

LOS ANGELES

AMY STEIN

Paul Kopeikin Gallery

AMY STEIN'S A LIAR if we are to take her pictures at face value. Any seasoned *National Geographic* photographer will tell you that animals in the wild don't pose for the camera — though our lives would be so much more agreeable if they would. Ironically, Stein's photoshopped efforts at articulating man's conflict with nature in Matamoras, Pennsylvania point instead to Baghdad, Iraq, where the battle between fact and fiction continues to play out. I understand where Stein is coming from with these animal fantasies every time I watch another presidential debate. You won't get straight talk from McCain, Clinton, Obama or Stein when it comes to confessing base reptilian instincts:

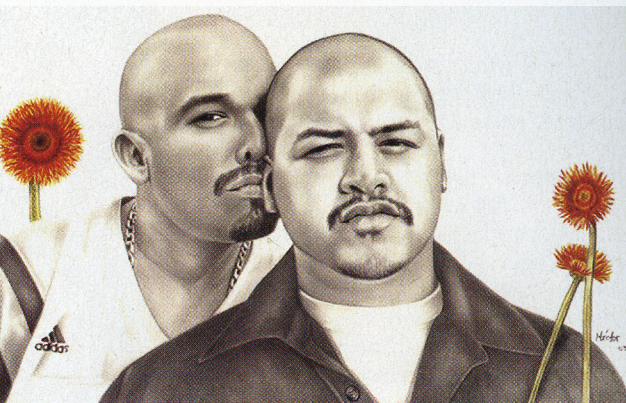
Oh the romance of it all! To express conflict in such palatable fashion (*Watering Hole*, *Trasheaters*), in means and ways that flatter our love for Mother Nature even as She continues to regard us as part of the food chain. Or to tug at our heartstrings (*Inbetween*, *Nursery*) as only Walt Disney — the fiction factory archetype as far as sentimentalizing the animal kingdom is concerned — can. But wild Nature, having been forced to rummage through trash cans and cower at the daunting task of crossing a four-lane highway at rush hour, at some point demands a picture that dignifies Her true self; *Howl*, easily the fulcrum of the exhibition, delivers savage repatriation faster than you can say Jack London.

Although the photographs are finely crafted and have sex appeal, Stein only pays lip service to "primal issues of comfort and

Amy Stein, *Trasheaters*, 2008



fear" in Matamoras, Pennsylvania. What's worse, the artist has treated Nature as an easy tool, an obedient actor that ultimately does not threaten our peace and stability, our fortified Green Zone. That's the fiction. The facts would look more like a photograph of a dead, half-eaten little girl floating in a bloody swimming pool, followed by a picture of a smiling law enforcement officer kneeling with his rifle in the grass next to the carcass of a dead bear with half its head blown off. But one does not look for facts in an art gallery any more than one looks for them in so many presidential speeches and Fox News commentaries about the war. That being said the stakes are simply too high these days to be offering glossed-over rhetoric that hints at, but does not directly state, the sobering facts: both man and beast are murderers.



Hector Silva, *Rudy and Frank*, 2003

—Darrin Little

HECTOR SILVA ONE Archives Gallery at USC

HECTOR SILVA WORKS VERY HARD to make real art for the people. His people are Latinos in Los Angeles who straddle American and Mexican cultures as well as a smaller, more specific subset: the gay cholos that populate much of his work. Considering how unrelentingly macho Latin culture is, it is shocking to see his realistic yet intimate portraits of guys who are so DL that they could be on Oprah. Silva is not coldly documenting a scene, his drawings come from his world and his models are usually people he knows. He does a range of work including portraits of figures like Mother Theresa and Frida Kahlo and an anti-war drawing called *GI Jose* which is why Silva has many fans that aren't even aware of his more sexual, homo work.

In this complete retrospective, you can see the evolution of a young man embracing the typical gay icons (golden era movie stars, female pop singers, white porn stars) in the '80s, exploring his own ethnic heritage and his sexual fantasies in the '90s and

incorporating politics and ideas of community into his more accomplished recent works from the last eight years. This show sequestered his very explicit sexual drawings in one smaller room with the main galleries showcasing everything else.

Entirely self-taught, Silva has become a master of light and dark in his pencil drawings. He expertly plays up the contrast between the white of the paper and the darkness of the pencil to capture the luminosity of skin. On the surface, it appears simple and natural but the technique is incredibly sophisticated. In some of the black and white drawings the artist slyly incorporates color in details like flowers, boxer shorts, even a Mexican blanket. His backgrounds of chain link fence, graffiti and razor wire are a gritty reminder of the parts of the city his subjects inhabit.

Some might be tempted to pigeonhole the work as "erotic art" and compare Silva's drawings to Tom of Finland. While Tom's work was hyper-stylized and drawn from his insular fantasy world, Silva's drawings are naturalistic and he can't help but inject aspects of race, class and politics even into his sexualized work. In *Latino Power*, a young man proudly and defiantly showing off his foreskin becomes a political act. His *El Bautismo* focuses on the face of a very handsome Latino ecstatically receiving a golden shower from the uncut penis at the top of the drawing. It is presented as a religious experience for the soaked individual in the drawing and Silva draws it reverently. In contrast, his drawing of himself as a boy on the day of First Communion feels stiff and constipated, like an old photograph, until you notice the snake under a table on the tile floor. The serpent represents the corruption of the church; especially its complicity in child molestation cases at the hand of priests. Like the filmmaker Pedro Almodovar, who also toys with expected ideas of what is sacred and profane, Silva can never divorce himself from the influence of a Catholic upbringing. Guys who look like gang-