

VISUAL ARTS » REVIEW

Artist adds a little voodoo to complicate things



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GALLERY GOING

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PAUL BUTLER AT MKG127

\$1,400-\$9,000. Until Dec. 20,
127 Ossington Ave., Toronto;
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When Winnipeg artist Paul Butler uses the word "Interventions" — which is the title of his exhibition at Toronto's MKG127 (i.e., Michael Klein Gallery at 127 Ossington Ave.) — he's not kidding.

In his *Toronto Now Suite*, for example — the seven parts of which form the centrepiece to the exhibition — the lethally waggish Butler appears to have taken a flamethrower to a portfolio of photographs by fashion photographer George Whiteside that appeared in the Winter issue of Canadian Art magazine in 2007. The photographs showed carefully composed groups of what the magazine offered as "a cross-section of the artists and individuals shaping the current Toronto scene."

The Whiteside photos gathered together these artists and individuals into categories: Some of them were deemed to be "Sources"; others were the creatures of the "Marketplace" (art dealers), or indefatigable wielders of "Paint." Further pages offered "Imagecraft" (photographers), "The Directors" (of art institutions), movers and shakers ("To Watch"), and eight lucky artists chosen as representatives of "The Moment."

The photo work reproduced here began life as a Whiteside group shot showing a gaggle of Toronto-based art writers ("Voices"). The photo was taken on Thursday, Sept. 17, 2007, at a restaurant called Sotto Voce in Little Italy. I'm somewhere in that carbonized murk — I'm over at the far left, sitting at a table. So is Sarah Milroy, who is standing just behind me. John Bentley Mays is seated across from me, while R.M. Vaughan hovers near to him. There are nine people in the photo. I mention only the four of us because we all have some important connection to The Globe and Mail. But why have we all been so brutally incinerated?

Well, the "incineration" is actually only an accumulation of tiny pieces of black masking tape. But the desire to get rid



Paul Butler erased the faces of the art world's movers and shakers.

of us seems real enough.

I phoned Butler in Banff, where he is holding an artist's residency, and asked him about our obliteration — and that of the others on the art scene too. "First of all, I want to stress," says the almost always amiable Butler, "that this is not an attack on Canadian Art magazine." He does note, however, with no little irritation, that the magazine's project did, at least momentarily, turn it into Vanity Fair.

His *Toronto Now Suite*, he says, actually reflects certain aspects of art-making and the art scene in Canada at large and beyond. And what powers it. As Butler sees it, the Canadian Art portfolio, like many similar projects, purports to tell the truth about who counts — but (almost inevitably) fails to give the complete picture.

"Ten years ago, when I was just out of school," Butler tells me, "I'd wonder who controls what, and I would have looked at pictures like these and taken them as the truth about the art world. But they're not accurate."

For Butler, it's not that such photos don't show who does what, but more a matter of the restrictions generated by their selectivity. Clearly, in the case of "Voices," the art-writer photo — devastatingly reworked by Butler — there were many "Voices" missing. In a busy, teeming art community like Toronto's, how could it be otherwise?

But Butler isn't really asking that such formal group-shots be exhaustively inclusive, perfectly representative of any entire scene. What bugs him is that photos like this one just make it all seem too simple. They lack complexity, nuance. I think he disliked the posing

too (who didn't?). According to Butler, everybody looks embalmed — critics in amber.

So did he have to deface us? Yes, he did. "I figured I'd edit all you people out and destroy the system," he tells me with a laugh. As the joke about lawyers at the bottom of the sea would have it, it's a start.