

VENUS

MANHATTAN

Berman, Artiko. "Gang Bust." *Flash Art*, Summer 2013.

Flash Art

· JULY / AUGUST / SEPTEMBER 2013

Gang Bust

Venus Over Manhattan, New York

"Gang Bust" is a provocative affront to notions of good taste, race, sex and authorship. Or at least it pretends to be. Conceived by Bjarne Melgaard, the show features works by William Copley, aka CPLY, the late American writer, dealer and collector; and Big Fat Black Cock Inc., Melgaard's faux art-fabrication outfit. Melgaard's outrageous alias is appropriate given his contribution to the exhibition: six replicas of Copley's fleshy paintings of naked figures in various sexual acts, and four copies of Allen Jones's formiphilic pieces of Pop furniture. In Melgaard's versions, however, the figures have changed from white to black.

Sure, this gesture packs a punch; the charged cocktail of sex and race generally does. Yet, the initial impact subsides quickly, and Melgaard's bad-boy tactics become less threatening and more posturing. Copley's works reflect this deflated impotence. They are lovely, almost quaint compositions that pull together subjects and styles from various modernist art historical avenues, rearticulating aesthetic and compositional challenges that had already been resolved by the time he got around to them. *Homage à Man Ray* (1950) anachronistically pairs Japonisme and Surrealism to produce a sweet dream-like vision of a nude and harp. It's a beautiful work, but not incendiary; it is remarkable mainly as evidence of Copley's famed friendship with the eponymous artist. Still, Copley's prolific output is endearing due to the unwavering naïveté of his particular style — a quality that Melgaard makes sure we can easily appreciate.

Clearly, Melgaard's project springs from more than just his sincere reverence for Copley's life and work. By staging this faux retrospective, and puncturing it with his own sensationalist appropriations, Melgaard cleverly raises questions about context, identity, and taboo. If Melgaard were black, would the cultural significance of his Copley and Jones copies shift? Why does the race of these artists' subjects even matter? And perhaps most importantly, if flagrant plagiarism, sexism and racism no longer truly shock us, then what can? In telling his entertaining lies, Melgaard successfully alludes to many truths.

by ANIKO BERMAN



William N. Copley, *Scorpio Rising*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 147 x 114 cm.
Courtesy Venus Over Manhattan, New York

