a material that they of course share). The reason they work outdoors on the walls? Jasmine describes how when she was younger she moved to the city of Weisbaden which is known for its graffiti walls. She saw these large walls as open studios, and says with the wall and the street there is no end to your canvas. "Outdoors there is no roof to limit your thoughts."

But Jasmine also discusses the democratic element of their work. She and Falk take pleasure in creating for the people who walk along the street. She tells me a story. Some time back she was working in Sarejevo. She saw a stone seat attached to a wall and it welcomed her as a restful place. She painted a ballerina on the wall who was leaning upon it, resting her weary feet. Then an elderly woman walked by. She was bent over with age and the weight of her shopping bags. The woman looked at the ballerina and Jasmine, stopped, placed her bags upon the ground, and gave Jasmine a smile and two thumbs up. A response like this, she remarks, means more to her and Falk than anything else.

I myself can't wait to see the finished installation opening at Red Flagg this evening.

Herakut. Red Flagg, 638 West 28th Street, NYC, May 21 – July 3, 2009, opening reception May 21, 6-8 pm

Tags: [Aesop's Fables](#), [Atmosphere](#), [Deitch projects](#), [Edvard Munch](#), [Egon Schiele](#), [Falk](#), [focus](#), [Gagosian](#), [graffiti](#), [headline](#), [Herakut](#), [Herakut: No Placebos](#), [Jasmine](#), [Lily Alexander](#), [photorealism](#), [picasso](#), [Red Flagg](#), [Saturdays @ Phillips](#), [street art](#), [Swoon](#), [symbolism](#), [Weisbaden](#)