

*JAMES ESBER AT P.P.O.W.*

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by Drew Lowenstein

In his second solo exhibition at PPOW Gallery, James Esber continues to pull, ply and distort sexist and racist hate images culled from popular American sources. But this time a more subtle use of these taboo subjects operates as they intrude, creep into and subvert America's most beloved images. Riffing off Norman Rockwell and late-1960's doe-eyed figurines, Esber spins grotesque, trippy amalgams on canvas and in plasticine wall adhesions. In *Boy's Club*, a Rockwellian group of youths merge into a torquing mass of conjoined quadruplets. Close inspection reveals fingerprints left in the wake of the artist's pummeling the now writhing plasticine relief. Another plasticine piece titled *Lub U* consists of a flayed, splayed and stretched version of these beloved 99-cent shop figurines. It is as if a cartoon steamroller or a Mr. Bill episode left behind this figural panoramic road kill.

Esber turns from bold plasticine modeling to bravura brushwork and electric color in the paintings on canvas. In *Rabbit Talk*, a distended lipped, Tom/Huck like little tramp innocently bends toward a rabbit as, unbeknownst to him, his body unfurls in a eruptive rush of dropped trousers, sprouting limbs, breasts, high heeled leather boots, and exposed genitalia. *Self Portrait of the Artist as a Foursome* offers a similarly sympathetic boy, this time hunched and writing at a desk, tongue pointed in concentration. Underneath the surface of the desk, Esber hits below the belt with an image of copulation that grows like fungi off gnarled tree bark. Like a Peter Saul composition or Ivan Albright decompositions, there's plenty for viewers to occupy themselves with here. Try to find and count the variety and number of feet twisting in a single figure or watch a lock of hair morph into an eviscerated intestine. Esber seems to collaborate with himself as each exquisite corpse in this exhibition floats in an exuberant flight of fancy, celebrating the orgasmic multiplicity of freedom while indexing the perversions of repression, objectification and self-loathing.