

Art Review:

Future Greats
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By Joshua Mack



TOMMY HARTUNG

With a magpie's appreciation of the quirky resonance of life's jetsam and a keen sense of sculptural composition, Tommy Hartung draws deeply poetic content from stop-motion animation using props constructed from street finds and bric-a-brac.

Take *Stay Golden Ponyboy*, 2008, which sets footage of naked boys bathing in the Amazon – cribbed from Jacob Bronowski's 1973 BBC documentary series, *The Ascent of Man* – a salaciously posed Japanese doll made for aficionados of schoolgirls and a golden faun with an oversize African head to Paul Robeson's plangent rendition of *Shenandoah*. On the surface the piece charts a passage from childhood delights to more twisted desires. But the incongruities between doll and boys – heightened by the crude clay nipples Hartung added to the doll – also reveal the potent mix of longing, objectification and cliché involved in using native children as avatars of a prelapsarian idyll and the gamine as turn-on.

These tensions are inherent in the work's title, which refers to the hero of the 1967 S.E. Hinton novel – and 1983 Francis Ford Coppola film – *The Outsiders*, a story of crime and redemption, and in the use of *Shenandoah*, a song of unknown origin variously interpreted as a pioneer's lament for home and a slave's celebration of escape through a purifying river. Such poetic backstory, and the visual beauty of the piece, suggest that while Hartung embraces cliché by lowering the lugubrious pitch of Robeson's voice and zooming in on the glistening skin of the frolicking boys, his intent is less irony (standard fare of late) and more a search for meaning beyond platitudes.

In earlier work, Hartung has drawn on sources as diverse as the Gnostic Gospels, Philip K. Dick's 1981 sci-fi book, *VALIS*, and conquistador Bernal Díaz's *The Conquest of New Spain*, to probe faith, history and race. Beyond its rich content, what renders this work truly engaging is Hartung's use of animation to create open-ended, emotionally evocative and highly nuanced meditations on such dense and broad themes.



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