

LUKE BUTLER: "Goldies 2009"

Written by Matt Sussman

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"It's so hard for me to figure out where it begins and ends with Shatner," comments artist Luke Butler on the man who, arguably, could be called his muse. "He's a genius," Butler continues, "not because he is a great actor, but because he has this unstoppable quality. His vulnerabilities are on the surface for all to see."

Butler has spent a lot of time thinking through what William Shatner reveals and withholds on his most expressive surface: his face. For his Enterprise series — hung as part of "Captain!," his recent solo show at Silverman Gallery — Butler meticulously painted and repainted the freeze-framed countenance of Shatner as Captain Kirk.

Roland Barthes famously rhapsodized over Greta Garbo's face, noting that, at a time when onscreen representations of beauty were changing, her visage "assures the passage from awe to charm." Butler's paintings propose an alternate shift in regard to the uses of pop culture in contemporary art: from something ironic or quotable to a strange, new affective model — especially where masculinity is concerned.

Isolated against their gray backgrounds, devoid of context, Butler's faces invite projection on what's causing the crew of the U.S.S. Enterprise to look so pained, or languorous, or nervous. In space, no one can hear you scream, but Butler is still trying to listen.

Which brings us back to vulnerability. Kirk is described in text on Silverman's site as a "model of vulnerability" — one no doubt enabled by Shatner's borderline-hammy yet entirely committed acting style. "I think vulnerability is a better way for people to be," Butler reflects. "I think that it's the best, most productive form of strength."

It's an observation carried out most fantastically in Butler's collage series "Leaders of Men," also displayed in "Captain!," in which the heads of Cold War politicians appear seamlessly grafted onto the glistening, well-endowed bodies of contemporaneous gay beefcake. While humorously resonating with the recent eroticization of the body politic (think of those shirtless pics of Obama swimming or Putin fishing), Butler's jarring juxtapositions are more than a one-trick sight gag. They offer that most sheltered, scripted, and paranoid of creatures — the politician — the chance to literally let it all hang out.

"It was no big deal to show Saddam Hussein being hung to death. But if his cock had popped out — that would have been a real crisis," Butler explains, expounding on our culture's double standard toward depictions of violence versus male nudity. "It's such an awful contradiction. My collages don't solve this problem, but run into it head on."