



Steven Charles & Akikazu Iwamoto's Dual Exhibition Hits NYC

BY RAQUEL LANERI MAY 11, 2012

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Untitled #9, Akikazu Iwamoto. Photo: Stux Gallery

Akikazu Iwamoto is only 38 years old. Yet growing up in Hiroshima, even decades after World War II, the artist was profoundly affected by the atomic bomb. "It was everywhere," he says through an interpreter at the opening of his [Stux Gallery](#) show in New York City. "You would see people walking around with melted flesh. My pediatrician had lost his hand." His grandmother, who raised the young Iwamoto after his parents died, lived 10 miles from the bomb site and witnessed it first-hand.

These images of human suffering and devastation continue to haunt Iwamoto, and they seep into his all-candy-colored, garish illustrations featuring hybrid animals gleefully, sometimes unknowingly, destroying one another. One colored-pencil drawing at the Stux show, which runs through June 30, features a young girl in a blue dress, a halo over her head, with an enormous bunch of dynamite strapped to her back, its fuse sprouting brilliant red sparks. (Underlining the duality of this self-destructive angel, the fuse looks like a devil's tail.) In another, a man or is he a slug? washes dishes in a derelict rat-infested kitchen, his skin melting into a train behind him. What's most disturbing about Iwamoto's drawings and paintings, however, is that there's a sort of manic joy to them: a rebellious, anarchic freedom that is as enticing as it is repugnant. "It is heavy and sad, but there's hope too," says Iwamoto. Chalk that up to the birth of his daughter, who just turned 3 years old. "She gave me a lot of hope for the future."

If Iwamoto's work is inextricably tied to his relationships—to his hometown, to his family, to his heritage—Steven Charles's is about the freedom from those ties. "I'm a very selfish person," says the 45-year-old artist, whose abstract paintings are also at Stux. "I'm not married, I don't have kids, and I never will. I just want to paint!"



Doorway to 7-Eleven, Steven Charles. Photo: Stux Gallery

But even when it comes to painting, Charles has a wandering eye. The New York-based artist works on at least eight canvases at a time, rotating through them as he gets tired or stuck on one. "It deflected committing to just one idea," he says of his method. His canvases, as a result, are dense, busy explosions of disparate colors and ideas. He calls them "improvisational abstract" paintings. One work at the show, "Doorway to 7-Eleven" (yes, it's supposed to recall Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven") started out with a checked harlequin pattern, inspired by a Picasso exhibition Charles saw at the Museum of Modern Art. After abandoning it for a bit, he started to drip paint onto it. Then he filled in those drips with intricate, tiny dots and squiggles. Then he added black triangles, after seeing some minimalist Gennap works that included the shape. ("All artists are cannibals," he says of his liberal borrowing.) Hundreds more drips and lines and scratches later, et voila: he had his painting.

Other works in the show include glitter, pom-pom balls and even a sock glued to the canvas. ("Why not?" Charles responds when someone at the preview asks him about the sock.) Indeed, "Why not?" seems to be the central theme of Charles' work: what happens when an artist is beholden to nothing except his own strange, often irrational impulses. "I'm at my best when I have no idea what I'm doing," says the painter. "But I usually end up finding something in the search."



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