



LUKE BUTLER: "Captain!"

Written by Victoria Gannon
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Friday night I walked up the crowded and sweaty streets near Union Square to Silverman Gallery for the opening of [Captain!](#), new paintings and collages by Luke Butler.

Butler deals in masculine icons of the sixties and seventies—dead presidents and Star Trek officers. In "Leaders of Men," he decapitates former world leaders and attaches their heads to porn stars' bodies. We get a naked Richard Nixon reclining on a box of Wheaties and a well-endowed Gerald Ford staring out from a magazine page, an ad for a giant dildo named El Perfecto beside his smiling face. The pieces highlight our culture's reverence for the male form while introducing vulnerability into symbols of masculine power. No one can be that strong, they say.

In the Star Trek paintings (the "Enterprise" series), Butler isolates each character from his surroundings and separates his gestures from their potential causes. Captain Kirk hides his face behind his hands and writhes on the ground. We don't know what came before or what will follow; we're stuck in prolonged discomfort. Time is stopped at the most unfortunate moments. The attention and concentration Butler devotes to the subject is obvious. In this way the artist acts out his message: men and boys are taught to look up to other men, to study and learn from them. Butler is doing it himself through his careful observation and recreation. In the process, he's exposing the naked humanity beneath these icons' facades.

Deciphering the work's themes occupies your mind for a little while, but not too long. Once you get it, you've kind of gotten it. That's okay. The draw, in my opinion, is Butler's hand; his ability to apply paint in such detailed and striking marks, meticulous but also gentle. It's stunning. Really. And I'm confident that when the artist tires of this current body of work, gets bored with Star Trek tableaus (how many can there be?) and presidents with penises, he'll render his future subjects with the same exacting grace.