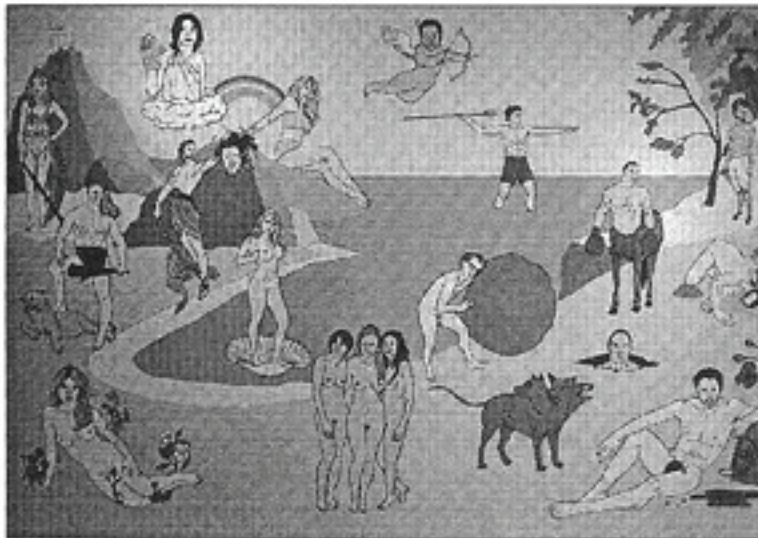


Waterfront Week

Artburgher: Starstruck at Bellwether Fritz Chesnut & Bill Walker

By Susan Hamburger
May 2002

Fritz Chesnut and Bill Walker take us on a tour of our complex and ambivalent relationship with celebrity culture.



Bill Walker
Pantheon

Mr. Walker focuses on the subjects of our gaze — the stars themselves and the types of media images we see of them nearly every day, often without even realizing. While you might not consider yourself either a frequent television viewer, or a consumer of popular culture, you absorb these images simply by glancing at billboards or at the covers of the magazines that fill the cases by the supermarket checkout counter. Whether you like it or not, you know these people.

Mr. Walker takes a deceptively simple and superficially bouncy approach to his work. His black and white line drawings are realistic, just shy of cartoonish, and are installed floor to ceiling on two adjacent walls, much the way signed celebrity photos hang in restaurants like Carmine's. The artist's famous subjects are so renowned that they are identified by first name only and their thought bubbles are captions include their most infamous statements and inane remarks. The artist's acrylic paintings on canvas, also mostly in black and white, are executed with a similarly flat, drawing style. Pantheon is the only full color canvas, presenting an allegory, with each star cast in a role from Greek mythology. And if you can identify only the stars but not the folks from Mt. Olympus, Mr. Walker will have surely made some kind of point. It is the sense of the over familiarity with the superficial and the trivial, along with our collective obsession with the knowledge of factoids of celebrity lives that gives this work the power to mock us and our aspirations.



Fritz Chesnut
Total Request Live-Limp Bizkit

The other side of the equation is the audience, which is the focus of the work by Mr. Chesnut. Using stills from the television program MTV's Total Request Live and NBC's Today Show, he takes images from the cameras turned on the viewers, transforming them into paintings. Catching the awestruck, rapt and foolish expressions of ardent fandom, the artist's relationship to his subject, and what he requires of us as viewers, is dubious. In most cases there is no empathy created between the viewer and the subjects but a kind of harsh smugness most of us feel towards the audience and guests on shows like Jerry and Ricki.

With his broad-brushed and flat style of realism, Mr. Chesnut's paintings are compelling for the curious and intangible way in which he converts the image from photograph to painting. There is a softening of the edges and the colors in this body of work that extends the tradition of genre painting as the artist documents the details of social groups through clothing, hairstyles and expressions. Mr. Chesnut offers representations of the rituals and practices of contemporary culture, of people gathered together for artificially constructed celebratory experiences created for television broadcast.

Both of these artists are tapping into a social phenomenon that is very powerful and real with an endless source of material for examination. Without offering solutions, they both ask what it says about our celebrity obsessed culture that we repeatedly turn our gaze to the stars. Perhaps, it is the need to acknowledge that even among the most jaded of us there is still a jolt of excitement in the sighting of a celebrity whether in an unguarded moment, or in front of the cameras. We know that star worship and celebrity gossip is the basest form of diversion and distraction and yet despite our best intentions, there is a voyeuristic streak in all of us, to which, to our peril, few of us are immune.

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Hours: 12-6 F-M
Show runs thru May 20th