

Luke Butler

SILVERMAN GALLERY

In “Captain!” Luke Butler’s first solo show at Silverman Gallery, a critique of male hegemony is filtered through 1960s and ’70s television.

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Luke Butler, *Captain XIII*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 16 x 19".

The artist’s witty paintings and collages depict men in charge—most notably, *Star Trek*’s Captain Kirk (as William Shatner played him) and America’s thirty-eighth president, Gerald R. Ford—but reverse power dynamics, hinting at the erotic potential of reduced authority. Taking on two white men who lorded over their charges with comical earnestness, the entertaining result nods to the peculiar homoeroticism of slash fiction.

Butler’s *Star Trek* paintings are often based on screen

shots, with the characters stranded in drab settings or isolated against a blank gray ground. Painted in acrylic, a medium that suggests the Sunday-painter dabbling of an adoring fan, the works maintain the flatness of a TV screen. In *Captain XIII*, 2009, Kirk is seen with his hands melodramatically covering his face. His squirming, theatrical shame contrasts with the impassive gray of the background and beige of his uniform. Butler renders piping on Kirk’s cuffs with squiggles of paint that resemble cake frosting—the off-white hue reads as vanilla—marks of humiliation that may be the source of the character’s anguish.

Vibrant color invades *Captain XII*, 2008, a rocky desert landscape depicting Kirk lying supine beneath a solid orange sky. The implied threat is unidentified, and the leader appears conscious but immobile, in a frozen state inflicted either by an invisible alien force or his own psychological demons. Inner turmoil is more energetically expressed in *Bridge*, 2009, a more populated image, in which *Enterprise* turbulence sends characters tumbling. While the camera’s Dutch angle transforms the bold colors and geometric furniture of the USS *Enterprise* bridge into a Russian Constructivist composition, one of the few women in the *Star Trek* universe, Lieutenant Uhura, appears to be giggling at the cheap special effect.

Butler’s other major target, Ford, became known for political gaffes and pratfalls, such as tumbling down the steps of Air Force One—and Butler gives him a majestic hero’s welcome here. In a series of disconcerting collages, the president’s head is placed on beefcake bodies scavenged from ’70s-era *Playgirls* and gay porn. Sexualizing a president maintains an elastic taboo (especially when images of a shirtless Obama at the beach are part of our media consciousness), and visions of Ford, a former football star, in the buff, are uncannily ordinary. His inflated physique somehow compensates for his ineffectiveness as a leader, an equation that confuses classic notions of potency. In other works, Butler portrays Ford as a Greek god, a man in nature, and a good-natured, pipe-smoking boy toy. TELL ME WHAT YOU PERSONALLY DESIRE, reads the ad copy in *Leader of Men 38: El Perfecto*, 2009, a statement distilling the essence of any politician’s main come-on.

Butler’s attack on power risks veering into puerile territory, a line that may have been crossed with *Healthy Breakfast*, 2009, an edition of Wheaties cereal boxes. The result is just a hairbreadth away from Wacky Packages—dorky *Mad Magazine*-esque product parody stickers—only with adult sexuality. PLAY BALL WITH THE PRESIDENT, appears over a reclining nude Ford. Though the work is the least effective here, Butler manages to uphold the president’s champion status.

—Glen Helfand