

FIRST LOOK



David Leggett:
*Invited to the
cookout, 2017*,
acrylic, collage,
ink, oil stick, and
airbrush on canvas,
84 inches square.
Courtesy Shane
Campbell Gallery,
Chicago.

David Leggett

by Sean J. Patrick Carney

The cartoonish paintings and works on paper of Chicago-based David Leggett pack a cognitively dissonant punch. Saccharine backgrounds and playfully astute renderings of pop-culture figures invite viewers to laugh. Then, devastatingly, Leggett's jokes reveal themselves as brutal confrontations of systemic racism in the United States. "You are in physical danger," the images remind one viewer. "You are complicit in violence," they show another.

Leggett's *Power of the glow* (2016), a sparse work on paper, has only a small magazine cutout of the young Elvis Presley in a gold lamé suit with HELLO HATER scrawled anachronistically above him. Smarmy Elvis, adorned in expensive threads, is resurrected in the twenty-first century to cockily let us know that he'd steal black music again in an instant if given the chance. In the painting *It's not what you know it's what you can prove* (2016), Chief Wiggum from "The Simpsons" appears on a square yellow field with a bloody bullet hole through his head. The work's title is a quote from the film *Training Day* (2001), a bit of wisdom imparted to a white rookie officer by a corrupt black cop. Was Wiggum shot by a civilian? By the artist? By another cop? Or does the allusion to *Training Day* and the multiple inversions of racial power dynamics in its plot suggest yet another inversion, where fantastical cartoon violence against an agent of the state recalls the state's real violence against

people of color? Slow-burning, paradoxical references like these make Leggett's work open to multifarious readings.

Influenced by the Chicago Imagists, Leggett fluently mixes dichotomies of high/low and fine/folk in both content and form. Characters recur in paintings made years apart, as do myriad materials, including felt, glitter, googly eyes, and oil stick. Leggett understands simplicity's depth. The ambiguous one-liners of the late stand-up comic Mitch Hedberg and the off-the-cuff existential quandaries served up with surreal calm by comedian Hannibal Buress are the oral equivalents of Leggett's understated complexity. The reverberations that come after the punchline beget philosophical introspection.

This spring, Shane Campbell Gallery in Chicago staged "Their funeral, our dance floor," a solo exhibition of seventeen new Leggett paintings. In an unusual move, the gallery is following this display with a show of his drawings this summer. The rapid-fire exhibition schedule recalls the frenzied production pace of the artist's Tumblr, *Coco River Fudge Street*, where he posted a new drawing every day throughout 2011. When I asked Leggett if he feels pressure to be consistently funny for an expanded audience, he replied, "I'm OK with people not finding humor in my work. I do, however, crack myself up." ○

COMING SOON
David Leggett's solo
exhibition at Shane
Campbell Gallery,
Chicago, June 17–
July 15.

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