

# WESTERN ★ PROJECT

Selected Press on Patrick Lee

Patrick Lee at Western Project

By Bruce Hainley

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Albrecht Dürer would have seen a reason for drawing, meticulously, the subjects of Patrick Lee's "Deadly Friends." The men in Lee's pictures look like they understand, firsthand, that looks can kill, or at least inflict a serious bruising. Drifters, outlaws, parolees, gang-bangers; guys with thick necks, shaved heads, and broad chests, parts emblazoned with tattoos ("Fuck All Haters"; "Trust No Bitches"; "Bad Influences"), the warnings and braggadocio of member status, make up this forbidding posse. Although Lee has photographed hundreds of men, met on the streets of Los Angeles, over the course of a decade, a frieze of ten of these portraits, *Deadly Friends 2006*, demonstrates not only the actual



elements of masculine style and physicality that trigger Lee's attention but also the difference between the artist's uses of the photographic—its indexicality as well as its constructed-ness (clear SoCal sunlight, rugged chin-up posture)—and the drawn.

Despite all his virtuosic technique, which finds the artist deploying effects associated with realism, super- and/or photographic (exacting shadows; delineation of individual hairs, skin pores, and bloody contusions), Lee's graphite works on paper, composites culled from his photos, impress because of the verismo of fantasy. Their focus is not so much the thug antics of *Prison Break*, 2005, or the fronting of rap or reggaeton; rather, what Lee draws are the unruly, wayward, even criminal aspects of desire as it operates in the guise of masculinity.

What's interesting is how often these masculine attributes are negotiated through the metaphor or allegory of the eye—emphasizing vision, visibility, looks, looking as well as being looked at—to broach the conflicted nature of seeing and appearances. The eye is wounded: In *Deadly Friends (Head #10)*, 2005, mustachioed trouble tilts his head back, a Band-Aid already crossing most of the forehead; his right eye is swollen shut. *Deadly Friends (Head #3)*, 2004, depicts a hunk after he's been in some kind of athletic match or testosterone brawl; little butterfly bandages suture his right eyebrow. In other pieces, the eye socket is bleeding or stitched up.

Lee has mentioned graphic artist Boris Vallejo (think Conan the Barbarian riding a giant panther with a buxom princess in distress) and Tom of Finland as influences. Finland, in addition to flaunting scenarios of, say, huge police cocks plowing fresh convict ass, concentrated on the cruising gaze between men on the make. But Lee pictures men, who, unlike most of Finland's studs, are removed from stabilized narratives of definitive sexuality. Because of his rendering, the tolls of a tough life, instead of operating as plot lines in which the erotic dramatizes itself, refuse to remain mere aphrodisiacs. Burdened with and burnished by many of the signs and consequences of aggressivity, results of economic and existential hardship, Lee's models may be looked at as having been drafted into situations not entirely of their own making. Resigned or stoic, they don't seem fazed in the slightest.

Two of the most recent drawings, *Deadly Friends (Snitch)* and *Deadly Friends (Comb)*, both 2006, zero in on the mouth. *Snitch* shows tight lips, a scarred cheek; *Comb* catches its exemplar in right profile, a comb midway through his thick, impeccable doorknocker. The allegorical potential of such grooming—wild as it is in Wildean—accrues, tensions already palpable.

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Patrick Lee  
Western Project  
By Vonn Sumner  
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This first solo show by Los Angeles artist Patrick Lee consists of 23 drawings, all graphite on paper. Each drawing is small (around 14 x 11 inches) except for what appear to be the most recent 3 drawings, which are about 2 x 3 feet. Most of the drawings focus on the face and neck of a solitary young man.

The men appear to be mostly white or Latino, quite muscular, and all of them are bleeding or bandaged or both. Some of the faces stare at the viewer defiantly, some stare off into the middle distance. A few smoke cigarettes. Tattoos on the head and neck read phrases such as “Bad Influence,” “Kings Until Death,” “Trust No Bitches,” “Fuck All Haters,” and “5150” (the police code for mentally unstable). Almost all of the men sport buzzed haircuts and goatee mustaches. Some have stitches, cauliflower ears, swollen black eyes, dripping cuts and long scars. They could be prison inmates who get into frequent and violent altercations. They could be Ultimate Fighting Championship veterans, a couple of fights past their prime. Or they could just be tough guys who have had to scrap and brawl their way through a hard life.

The ambiguity of their identities and origins is a strength in the work: The subjects don't get pinned down as one specific person, but rather attain a more metaphorical, universal character. This challenges the viewer to ask questions and move beyond the work's fetishizing of the signs of physical brutality. Look longer and the ugly-beauty of the drawings begin to reveal an underlying humanity. Lee's subjects are, at first glance, people who might make a person very nervous if met alone on a dark street; but seen through the eyes of this artist they become vulnerable, almost saintly. Are the exterior wounds signifiers of the interior pain and suffering? Perhaps, but the men don't appear upset by their brutalized visages. Instead many of them seem content, even comforted, as if their bloodied state they have gained some sense of self-acceptance through the process of making their exterior match their interior.

A standout piece is a 24" x 26" recent drawing (*Deadly Friends (Comb)*) which focuses, vignette style, on a man's hand holding a comb, which is in the middle of a thick goatee. There is something intensely visually satisfying about the comb stuck in the beard and this large, heavy hand coming up from nowhere. The image is so specific, so distilled, as to become iconic. It is one of the most effective and well-realized coded for masculinity that I have seen in recent art.

The psycho-analyzing is really secondary to the drawings themselves. They are based on photos—the dominant convention of representation—but in translating the images to pencil on paper, they are transformed.

What is drawing but the recording of touch? The pencil is a deputy for the hand.

In the process of making these drawings, Lee is in effect caressing the surfaces of these brutalized men thousands of times. The pencil stops being graphite and becomes leathery skin, stubbly scalps, bushy goatees, bloody cuts and scars. There is a band-aid in one of these drawings rendered with as much care and intent as any Dutch still-life flower.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century painter Balthus likened representational painting and drawing to an act of devotional prayer. Lee's treatment of his subjects lives up to that description. These drawings allow the viewer to become intimate with the most menacing of strangers.