

Devin Troy Strother at The Pit

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To be a Black man in America is to be in a constant state of reconciliation with predetermined limits. As Baldwin put it, “The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever.”¹ So it’s only that much more exciting when a Black man decides to be bombastic. Sure, Kanye West’s continued reputational unraveling makes him more of a cautionary tale these days, but it’s fascinating to see figures like Tyler, the Creator spit off-color lyrics in one breath and total vulnerability (about his sexuality, tender friendships, etc.) in the next. Or to watch a once alienated-feeling Donald Glover grow comfortable enough in his Blackness to start making waves about it (be it through his song “This Is America” or his donning of whiteface on his hit show *Atlanta*). Of course, there’s also Lil Nas X, whose average day consists of descending into the bowels of hell on a stripper pole to give the devil a lap dance. There’s something electrifying in making people angry about your existence when it’s on your own terms—if they’re going to hate you anyway, why not have a little fun?

Devin Troy Strother approaches *Undercover Brother*, his show at The Pit, with a similar philosophy, summoning nervous chuckles from some and indulgent belly laughs from others. It’s the gallery’s first solo exhibition with Strother, and the work in it ranges from figurative caricatures on canvas to ceramic figurines that engage in what the artist calls “revisionist art history” and “rebranding” meant to unearth deeper intentions from familiar cultural artifacts of the last century. Strother consults a slew of mainstream racial narratives, drawing from *BlacKkKlansman*, *White Chicks*, *Trading Places*, John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me*, and W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction in America* to further investigate identity positioning with his dark brand of humor bolstered by an unmistakable sendup of themes and compositions seen in the work of the late Philip Guston. A piece like *studio visit with the black boy in the pink studio / RIP guston* (all works 2021) is perhaps one of the more direct references (naming the show’s overt homage to the artist), while *on the way to the rally / undercover brothers / shotgun* alludes to a film title (*Undercover Brother*, 2002), but doesn’t linger on the actual content of the source material—a satirical, Blaxploitation spy action comedy.

Undercover Brother dives headfirst into Blackface, appropriation, and cancel culture, so it’s fitting that Strother would reproduce the familiar gestures of a figurative painter—Guston—whose retrospective was recently canceled for its ill-timed, controversial imagery of hooded figures (the show was supposed to open at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in June of 2020, a moment when the Black Lives Matter movement was peaking). Guston attempted to make sense of hate in his work, with many of his paintings featuring chain-smoking Klansmen riding in cars and Black individuals in supine poses. Strother, whose relatives left Louisiana, in part, after harassment by the KKK, saw the Guston cancellation as an added reason to delve into the grim themes of Black trauma that Guston was drawn to.

Like Guston's painted compositions, Strother's works build frames and grids with layered imagery. For example, in the painting *smoking painting and talking*, an artist in profile in their studio, smoking while making a painting of a foot, is surrounded by other paintings—each a newly invented history or world (Guston's *In the Studio* (1975) features a mirrored composition: a similar doe-eyed profile of a smoking artist in his studio and a painting of a reddish, triangular foot). In works like this, Strother's compositional mimicking of Guston is at its most reflective. Notably, though, Strother's artists and figures are Black, while Guston's were always white—in Guston's world, Black figures were often depicted in pain or as brutalized counterparts to the KKK characters.

In this way, Strother walks the line between appropriation and revision. He appears to practice the latter by ignoring the restrictions of subjective history telling in order to make up for past exclusions to the canon. In a series of sculptures installed on small shelves hung in diagonal lines and staggered throughout the show, he reclaims vintage kitsch, glazing over thrifted ceramics to make the white figures appear Black. In the piece *Sister Act 2*, a ceramic nun figurine has been darkened with enamel to better reference Whoopi Goldberg's character Sister Mary Clarence, the protagonist of the blockbuster film of the same name. Other figurines rendered in Blackface include *If Lucy were black*, a bust that bears an uncanny resemblance to Lucille Ball, and *Fuck John Wayne*, a cowboy wearing yellow, his hands and face painted Black. The stark contrast looks silly but feels like a twisted form of reparation—the exercise in reclamation eliciting an unexpected sense of fulfillment.

Strother's lack of subtlety is invigorating in this era of frequent tiptoeing, but it also complicates the already thorny conversation surrounding cancel culture and the checking of subjectivity. His brash tendency to fight appropriation with reappropriation shines in paintings like *bon fire of the vanities / recent thoughts / wet dreams*, which features eight KKK members and a couple of confederate flags burning in a fiery inferno emanating from the cigarette smoke of a Black figure who lies on his back across the bottom of the image—a compositional allusion to Guston's *Painter in Bed* (1973). In Strother's forays into revisionism, nobody is safe, as in the pair of Black men in white robes, riding to a rally by night in *on the way to the rally / undercover brothers / shotgun*. Depicting a Black man as a KKK member is a more uncompromising gesture than a Black nun or John Wayne, but this show is not about compromise.

Strother's playful and bombastic strategies—which include spinning up surreal dreamscapes, embracing titles as opportunities for jokes, and leaning into fantastical realms to revise history with bold brushstrokes (rather than uncovering specific truths)—make a cannonball-sized splash in the pool and then get out. It's not that the resulting ripple effect doesn't matter, but *Undercover Brother* feels less like a lesson and more like evidence that public reclamation can offer a sense of (fun) private empowerment and, in turn, serve as a wellspring for renewed vitality so that one might stand a chance at continuing to fight the good fight.



Devin Troy Strother, *on the way to the rally / undercover brothers / shotgun* (2021). Oil, acrylic, latex caulking on linen, 36 x 48 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and The Pit.



Devin Troy Strother, *Undercover Brother* (installation view) (2021).
Image courtesy of the artist and The Pit. Photo: Jeff McLane.



Devin Troy Strother, *Fuck John Wayne* (2021). Enamel on ceramic, 13.5 x 6 x 4 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and The Pit.