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BY NICOLE
DISSER

GALLERY SCENE

Blurry Backpage Girls and Liquor Bottle Swirls: Paintings for Bukowski



"Bather" (2014) by Walter Robinson (Image courtesy of Owen James Gallery)

We've all seen the "massage girl" advertisements lurking at the back of alternative weeklies and the grainier budget versions of escort ads spamming the nether regions of the internet—signs that a legitimate underworld of body-business is still solidly stuck to the underside of the white market. It's ever-present, and in some ways unchanging. These familiar "backpage ads" are the source images for art-critic-turned-artist **Walter Robinson's** blurry acrylic renderings on view

at *There's a Bluebird in My Heart*, a new show opening Friday, April 8 at **Owen James Gallery** in Greenpoint.

The paintings depicting doe-eyed girls wearing slinky loungewear, long tresses, and pouty demeanors, account for about half the show, while the rest consists of still-lives of liquor bottles, cigarettes, and pill bottles. "It's basically a two-artist show," explained Owen Houhoulis, owner of Owen James. "One is a longtime New York artist and the other is the well-known poet Charles Bukowski." Really, though, the show is a three-way effort between curator, painter, and the late, great drunken poet, as well as a way for Houhoulis to realize a longtime dream of putting together a curatorial homage to Bukowski.

At first glance, the literal connection between these paintings and Bukowski's poetry is immediate. Babes, beer cans, booze, and the blues are on full display here, present in still lifes and unusual portraits smattered in acrylic on cardboard, paper, and canvas. "This style, there's a quickness to it, there are no under-drawings," Houhoulis explained. "They're sketches, really, that have this immediate, gauzy look to them." Slightly out-of-focus, but with a seedy sort of darkness to them, the paintings inspire a beer-goggle sort of feeling, and a bile-like sour taste in the mouth to boot. But there's a little more going on here too, something that might take a bit of back-and-forthing between the poem and the paintings to really understand.

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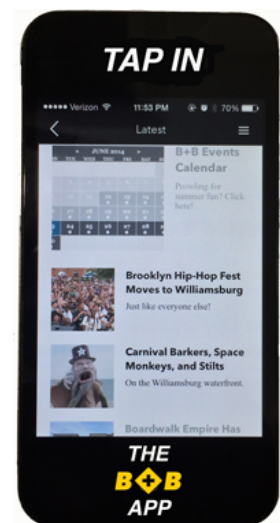
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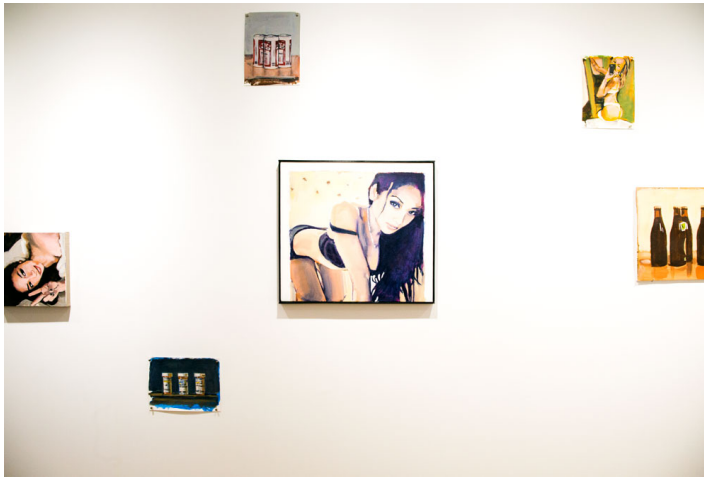
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At center, "Backpage (Doggy Style)" (2014) by Walter Robinson (Photo: Nicole Disser)

How exactly Houhoulis went about making a show like this required some oblique ways of thinking too. "I've been wanting to do something on Bukowski for a long time, especially with this poem," he said. "But I wasn't sure how to bring Bukowski into a gallery in a new way." Firstly, the curator decided it was best to focus on a single poem, "The Bluebird," which also happens to be one of his favorite Bukowski poems. "I think it sums up a lot of the themes that usually show up in his work," Houhoulis explained.

Instead of commissioning paintings, Houhoulis selected paintings from Robinson's existing body of work. "As soon as I saw Walter's studio for the first time, in the back of my head almost immediately I said, 'Ah, I know how this is going to work,'" the curator explained, but it did take some time to select the proper pieces. The ones he did choose, Houhoulis explained, "are very close to the image in my mind when I read one of Bukowski's poems." Still, it's not as if the overlaps are intentional. "But it's beautiful that they're there to be found," Houhoulis said.



"Gin" (2013) Walter Robinson (Photo: Nicole Disser)

The choice wasn't an obvious one, either— it's not as if Walter Robinson and Charles Bukowski share an artistic process. "Bukowski *was* his writing," Houhoulis explained. As for Walter, "these are not self-portraits." Nor does Robinson's body of work as a whole immediately recall Bukowski. Much of it reflects on pop culture (see: what Houhoulis described as his "normcore" paintings) and pulls directly from [advertisements](#).

"He's well-known as someone who takes a slightly humorous, or ironic look at mass media, commodification, the gluttonous side of American



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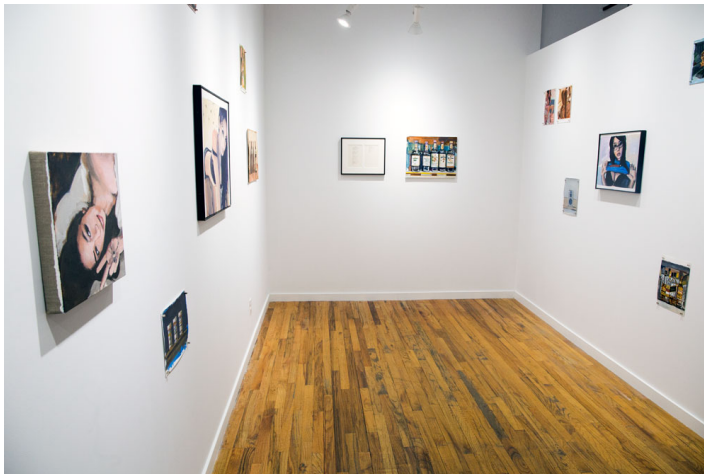
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society,” Houhoulis said. “But what I wanted to do was to find a way to take a fresh look at his work, and focus on the dark themes of his work without the funnier side.” While Robinson’s paintings can normally be viewed “in that neutral-to-happy range— how life is shown in advertisements,” the paintings at this show have a much seedier, underbelly vibe to them. “His subject matter usually consists of things you see every day, image sources might be Macy’s swimsuit ads, or a hamburger on a plate— the images are very straightforward,” Houhoulis said. “The point is to zero in and have people focus on the dark underside itself, as opposed to that veil of normalcy and prescribed happiness. It’s really saying: no, there is depth and a darkness and a profound way of thinking about his work when you’re no longer distracted by that.”

In this way, *There’s a Bluebird in My Heart* might be surprising even for seasoned fans of Walter Robinson. “The poem illustrates a way of looking at Walter’s work in a fresh way,” Houhoulis said. “And it’s something new for Walter, too. That chance doesn’t come up so often for an artist—to think of yourself in that new way.”

And “Bluebird in My Heart” also calls for a re-examining of Bukowski, a writer who Houhoulis said that “everyone’s a fan of” (but I’m more inclined to say everyone has an opinion of). While Robinson’s paintings confirm the boozy glimmer and lovelorn leanings of Bukowski’s poems, they also encourage the reader/viewer to go deeper with Bukowski’s poems, which are also matter-of-fact on the surface.



“There’s a Bluebird in My Heart” at Owen James Gallery (Photo: Nicole Dissler)

“The paintings from the ‘Backpage’ series, they’re not just pictures of girls, they’re not just taken from Playboy centerfolds, that’s not what they are,” Houhoulis explained. “They’re the advertisements that massage girls or call girls will use for their business.” He said that the nature of these images raises several questions: “Is it an image of a real person? Is it a stock photo? Is this just a fantasy image? Or is this someone really making a business out of themselves?” In that way, we start to examine this distance between advertisements and the ideal world we’re told we have access to and what the curator described as the stuff that’s “really real.”

I also noticed that a few of these paintings hint toward our increasingly tech-fetishizing age (one call girl is pictured taking a selfie with the help of a mirror, which reflects back her iPhone)— something that works to bring Bukowski’s poem up-to-date and puts his ideas directly in conversation with the modern condition. The two things fit without having to perform too many mental backflips. “That’s one of the nice things about Bukowski is that his work is timeless,” Houhoulis said. “It’s

about the struggle of life, the things that happen to people and how they survive this world, and sometimes how they don't survive."

And much like the call girls, the booze, and battling your demons in whatever ways you can, those ideas never die. "The service that these girls are providing is called the 'oldest profession in the world,'" Houhoulis pointed out. "There's a new way of going about it, perhaps, but the thing itself is very old. It's the same thing with struggles and how people get through it— they drink the whiskey, they call these girls. Sometimes it works for them, and sometimes it doesn't."

*Charles Bukowski/ Walter Robinson: **There's a Bluebird in My Heart** opens at **Owen James Gallery** Friday April 8 and is on view through Saturday May 14 at 61 Greenpoint Avenue, Suite 315 in Greenpoint.*

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