

**LUKE BUTLER: "Luke Butler at Charlie James Gallery"**

Written by Retha Oliver

July 5, 2014



Luke Butler, *Detectives*, 2013, Acrylic on canvas, 22 x 29 inches

Even before you enter Charlie James Gallery, the aesthetics are compelling: historic doorways beckon, lanterns hang overhead, roofs sweep upward and yellowing graphics in windows all command you to be visually awake. You're on Chung King Road, the alley across the street from Chinatown's famous archway and a sometimes-flourishing gallery district. Inside the gallery, the street's opulent colors are silenced by neutral walls and the hushed, contemplative

paintings of San Francisco artist Luke Butler. In contrast to the faded "auspicious" symbols in shop windows outside, Butler's musings are more warning signs. His exhibit, on view through mid-July, is comprised of works from two complementary series, both of which rely on Western iconography to draw the viewer into a subtle semiotic dialogue.

Butler's skillful, carefully executed acrylics are so free of texture they seem almost silkscreen, but he is going for a surface even more elusive, since these images are stand-ins for celluloid: The words "The End", "L. Butler Pictures", and a date in Roman numerals appear in the center of each painting like a vintage movie's last frame. These final shots of unseen films are comprised of oceans and skies – not a blank space, but nevertheless a void. In the generic trees, oceans and skies, Butler imposes the most concocted of allusions (end shot of a movie) onto the most natural of forms, a subtle reminder of what we stand to lose in "the end." The skies, leaves, and oceans of Butler's works are almost painfully peaceful, even soothing, yet the superimposed stamp of man's ownership provides an unsettling note.

Butler's 20th Century celluloid theme continues in the second room of the gallery, where he utilizes characters from one of America's most iconic television programs, *Star Trek*. As overused as many vintage TV references have been, this feels fresh – a plunge into Comic-Con.

Butler paints the *Star Trek* crew as futuristic "everymen." Here, humanity is hurling through space, (as indeed we are) empathetic, wounded, and powerless. In these frozen moments, the

characters are inert and incapacitated. In *Landing Party IV*, Captain Kirk embraces a “red shirt” – the anonymous crewmen who, Trekkies will tell you, inevitably die. *Captain Crew IX* shows the cowboy-spaceman motionless and seemingly dead, while the characters Doctor McCoy, Nurse Chapel, and an unknown crewmember examine the body. In *Captain XXXIV* he struggles to rise, his fallen body casting harsh shadows on either side. Only in *Landing Party IV* is there a hint of environment: Butler has stripped his intergalactic travelers of their surroundings, earthly or alien, and reduced them/us to our most vulnerable selves.

There’s one oddball painting, of the 1970’s super cops Starsky and Hutch. Like *Landing Party IV*, *Detectives* is an anguished display wherein Hutch holds his fallen comrade, who curls in his arms like a baby. In their television form, heroes are men of action. Reduced to static tropes on canvas, they are incapable of rescuing those they love. They are helpless in these frozen moments: All they can do is observe, suffer, or grieve.

Storytelling is central to the human experience; but there are stories and there are stories. Butler’s choice of schmaltzy, “bad” TV shows (as opposed to, say, *King Lear*) applies a coat of ironic reserve, and not a little hipsterism, to the genuine pathos and existential crises he depicts. Perhaps he does so because his ultimate subject matter (“The End”) is hard to digest in a less filtered or mannered form.

In the transition into adulthood there’s a point of no return – where things are lost, expectations shifted, innocence shed. A point where the manufactured, saccharine emotions in a 30-minute TV show give way to actual traumatic life experiences. Butler expands the conversation beyond a personal loss to a societal one – the yearning not just for innocence of childhood, but for a more innocent, less troubled era (however mythical that era may be). But “The End” is as much rumination on beginnings as endings, since beyond the titles there is something, after all. We all spill back out onto the street from the film just ended – or back out into Chung King Road, as it were.