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Fahamu Pecou's imagines himself as a hip-hop impresario

By Melissa Stern

Fahamu Pecou is leering at us from the rarified cover of *Arte* Magazine. At least that's how the Brooklyn-born artist paints himself in the large-scale portraits of his alter ego, "Art Star," as seen in *BORN inFAMOUS*, the exhibition of his work currently on view at Lyons Weir Ortt Gallery. Pecou's paintings are funny and confrontational, daring us to like him. It's meant to be discomfiting to see this young man posed like a street thug, and he's so convincing a poseur that it's tempting, upon first glance, to dismiss the work and fall for the game. Also on display is an elaborately produced and quite funny "mockumentary" with interviews of friends and colleagues interspersed with shots of him arriving at events surrounded by paparazzi and squealing fans—more like a pop star rather than a painter.



While the work sometimes teeters on the obvious, what saves it from falling into cliché is that they're beautifully painted. Pecou uses a lush palette and bold, painterly style to portray "Art Star." The soft, swirling brushstrokes are at odds with the sneering, defiant faces, and the tension this creates works very nicely. As he moves from the center of his canvas, Pecou leaves ragged edges and pencil lines underscoring who and what is the focus of attention. Calculated dribbles of paint and unfinished pencil sketching remind us that they're handcrafted—not the glossy magazine covers they pretend to emulate.

The power and beauty of Pecou's painting is undercut by the addition of a layer of text written Basquiat-style, just in case we've missed the point: "The names change but the game is the same" or "These r conflict paintings." One can read Pecou's message loud and clear without the words, so in time he'll hopefully develop the confidence to let the painting speak for itself.

Through Oct. 6. Lyons Weir Ortt Gallery, 171 7th Ave. (at 20th St.), 212-242-6220.