

Todd Bienvenu

Kill Your Idols

Jan 18 — Feb 24, 2024 | Brussels

Almine Rech Brussels is pleased to announce *Kill Your Idols*, Todd Bienvenu's fourth solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from January 18 to February 24, 2024.

Todd Bienvenu is a prolific, seriously brilliant painter whose uniquely prolific brilliance is most exuberantly expressed when he succeeds in keeping his creative seriousness in check. At times, this regard entails cheesiness, cheekiness, tongue-in-cheek-ness, or simply butt cheeks. At times, it's a matter of humorous cultural references or comical riffing. At other times yet, and on full display in *Kill Your Idols*, it's an admixture of all of that within the context of new source material for the artist to explore. In this reverentially inspired, pictorially stimulating exhibition, Bienvenu mitigates seriousness by blithely skirmishing with art history.

Regardless of subject matter, Bienvenu's generously punchy palettes, brushily wet treatments, broad and swiftly rendered marks, and often narratively navigable compositions do much to keep potential seriousness in abeyance. The artist's genial, indeed gleeful approach to painting suffuses his diversely representational works with an unmistakable sense of material, graphically palpable mirth. In this sense, the ebullient charm of his compositions is a truly substantive feature, one that runs far deeper than puckish playfulness and fun and games. For at times, the artist's aesthetic mood can be touching or sweet, wistful or pensive, and although never fully woebegone, perhaps mildly bummed out while betraying glimmers of hope. In this vein, or in these veins, Bienvenu's subject matter has charted territories of southern folklore, childhood memories, urban chaos, rock and roll, 90's nostalgia, surf and skate culture, and more than marginally occasional smatterings of smut. The artist's sources of inspiration are broad and always broader, and his trademark protagonists, settings, scenes, and subcultures are emblematic of a fundamentally joyful creative disposition. The more the artist has expanded his skills as a painter – which is to say, the more seriously he has taken his craft – the wider a net he has cast into the world around him to expand, too, his assortment of imagery and avatars to portray in variably whimsical ways.

And so, in *Kill Your Idols*, bring on an even more assorted mix of mosh pits, dude-bros, beach babes, pool parties, grizzled brawlers, tattooed bruisers, woozy loiterers, wedgie snaps, butt cracks, and anti-heroic asshats, right? In a word, no. For this new body of work, rather than turning to his usual suspects in search of inspiration and lightheartedness, Bienvenu flipped his own script by challenging himself to depict subjects invested with airs of tacit, temporally embedded seriousness, and to somehow extract fun and lightheartedness therefrom. This was informed in part by a large painting he made for a Picasso-themed exhibit, a work that not only permitted but required him to indulge in painting something as ridiculous, relatively speaking, as a huge-headed Minotaur. The art historical reference point gave him a reason to step back from determining every decisive aspect of a work, and to relish anew the invigorating joy of painting as opposed to the mere process of depiction. Hence Bienvenu's energetic rendering of John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark*, an 18th-century painting he chose to rework not because Copley is among his pictorial heroes, but because it offered rich compositional challenges of palette and dramatic dynamism – and of course, because it would entail depicting a shockingly savage encounter with a frightfully savage sea beast. While Copley, several centuries ago, might've been portraying a real and dreadful instance of heroic rescue bearing a certain sense of solemnity, the same event in Bienvenu's hands becomes one of outrageously animated boat-tastic adventurousness.

Expanding this new oeuvre of art historical references and spirited nods to old masters, Bienvenu continued seeking out monsters, seafarers, wild compositional dynamics, bizarre imagery, and challenging palettes. So he looked to Hieronymus Bosch, of course, reinterpreting the Dutch artist's classics in full and in delightfully rescaled small works zooming in on some of the master's fancifully outlandish details. He found Minotaurs, mazes, warriors, myths, mysteries, and beasts galore in Roman mosaics, Greek pottery, and Japanese woodcuts, and sampled from them to create diverting works that scan more as loose translations than faithful transcriptions of imagery. Some of Bienvenu's most immediately identifiable homages show him reinventing the perspectival capaciousness of Ensor's thronging crowds, the divine dreaminess of Michelangelo's frescoes, the theatrical drama of Caravaggio's chiaroscuro, the fleshy congregations of Rubens's figurations, and the über-emo bliss of Klimt's *The Kiss*. Referencing such a variety of stylistically diverse works has allowed the artist to paint a multitude of previously unexplored subjects, treat an array of classically intriguing themes, resolve surfaces in dazzling new ways, and let his generally unbridled palette positively burst.

In *Kill Your Idols*, Bienvenu's aim in reinterpreting the canon is not to sneer at or parody the art historical gravitas of the works at hand. Rather, his intention is to venerate and revivify the masters and their subject matter alike – and to imbue them with the good humor, formal freshness, and pictorial jubilation of his trademark touch. Bienvenu believes this intervention to be something akin to a cover band breathing new life into old songs. As such, in *Kill Your Idols*, Bienvenu is The Misfits ripping through a symphony by Mozart, as it were, rather than “Weird Al” Yankovic punking hits by The Misfits. In music as in visual art, the oldies never get old as long as someone's still riffing on them. Imitation is flattery. Rock on, Ingres.

Riffing on the Oldies: Todd Bienvenu's Kill Your Idols

– Paul D'Agostino, PhD is an artist, writer, curator, and translator.