



D. Domanic Lombardi, *Tattooed Tokyo #4*, 2008. Acrylic on unprimed canvas, 24 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

RE-DIGESTING KITSCH

Lauren Kaufman

D. Domanic Lombardi's recent exhibition *Toyota vs. Godzilla* at ArtLexis in Brooklyn highlights the alternately political, prosaic, spiritual, and flamboyant methods by which life is experienced in Tokyo and Seoul. The exhibition exploits Lombardi's own fluency in these multifarious forms of discourse, here painting and sculpture. They are the basis for his shrewd and penetrating cultural assessments.

This exhibition is divided into two sections, the first, which examines Lombardi's *Tattooed Tokyo Series*, was inspired by a visit to Tokyo and Seoul last spring, where the artist was struck by how differently and overtly most things were advertised, promoted, or just plain experienced. Endearing figures, cartoony characters, and the obvious popularity of the graphic novel for all ages left a lasting impression on the

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artist. For the majority of his career Lombardi has blended the concerns and methods of Pop, Conceptual, and appropriation art with craft-making and popular culture to create his own unique iconography, often controversial and always engaging. His work explores contemporary obsessions with everything from sex and desire, race and gender, and celebrity, media, and commerce. For this new series of *Graffoo* paintings, which combines the transgressive approach of graffiti with a tattoo aesthetic, Lombardi placed two characters in a series of situations and settings within the streets, restaurants, and homes of Tokyo to form a narrative. Lombardi's recent work has evolved from painting to innovative sculpture that is intended to fly in the face of social convention, testing the emotional limits of both the artist and the viewer.

The second part of the exhibition featured idiosyncratic sculpture in the form of little-urchins type figures. These figures of mischief are common to all cultures and eras. These

sculptures represent growing concern for the current state of the world, most notably how the poor economy will affect our children's future. The urchin sculptures are composed mostly of sand and acrylic medium, built on an armature of recycled objects, which continues the artist's obsession with reusing discarded materials as part of the art-making process. Using the language and imagery of the all-pervasive American consumer culture he grew up in, his work distorts and mutates the familiar into the disturbing and almost carnivalesque.

The placement of the urchins on books magnifies the narrative aspect of this mischievous subject while the use of recycled objects brings to the fore, the importance of making the most of preexistent resources. Lombardi's artworks rarely inspire moderate responses, and this is one signal of the importance of his achievement. Focusing on some of the most unexpected objects as models for his work, Lombardi eschews typical standards of high art and zeroes in rather precisely on the vulnerabilities of hierarchies and value systems. Much of his art has a delirious, hallucinatory air, as if the artist were trying to transcend both the naïveté of junk feeling and the sophistication of the art world.

Lombardi has created his own brand of kitsch. Countless artists today work with kitsch. It's taken for granted as a subject, as conventional in its way as still life or landscape painting. Kitsch is such a powerful presence in America that, inevitably, artists try to confront and transform it. Their work, like art that depicts a still life or landscape, can be more or less competent, and can embody many different attitudes, from the silly to the sublime. Lombardi's is a razzle-dazzle impresario of the kitsch object, an explorer of clichéd roles and social disguises. His approach to the kitschy illustrates the characteristic strengths—and, at times, the principal weakness—of this tradition. In his best art, Lombardi does something riskier and more paradoxical, entering the spirit of kitsch as if to know it from the inside. He retains, in such work, something youthful or childlike. Powerful, even angry sensations of lost innocence—something not usually attributed to hip and knowing postmodernists—shape the work of Lombardi.

The power within his work is the lack of commitment to any specific style—the intention is to mix different visual languages that both compliment and nullify one another. Crucially it is this swirling inner contradiction that visually shows how successful his work is at dealing with the human condition. Contradiction is Lombardi's way of showing the unavailability of certainty about anything, specifically the human relationships. □