

DEREK ELLER GALLERY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Ivan Witenstein

May 6 - June 18, 2011

Opening Reception: Friday, May 6, 6 - 8pm

Derek Eller Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of new work by Ivan Witenstein. Consisting of numerous paintings and six large carved wooden sculptures, this show continues his engagement with provocative political and cultural imagery.



Witenstein found inspiration for this body of work in the neo-expressionist paintings of Miles Davis and in Jeffrey Herf's analysis of Nazism in *Reactionary Modernism* (1984). Using this set of contexts and histories to work backwards, he discovered groups of antecedent and related imagery and texts that he then developed into the paintings and sculptures for this show. Life magazine photos from Weimar Germany are set against post war images of "Jazz Diplomacy" (the American attempt to contain communism through an outreach from American musicians traveling behind the iron curtain); Nazi official Julius Streicher's pornographic, anti-Semitic storybooks are portrayed along side Hustler magazine cartoons; Herman Leonard's famous jazz photography is given the treatment of editorial cartoons. He appropriates from these sources and intermixes them to create a disturbing, darkly comic, and Fellini-influenced carnival of characters and imaginaries.

The sculptures embody the clash of ideas and imagery Witenstein stages as weighty blocks of solid oak and poplar collide to form dynamic, precarious compositions. Figures such as Al Pacino's "Scarface," Kurt Cobain, Mohammad Ali, a Virgin Mary from a tombstone, and a 7-foot ingénue smash into one another to generate a tension, a conflict of expectations that celebrates incongruity. Witenstein chooses to deny his figures Bernini-like unity; they dance in wild defiance of gravity but remain separate. This embrace of irresolution forms the crux of his work. It's the enlivening joy of delving into difficult, meaningful issues, and aesthetic challenges that Witenstein finds inspiration and infuses his work with vigor.

Like Otto Dix and George Grosz, Witenstein uses confrontational, daring imagery to challenge and goad the viewer. He walks the line between complicity and critique in order to generate debate and spur a deeper understanding of one's personal reaction to such imagery and relationship to the history that it refers to. These paintings and sculptures demand a response and dig into the uncomfortable zones of our collective psyche.

This will be Ivan Witenstein's fourth solo exhibition with the gallery. His work has recently been seen in *Size Does Matter* at The FLAG Art Foundation, New York, *Neo-Integrity: Comics Edition* at the Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art, New York, and *political correct* at BFAS Blondeau in Geneva, Switzerland.

In conjunction with New York Gallery Week, we will host a conversation between Ivan Witenstein and artist Barnaby Furnas on Saturday, May 7, 12 - 1pm

Derek Eller Gallery is located at 615 West 27th Street, between 11th and 12th Avenues. Hours are Tuesday - Saturday from 11am - 6pm. For further information or visuals, please contact the gallery at 212.206.6411 or visit www.derekeller.com