



## Men in L.A.: Three Generations of Drawings at The Box

June 13, 2014 Written by Matt Stromberg

*Men in L.A.: Three Generations of Drawings* at The Box features a massive collection of over 400 drawings created by artists Naotaka Hiro, Benjamin Weissman, and Paul McCarthy, individually and in collaboration with one another. The title of the exhibition overreaches somewhat—there are not really three generations, but rather three artists separated by less than thirty years in age. Yet what the exhibition does accomplish is to gather together twenty-five years of drawings by artists who depict the body in all its grotesquely sexual, scatological, and effluvial glory.



Paul McCarthy & Benjamin Weissman. *Quilting Sessions*, 1997-2008; installation view at The Box Gallery, Los Angeles. Image courtesy of the Artists and The Box, Photo: Fredrik Nilsen.

Fittingly, the oldest artist in the show is Paul McCarthy, who has been creating all manner of abject and provocative art since the early 1970s. Beginning with simple early performances, McCarthy's oeuvre has come to include sculpture, video, and installation, culminating in recent big-budget cinema spectacles. McCarthy's "signature ingredients: violence, humor, sex, impotence, appetite, degradation, art history, politics, and pop culture"[1] are all present here, most notably in his collaborations with Benjamin Weissman in *Quilting Sessions* (1997–2008). Although they are still quite graphic, these mostly black-and-white drawings have a different impact than McCarthy's more substantial works. Instead of being



confronted by the over-the-top viscera and obnoxious characters of his films, here the intimacy of the crude ink-on-paper drawings pulls viewers in, even while their transgressive imagery repels. The repetition of so many images, hung in tight rows four high, only strengthens this dynamic. These works recall an adolescent's notebook doodles, page after page of feverish attempts to conjure as many naughty scenarios as possible. Bits of text hint at disturbing or absurd narratives. ("Mommy Daddy on all 4's in the Kitchen," reads one.) Elsewhere, placed on tables, are preliminary sketches for McCarthy's upcoming *Stagecoach* piece, as well as *Placemat Drawings* (2009–2014). This latter series proves interesting for its diversity of subject matter and the casual manner in which various ideas have been developed while the artist dined.



Benjamin Weissman. Untitled (*Charles Darwin*), undated; 30 x 77 in.  
Image courtesy of the Artists and The Box. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen.

The solo drawings of Benjamin Weissman, who is perhaps best known as a writer, certainly give McCarthy a run for his money in terms of puerile depravity. A series of 144 small, colorful drawings on the gallery's back wall seem to feature at least that number of erect penises, if not more. The artist was presumably so pleased with an image of Charles Darwin fellating an anatomically exaggerated member that he has drawn it twice in a work by the front desk. Weissman's seemingly deviant obsession with sex is not surprising, given that he spent a year reviewing 300 adult films for AVN, under the pen name Leopold Loeb, a reference to the notorious 1920s child-murderers Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb. There are moments of delight in Weissman's delicate but warped works, but as with his collaborations, the overwhelming repetition of so many charged images can prove exhausting.



Naotaka Hiro. Untitled, 2012-14; installation view; acrylic, charcoal pencil on paper; 42 x 31 ½ in. Image courtesy of the Artists and The Box, Photo: Fredrik Nilsen

The exhibition's most welcome surprise is the work of Naotaka Hiro, the youngest of the three. Hiro's previous work has mostly been in video and sculpture, and generally addresses issues of corporeality. His time spent as a studio assistant to McCarthy has no doubt informed his practice, and his watercolor and acrylic works on paper are the most fully realized and least sketch-like pieces in the show. Hiro has managed to take the bodily preoccupations of the other artists and imbue them with a sense of whimsy. In some drawings the physical references are explicit, while in others, he has abstracted them to sinuous curves and brightly colored forms that recall works by Henri Matisse and William Blake. There are still orifices and phalli and bodily excretions in his works, but he depicts them with a fanciful innocence that proves a welcome foil for the damaged trauma of the other artists.

The Men in the exhibition title refers not only to the artists, but to their subject matter. In different ways, they each use drawing to explore ideas about masculinity. McCarthy and Weissman offer up ambivalent takes on what it means to be a man, full of insecurity, loathing, and phallic infatuation. They skewer heroic male tropes, while at the same time compulsively presenting a darkly comic, immature hedonism. Hiro shares the other artists' corporeal fascination, but his drawings are quieter, more focused than their frenetic output. McCarthy's and Weissman's drawings give us a glimpse of them working through familiar ideas, whereas Hiro's work shows an artist branching out into unknown terrain.

Men in L.A.: Three Generations of Drawings — Naotaka Hiro, Benjamin Weissman, Paul McCarthy is on view at The Box in Los Angeles through July 5, 2014.

[1] Holland Cotter, "The American Fairy Tale, Fun House Style," New York Times, June 28, 2013: C21.

