

REVIEWS

## Ken Kagami and Trevor Shimizu at Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo

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Ken Kagami and Trevor Shimizu at Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, 2018  
Courtesy: Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo / Brussels / New York

“Teen boy” describes the humor that bands together the irreverent work of Ken Kagami and Trevor Shimizu, which will be on view this February at Mendes Wood, São Paulo—their first duo show since HOT in 2012 at Misako & Rosen, Tokyo. In their work, both take on themes ranging from fatherhood and farts to bros and sports in manners at once hilarious and critical.

Kagami and Shimizu make fun of art and masculinity. Take their spoofs on painting: when Shimizu discovered he shared a birthday with Vincent van Gogh and Francisco Goya, he knew he wanted to paint, but noted that his crude stick figures, like his crude humor, probably would not appeal to his forefathers. Kagami offers a similar irreverence for painting traditions: his Please Imagine series features a painting with scribbled text that reads: “Please Imagine a Boring Abstract Painting.”

At Mendes Wood, Kagami will also show a selection from what he calls his “contemporary art mentor comedies,” including Calvin Klein underwear wherein “Yves” replaces “Calvin” on the elastic waistband. This is not the first time he has made fun of Yves Klein; Comedy Klein (Chucky) (2016) pokes fun at the artist’s use of women’s bodies as literal tools (paintbrushes) by replacing them with inanimate objects (Chucky dolls). I am inclined to read this mocking of Klein as a feminist critique, consistent with the artist’s

repeated mockery of bro culture, though not all of Kagami's humor is so politically correct. At art fairs you can wait in line to have him draw you in thirty seconds, as if he were a caricaturist in an amusement park. If you present male, he draws a penis; female, boobs.

Kagami will also be showing a new series in the same vein as *Please Imagine* that includes hammer which reads, "If there is a boring sculpture, please break it with this hammer." Shimizu, then, would be wise not display any boring sculptures nearby—which is actually a bit of a charge for the artist, who regularly takes on subjects that I would never call boring but that are certainly quotidian and banal. His *Farts* series, for instance, includes a painting of a couple comfortably farting together in bed. The quotidian scenes are a nice, light reprieve, as well as a break from art's often moralizing function that, in the Western tradition, dates back at least to the Renaissance but today operates under social justice rather than Christian ethics. In addition to a selection from his *Farts* series, Shimizu will also display works from the series *Groupies* and *Late Works*. The *Late Works* are painted by a supposed future self: a heterosexual male whose passion is the nude female form (which sounds a lot like many nonfictional male modernists). This is not the first time he has taken on such personas: his *The Lonely Loser Trilogy* (2013) comprises videos shot on Google Glasses wherein the artist began imagining himself as a tech bro whose hobbies include snowboarding, mountain biking, and skateboarding. The trilogy is shot from the (literal) perspective of that character embodied.

But if fictional future Shimizu is obsessed with the nude female form in *Late Works*, in his *Groupies* series, it's the nude female form that's obsessed with Shimizu—or at least that's what the spam Instagram profiles of sexy ladies that he paints want him to think. The paintings are of screenshots of spam profiles that have recently followed him. He calls them *Groupies* because they are scantily clad and usually disappear after a day or so.

Both artists also comment on another side of masculinity: fatherhood. The first thing Kagami mentions in the press release for the show is his daughter. Shimizu's 2016 exhibition at 47 Canal, New York, included paintings of teddy bears and Miffy toys, which he presented not as comfort objects for babies but rather tools of alleviation for parents: their soft surfaces dull the blows of wailing children and perpetual exhaustion. The show also featured *Putting Green* (2016), a shoddily re-created golf site that often serves as a respite for fathers. He further mocked the midlife crisis in his video *PGA Tour Live* (2016).

Both practices, then, contribute to important conversations about gender. Delicately, they balance humor and criticality. I firmly believe that it is imperative for male voices to participate in conversations about feminism and masculinity—to critically and actively reflect on their role, and to divide the labor of criticism—so long as they don't speak over or for women or non-binary people. But few male artists today, save perhaps Kenneth Tam, are doing this successfully. Others, like Joe Scanlan or Ryder Ripps, have tried but failed miserably.

I also believe in humor as a powerful tool capable of rendering critique palatable. Sometimes both Shimizu and Kagami flirt dangerously with what they critique: norms of masculinity. Rather than critiquing them from a distance, they often embody and exaggerate so as to caricature them. While I savor the critical and ethical aims of both practices, I hesitate to overemphasize this role, which risks justifying their interest in the humorous and quotidian on the terms of the moral and noble. The title of Shimizu's exhibition *Trying to Be a Good Person* (at Rowhouse Project, Baltimore, 2015), permits, no doubt, an ethical reading of the work. But not all of their works have grand, critical ambitions. Kagami will also show a series of "missing" posters (such those found in the city advertising missing cats) that search for things that can never be found, like missing acne. I applaud the efforts of both artists to dethrone the moralizing impulse of art through humor, without doing away with morals.