

## Tim Roda

DANIEL COONEY FINE ART

The black in Tim Roda's black-and-white photographs is inky, saturated, and absolute, and the whites are moony, stark, and often, although not always, provided by intense spotlights. Within these atmospheric extremes Roda stages tableaux reminiscent of myths, fables, fairy tales, and parables, often starring his son Ethan, and using a mixture of inventive props, costumes, and prosthetics to create a whatever's-at-hand aesthetic—so that his stage is cluttered with bits of wood, wire, string, and wallpaper, a sort of art-studio noir. The images in his recent exhibition "Family Matters" (all titled *Untitled* followed by a number, and made within the past four years) are echoes of tales of ill-favored fathers and sons, of antiheroes and their side-kicks: the father slaughtering a papier-mâché cow while the son, wearing a crown and cradling a lamb in his arms, calls to someone off to the side; the father seemingly suspended from the wall in some sort of full-body breathing apparatus while the son lounges, bored, in a chair; the two of them in serene silhouette, under the translucent wings of a windmill.

Ethan's presence—as Icarus, Isaac, Sancho Panza—gives the images the frisson of uneasiness that frequently arises from depictions of children in artworks. Certainly some of Roda's earlier images have trod edgy emotional ground, showing, for example, the boy in tears. But the constant back-and-forth between playfulness and darkness here seems truthful, as father and son enact the process by which adults transmit to children their knowledge of the world and by which they are, in turn, changed by doing the transmitting. Children may be innocent, but they are also wily, passionate, and destructive; they have a particular power and vacillate between knowing how to use it and being utterly perplexed by it. Roda captures the complex life of a child while still affording him his dignity and allowing him to be a real, singular child, rather than a symbol (which is how the images, although unsettling, avoid being exploitative): the child as the angry slayer of a mythical beast, the child as triumphant hero, the child as initiate into mysteries he doesn't yet understand (as in an image in which they regard each other with a kind of mutual bafflement, the artist in shadow, in long prosthetic legs and goggles, the child bathed in light). And they have a great deal of fun together, as Molière-ish buffoons, as intrepid inventors of crackpot machines, as vaudeville actors in a real-life skit.

Roda takes great care with the formal aspects of his photographs—despite the scavenged and taped-together aesthetic, and despite making a point of de-emphasizing finish (for a past exhibition his

photographs were mounted on plywood with screws, in some cases with the screws driven right through the image itself)—in order to balance the transience of the moments the works depict with the permanence of their record. This idea of balance extends to Roda's management of the staged and the natural, so that the viewer sifts through layers of artifice and stagecraft—fake legs attached to a human body, cartoonish brightness lines emanating from a real light-bulb, all manner of lo-fi optical trickery, including mirrors, shadows, and not-quite-illusionistic lines taped to a wall—to arrive at a real family pursuing its own particular versions of universal tales.

—Emily Hall

## Michael Williams

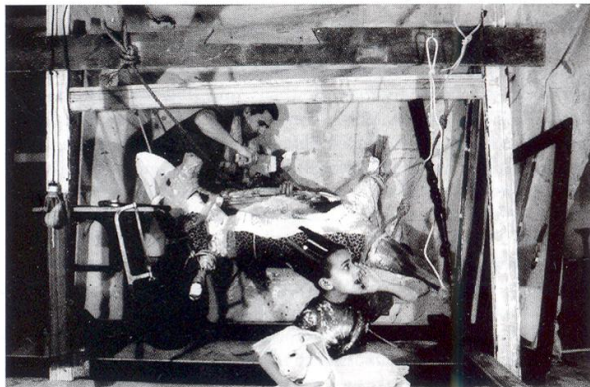
CANADA

Funny art of the late twentieth century can be split, broadly speaking, into two camps: sarcastic art that tactically reveals the illogicality of passively accepted social mores (Mike Kelley, Lee Lozano, Peter Saul), and art deploying a more subjective humor that draws from personal reference points. Apt examples here would be the self-glorification and self-deprecation (depending on the artist's mood) of Martin Kippenberger, Maurizio Cattelan, and Urs Fischer. More recently, a number of artists have signaled another type of humor in art. If Kelley, Kippenberger, Lozano, and Saul used humor to debunk what popular culture uncritically considers "normal," the new kind of humor in the visual arts is more of a slapstick routine—humor for its own sake.

With the paintings shown in his 2007 solo debut, also at Canada, Michael Williams fell cleanly into this last category. Like *Mellow Gold*—era Beck, the work in this show overflowed with ludicrous imagery: a miniature hirsute face emerging from a deodorant stick, a sheep on its hind legs wrangling an amorphous sky-blue blob. These are weird thoughts, but not really weirder than the new television ad in which two talking pigs eat a ham in a restaurant and criticize the hidden fees of cell phone plans. Digital imaging has made surrealism just another pop culture phenomenon, and one reason Williams's new imagery isn't as funny as it was a few years ago may be because a Heineken keg with arms, legs, and breasts just isn't that weird anymore. Sure, *Surf 'n' Turf 2*, 2009, shows a lobster and a clam earnestly surfing the Web, and *Bacon 'n' Eggs*, 2009, a paintbrush painting a fellow paintbrush. It's not that these compositions are dishonestly weird, just that Williams's more memorable recent paintings signal a turn away from absurdist slapstick and into a realm that expands the parameters of what strange painting can mean today.

Part of it is diversity. The acid trip of a painting *Mike's Zone*, 2008, renders the wood-grain planes of a claustrophobic room in explosive colors, and its perspective dissolves into manic, wiggled-out energy. *Chief Solution Advisor*, 2009, on the other hand, is an innocuous still life of fruits and vegetables, and *Jean Junction*, 2009, a set of breezy squiggles on unprimed denim. Williams paints in thin washes as often as in impasto, which he heaps on like toothpaste or frosting. Patterns are as prevalent as definite images in his new paintings, and sometimes—as in *Mike's Zone* or the nature study *In the Woods 2*, 2008—they actually subsume the image itself with their Fred Tomaselli-like density.

There are traces of Matisse's Fauvism, of van Gogh's impasto, of Martín Ramírez's patterning, and of the psychedelic colors and images that have been the hallmark of young American painters over the past five years. But it would be hard to accuse Williams of locating his paintings in a labyrinth of art-historical reference, another ubiquitous (and tired) trait of the current younger crop. Instead, his



Tim Roda,  
*Untitled # 141, 2007*,  
black-and-white  
photograph, 33 x 38".