

Review: Pop culture turns scary in Marcus Kenney's post-apocalyptic art
ARTS & THEATER By Felicia Feaster - For the AJC

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Artist Marcus Kenney's show "Babble" at Marcia Wood Gallery feels like the post-apocalyptic action film "Mad Max: Fury Road," with its objects and paintings cribbed together from junk.

Put American culture in a blender and give it a good whirl, and you have a sense of the maniacally scary-fun gumbo of influences that Kenney transforms into his found art farragoes. It's end of days, fun days in the anarchical "Babble," whose title seems to refer to the chaos of materials Kenney employs to create his art.

This Savannah artist and SCAD grad, whose work is frequently shown in Atlanta, is a junk shop prophet; a scavenger of the green stamps, canceled checks, storybooks, buttons, bottle caps, paintbrushes, scraps of homemade afghans, bones and the vast melange of cultural leaving found in thrift shops and rubbish heaps. +Review: Pop culture turns scary in Marcus Kenney's post-apocalyptic art photo

Kenney's signature work is a collage crafted from scores of those vintage paper bits and pieces and layered onto his canvases. "Babble" features a prime example, the spectacular "Tower of Babel," whose centerpiece is an enormous island formed from canceled checks, the focal point for an end-of-times narrative. Beneath that hulking monolith surrounded by sea, a phantasmagorical mishmash of figures from vintage storybooks and encyclopedias cavort.



But look closer and there are dark things afoot; those tiny children and presidents and astronauts and men in raincoats act out scenes of violence and mayhem that lend those storybook figures a nightmarish edge. What at first look like the constituents of civilization turn out to be play actors in its destruction in a work suggesting folk artist Henry Darger's blood sport-meets-cuteness tableaux.

A detail from artist Marcus Kenney's mixed media work "Babel" on view at Marcia Wood Gallery. CONTRIBUTED BY MARCIA WOOD GALLERY

In this and other works, "Babble" feels like a fugue on the collapse of civilization, in which a new, pastiche reality is constructed from its remnants: dead presidents, flags, dollar signs, canceled checks and nursery school flashcards.

The post-apocalyptic vibe is set immediately upon entering the gallery, where three repurposed oil barrels have been painted and labeled with the necessities of life: "water," "seed" and "dirt," as if to restart civilization. Nearby is a portrait of President George Washington "GDUB" sporting a bandit's mask across his face like some dust storm survivalist. There are businessmen in

suits, Abraham Lincoln, American flags, apple-faced children from the Dick and Jane storybooks and other remnants of a culture recast as players in Kenney's end-of-the-line adventure.

The dollar sign looms large over many of these paintings and sculptures, serving as a dead culture's vestigial remnant but also the source of its doom, now worshipped like a pagan god.

In "Babble," Kenney creates a convincing, funny and terrifying statement about what we hold dear, and what patching it back together again after the fall might look like.

"Babble" is its own stitched-together Frankenstein, split into that post-apocalyptic set piece on one side, and on the other, a survey of portraits in collage and also in watercolor, oil and pencil that feel like a different show entirely.

The subjects in those collaged works suggest a rogue's gallery of miscreants: strippers and criminals, men whose eyes shoot fire and hooded figures, all vamping and having the wrong sort of fun. Those collaged pieces on one wall contrast with other, angrier, dashed-off images laced with grotesque extremes of sex and violence that feel like something unpleasant uncovered from your loner uncle's basement. Kenney not only creates artwork from bits of cultural detritus, in these works he is channeling a sense of rage and outrage, violence and alienation that feels like another kind of scrap art, a pastiche of madness and sexual acting out that perhaps got us in all this trouble in the first place.



Marcus Kenney's "Mama and Bebe," mixed media on canvas.



"Vicki and Whiteboi" by Marcus Kenney, mixed media on canvas.