

Steve Lafreniere on Christian Holstad - First Take

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HANGING ON THE WALL OF CHRISTIAN HOLSTAD'S Brooklyn studio is a string of shiny cardboard letters that reads INFECT OTHERS. Just a suggestion, really, but one that couldn't be plainer about the artist's intentions. There's a slyly evangelical tone to Holstad's work; it aims to repudiate bad faith in a time seemingly piled high with it.

Holstad is interested in cognition, in particular the shifty relationships between touch, neurology, and subliminal states. Investigating these, he's developed a unique art practice, one that emphasizes its own meditative processes. If that sounds reductive, the work couldn't be less so--drawings, collages, sculptures, installations, costumes, performances, and videos that cleverly question our ability to fathom our own feelings.

The "eraserhead drawings" are black-and-white newspaper photos Holstad alters with both ends of a pencil. They have the irrational force of a nightmare. He turns the original figures into ghostly membranes but leaves their heads, hands, and fingers untouched, grasping at empty air. Some figures seem to have melted together entirely, their eyes registering only stoic sorrow. It's a world in the terminal stages of some soul-eating malady. Yet the more we look, the less solid that take seems. A slight jog in perception, and what was horrific slips dreamily into that refuge from horror, the spiritual. The figures are now clearly in poses of assistance and compassion, their mouths serene. Holstad so deftly balances the pathos in these drawings with something considerably more beatific that we find ourselves in a kind of Rorschachian stutter.

For the viewer to become suddenly unsure of an image's "obvious" intent is key to Holstad's method. A new series of collages sets an idyllic if detached male sexuality against a background of smart '80s

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bathrooms. Men are engaged in myriad sex acts, their lust tempered only by, oops, a lack of genitalia. Patterned fabric has replaced much of their skin, too, and Holstad tunes each room's color scheme to it. The tension between the works' formal qualities and their erotic power is so expertly sedated that everything keeps taking a moment to register. In these ostensible porn pictures we're left vaguely admiring the brass fittings.

The theme of sensual isolation is carried further in Holstad's current show at Daniel Reich Gallery. "Life Is a Gift" ruminates on the saga of David Vetter, better known as the Boy in the Bubble. Vetter was born in 1971 without an immune system and lived in a see-through plastic environment for the first twelve years of his life, at arm's length from human touch. Holstad references Vetter's predicament to speak to our own fears of loneliness. But even here, nothing is as it seems. An image from Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* is, on closer inspection, formed from rubber gloves; linoleum flooring is disguised as a rug (until you step on it); and party balloons somehow turn out to be pages of the *New York Times*. The show's unsettling melancholy is repeatedly co-opted by its own built-in attempts to cheer us up.

When he first arrived in New York from Minneapolis, Holstad was already exploring ways to manipulate context. In 1995 he conspired with artists Delia Gonzalez, Gavin Russom, and others to unleash the Fancy Pantz School of Dance, a shambling troupe whose syncopated routines took some startling twists and turns. By making a decoy of their amateur skills, Holstad knew that they would be able to play on an audience's expectations in interesting ways. In a new project with Gonzalez called the Black Lyotard Front, he'll be continuing these live provocations, this time taking his ideas to the streets. Infect others, indeed.

New York-based writer Steve Lafreniere is an editor at large for *Index* magazine and is currently at work on a book of memoirs. This fall he curated "Back Room," a DJ series at Passerby, Gavin Brown's Fifteenth Street bar.