



“SAN FRANCISCO

Paul Mullins

at Mark Wolfe Contemporary Art

Balzac’s 1837 story, “The Unknown Masterpiece,” recounted the comic tragedy of the fictitious painter, Frenhofer; for 10 years, in secret, he paints a figure, but manages only “a chaos of color” from which a girl’s foot emerges. Cézanne famously admitted, “Frenhofer *c’est moi*,” inaugurating the idea of the artist as existential and even absurd hero. Viewers unfamiliar with modern art’s rejection of photographic reality may look at Paul Mullins’ small mixed-media paintings as Frenhofer’s traditional artist friends did. The small works on panel incorporating fragments of colored-pencil drawings based on magazine photos, and embedding them in swirling abstract brushstrokes, seem at first glance absurd, human anatomy suspended in painterly amber or aspic, but the more you peruse them, the more you see and feel.

Mullins’ juxtaposition of powerful draftsmanship with its seemingly absurd subversion reflects his ambivalence toward growing up in Appalachian West Virginia, with its less-than-romantic (or chivalric, Old South) good-old-boy culture (nicely mocked in Will Ferrell’s Nascar comedy, “Talladega Nights”). Mullins is both “enthusiastic and apprehensive about... the iconography plundered from the cheapest of cultural sources, and associated with ways of life that contemporary coastal Americans should *supposedly* regard as less successful, if not outright undesirable.” He reconsiders the “popular images that powered the dreams of so many rural kids” of his generation from the viewpoint of “someone who has been looking at *Art* [his italics]... for a lifetime.” These muscle magazines (as I suppose), with their cars and babes, are hardly unique to “Southern

Man,” of course. The commercialization of sex and self-esteem is universal. Yet these small, generally high-key semi-abstractions—with their glimpses of beer cans and bottles, cigarettes, chewing tobacco, gesturing hands, flexed arms, bellies, eyes and lips—are strangely poetic and even powerful. *Puff, Cup, Skoal, Refresh, Cig, Nails, and Swig*, (all 2015) with their laconic Pop titles, make the banality of mass-market consumerism and the psychic wound of cultural dislocation, universally experienced in the modern world, aesthetically meaningful, like Dada photomontages and Rauschenberg’s ghostly image transfers. We are all Sisyphus; Frenhofer, *c’est nous*.

—DEWITT CHENG

“Swig,” 2015, **Paul Mullins**

COLORED PENCIL, ACRYLIC AND PAPER ON PANEL
12" x 9"

PHOTO: COURTESY MARK WOLFE CONTEMPORARY ART