

Steve DeFrank

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Margaret Thatcher Projects

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"Assmosis," 2007
Casein on panel. 24" x 18"



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT
"Wolf Hudson (Stud)," 2008. Casein on panel. 84" x 4" x 2"
"Chad Hunter (Stud)," 2008. Casein on panel. 108" x 12" x 2"
"Jeff Palmer (Stud)," 2008. Casein on panel. 120" x 8" x 2"
"Tommy Hansen (Stud)," 2008. Casein on panel. 60" x 3" x 2"

Steve DeFrank's exhibition *Mirror, Mirror* at Margaret Thatcher Projects is, at first, deceptively benign. His color palette is brightly saturated, cheery, and saccharine, recalling a Disney animated film. While DeFrank's imagery incorporates sparkling halos and Tinker Bell stars, a closer reading of the foppish slogans on scratchitti tree stumps and trunks reveals a homosexually male-centric world—one that, like the painting itself, appeals to and is understood by a specific and often narrow audience.

Excuse my heterosexual naiveté, but I was not aware that phrases such as "buttercup," "loose in the loafers," and "broken wrist" were all euphemisms for the gay male. Maybe I was seduced by the exquisite casein surfaces, paying less attention to text than the language of painting. However, with such titles as "Assmosis" and "Faglish," the message becomes clearer. Regardless of whether DeFrank is attempting to draw connections between the world of Disney and homosexual culture or he has just

appropriated the style, his co-opting of the flaccid visual language of the former is a brilliant analogy of the effiteness often associated with latter.

While the paintings of carved campy phrases on wood objects are technically exceptional and, from a distance, appear sculptural, they feel forced and overly literal. "Faglish" (2007), a grid arrangement of gnarly boards, features the phrases "Fansyland," "Nancy Boy," and "Ass-tronaut" as the most prominently carved text. This blatant strategy makes me wonder: Is DeFrank's only objective to shock? If so, this heavy-handed provocation comes at a cost to the paintings as aesthetic objects.

Far subtler and more interesting is his series of "Stud" works, where through titles, he slyly references gay male porn stars. Although, again, these titles operate within a particular audience, the objects themselves are conceptually and visually arresting. Painting rich magenta, viridian, and cadmium grain patterns over the wood

studs themselves creates a sort of cosmetic makeover for an object associated with the traditionally masculine craft of a carpenter. In doing so, DeFrank feminizes this material, calling attention to the preening with which gay males often pride themselves. Standing freely against the wall as objects, these boards also occupy an interesting place between the genre of painting and sculpture, providing him limitless aesthetic and semantic possibility for future series.