



Art: ist as Avenger

Matthew Dayler interprets superheroes at the Carnegie

MATT MORRIS // JUN 18, 2008

In his new show at the Carnegie Visual and Performing Arts Center, Matthew Dayler has mounted a multimedia exhibition of various works under the title *The Avengers*.

The name refers to a team of Marvel Comics superheroes — well-known figures like Captain America and Spider-Man that were joined by scientists, witches and aliens to form a society-defending squadron. Over the past half-century, concurrent with

Postmodernism's rise, these characters have been continually redesigned. The evolution of a character like Spider-Man is not *that different* from the pluralistic role-playing of Madonna or the multifarious, costume-based photographs of artist Cindy Sherman. In the lineage of all of these sources, Dayler in *The Avengers* has re-imagined himself over and over, each time emphasizing different cultural stylizations.

Three videos play out of television sets sitting on the floor, tilted upward to face the viewer like small cannons. These short, looped narratives elucidate a context for the team of flamboyant vigilantes depicted in the rest of the exhibition, creating a glamorous world with an all-male cast. A set of digital photographs of the artist is offset by a phalanx of life-size self-portraits drawn directly onto the walls.

In both situations, Dayler poses in brightly colored costumes based as much in queer culture as in street culture. Draped in feather boas and posing with large guns, his team of characters stands at attention, ready to face the threat of popular culture's power to dilute the authentic self.

The colors of the photos and drawings that make up Dayler's various guises have been over-saturated, invigorating the figures against the white backgrounds they are pasted onto. Each portrait is a send-up to the spirit of individuality, while still recognizing the threat of societal homogeny.

In "OTR (Avenger)," a bulky hooded jacket and low-riding pants imbue attire found in the streets of Over-the-Rhine with a pungent sexual innuendo. Many prints show scantily clad "crewmembers" posing like the pseudo-amateur fashion models of American Apparel ads, thereby invoking questions about style and authenticity.

Perhaps the most powerful influence to this work is House music and the jubilant dancing underground that surrounds it. In the shimmering video piece "Teach the Children," set in an eerily lit classroom bedecked with a disco ball, a group of half-dressed men is assembled. At the front of the classroom, the artist mimes with a pointer stick. As he points to a pictogram across the blackboard, a Gospel-like alto belts out: "House ... is a feeling!"

The Avengers contains threatening, gun-toting imagery (soldiers and artillery) and sports doses of ego and narcissism. But the menace of artillery throughout the exhibition is undermined by affectionate attitudes like T-shirts that read "I Heart."

The gaudy armed soldiers are defenders of the artist's ideals for an inclusive society that doesn't demand the losing of one's individuality as a price of admission. Dayler's pantheon of figures is a composite of pride, defense, sad gazes and tight-fitting uniforms that offer an alternative view of contemporary society's super-soldiers.

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