

Ted Riederer

Beautiful Discord.

The Art of Scooter LaForge.

Day upon day, and year upon year, O city, walking your streets,
Where you hold me enchain'd a certain time, refusing to give me up;
Yet giving to make me glutt'd, enrich'd of soul – you give me forever faces;
(O, I see what I sought to escape, confronting, reversing my cries;
I see my own soul trampling down what it had ask'd for.)

“Give me the Splendid, Silent Sun,”
Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman

To understand the art of Scooter LaForge, one must simply take an observant walk from 6 East 1st Street to his studio on Broadway, just south of Canal. This same path poets have trod will build an aggregate map of memory and landscape, one you will find you will remember and re-experience for years to come. To its long-time residents, the real New Yorkers, the city is never remade. Layer upon layer of remembrance builds a composite, a skyline where the Towers still stand, where the Bowery still evokes images of missions and flophouses.

Turn left on the Bowery, cross Houston, and walk past the site of Sammy's Bowery Follies immortalized by Weegee in his 1943 portrait of Shorty, the Bowery Cherub, a midget clothed only in a diaper, toasting in the new year at the bar.

Walk down past the profligate symbols of contemporary art, the New Museum, and the architectural marvel, Sperone Westwater; past the restaurant supply stores where men in tank tops lug appliances into double-parked vans. Cut over to Broadway where the streets are lined with both high-fashion boutiques and bargain jean stores. Cross Canal, with its plastic tourist shops and bootleg handbag-hawkers, and its Chinese storefronts filled with golden clocks and jade curios.

Scooter LaForge's work is all of these things: the gutter, fine art, high-fashion, and cheap plastic junk. If you dragged a stuffed animal behind you on a string as you walked this route, it would collect lots of New York by the time you reached your destination: a homeless man's cardboard beggar's sign, burrs of Bruce Nauman, Schnabel, Armani, and Gucci trash, a discarded souvenir. All of these bits and pieces of New York imbedded in matted and dirty fur. Scooter may paint a portrait of this tattered toy, or turn the toy into a sculpture, shoved into a painted cardboard box nailed to the wall.

Scooter's work is a hobo clown, a rotten Easter-Bunny costume, a Gucci box rescued from an oily dumpster but still smelling of leathery wealth. After all, as children our love rendered our favorite toys the dirtiest of all those on the toy shelves: threadbare, and loved, a velveteen rabbit tainted by scarlet fever, a toy longing to be real.

Scooter La Forge is acutely aware of his antecedents, Joyce Pensato, George Condo, Phillip Guston, Fellini's Clowns, Ringling Bros' Emmet Kelly, Picasso, and German Expressionism, but Scooter seems completely of this era, a time of gentrification, art fairs, and the economic paradox where a high-end boutique stands next to a welfare hotel on a street notorious the world over as Skid Row.

In his tiny studio at the end of our walk, Scooter holds out a cloth-bound, hard-cover book on the work of James Ensor. That it's one of his favorite books is evidenced by its pristine condition in a room of paint smudged walls rivaling that of Francis Bacon's studio.

In his book *Symbolist Art Theories*, Henri Dorra describes James Ensor's work as “artificial, dreamlike, deliberately discordant, and vibrantly expressive.” All of these adjectives characterize Scooter's practice as well, yet Scooter's work shows no “dédoublement,” no “dispassionate irony.” Rather, his works evoke the spirit of that great comic genius, Charlie Chaplin, the little tramp who entertained and comforted people during the second-worse financial crisis of the last century. Chaplin used to say, “Life is a tragedy when seen in (a) close-up, but a comedy in (a) long-shot. To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain, and play with it.”