

Julien Ceccaldi @ Jenny's

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February 18, 2016

It would be hard to assess Julien Ceccaldi's latest exhibition *King and Slave*, running at Jenny's in Los Angeles from January 3 to March 3, without a little historical filler. Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb were two wealthy, affluent young men in 1920s Chicago whose mutual relationship brought them to murder a young boy out of an interwoven web of sex, boredom, Nietzschean philosophy and parental neglect. Referring to each other as 'King' (Loeb) and 'Slave' (Leopold), their friendship took them on an ever-escalating path of crime until they decided to bludgeon 14-year-old Robert Franks with a chisel in May 1924. Their nonchalance about their actions was matched with a public outcry for their executions, and only Clarence Darrow's impassioned defense that Loeb and Leopold were victims of their upbringings spared them from the electric chair.



In referencing the Leopold and Loeb case, Ceccaldi's animated paintings extend deeper into the abyss of psychological motives and desires that fuel human sexuality, vanity and self-worth; all topics present in previous comics and exhibitions. His shows at Paradise Garage in Los Angeles and MJ Gallery in Geneva featured hand-painted clothes displaying characters on the verge of breakdown, either freaking out or embellishing the perilous terrain intersecting youth culture, entitlement and gender identification. While Ceccaldi's work at Jenny's veers away from his use of clothing as medium, it is firmly rooted in displaying the anxiety and angst that haunt so many of his characters caught between the terror of sexual, social and self-fulfillment.

The six wall works of King and Slave each operate in the vein of individual comic panels, displaying scenes of characters' oscillating self-worth within vignettes of interpersonal emotional dependence. A withered, desperate character grins a toothless smile while sipping on a Big Gulp next to a trash can in 'Bench' while another howls in a moment of rejection from their stronger dominant partner in 'Bed'. Painted literally as a piece of shit, the onslaught of heavy drinking flushes another figure down the toilet in 'Blue Face', despite (or because of) the backdrop of intense emotional enjoyment and gratification. In the painting 'BDSM', the Leopold and Loeb affair is strongly implied as two sickly figures restrain a healthy young male for their own uncertain pleasure. Throughout the exhibition, all of Ceccaldi's characters are portrayed as barely living corpses, best demonstrated by his sprawling mural 'Subway Cumrag' where a blithe, rotting, nude figure sits alone on an approximation of a Manhattan-bound L train to the terror and disgust of his fellow passengers. What could very much be Ceccaldi's self-portrait in 'Dirty Mint' muses at all the morass, hung alone on the left hand side of the gallery with his tongue poking out.



Far beyond a sexual show of horrors, Ceccaldi's work confronts and acknowledges the vagaries and indignities of physical and psychological fulfillment similar to the anime and manga influences he draws upon, especially the dark familial tales of Nekojiru in 'Cat Soup'. His allusion to Leopold and Loeb focuses less on their actions as murderers and more on their tragic mutual relationship. Under-reported during their 1924 trial was their intense physical relationship where Loeb would only conditionally grant Leopold sexual contact after committing a crime. Ceccaldi, using the medium of animation to illustrate facets of queer identity, writes a dignity into his characters' errant actions, torment and pleasure. It is hard to imagine that the artist is absent from the emotional rawness of the pieces, as he himself has mentioned in past interviews and his artist talk at 356 Mission Rd that all of his characters are fragments of himself. "I am less than the dust beneath his feet", said Nathan Leopold on his feelings towards Richard Loeb. This desperation is echoed in Ceccaldi's paintings, probing the deeper humanity in his downtrodden outsiders, criminals, losers and barely breathing corpses.**