

## Boy's Life

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Constraining an emblem of youthful expression, Steven Shearer's *Activity Cell with Warlock Bass Guitar* (1997) cushions the eponymous musical instrument inside a flimsy wooden enclosure. Inspired by a 1960s prototype for a 'teen recreation module', the structure enables any antics inside it to be watched from all sides. The work's mood of explosive energy channelled into socially acceptable forms permeates Shearer's oeuvre. Since graduating from Vancouver's Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design fifteen years ago, Shearer has made works ranging from posters, prints and collages to paintings, drawings, and sculptures that explore how provocative cultural forms become commodified, recycled and domesticated.

Shearer's billboard or poster-sized *Poems*, whose apocalyptic and scatological texts derive from the titles of Heavy Metal anthems, would be disturbing if they weren't so entertainingly hyperbolic. His collaged pictures of upside-down Christmas trees at once recall Rodney Graham's camera obscura photographs while also suggesting the taming of satanic rites. Shearer's 'archive' works – collages assembled from his extensive image bank – group photographs of leisure, escapism, and excess into idiosyncratic categories: from long-haired guys smoking, getting high or practising guitar to modernist-inspired children's art projects, garden sheds evoking vaguely deviant suburban activities and Black Sabbath memorabilia on eBay.

Like Andy Warhol, to whom he is often compared, celebrity in its commercial as well as its protean forms fascinates Shearer. The 1970s teen idol Leif Garrett regularly appears in his drawings and paintings and features centrally in the 2004 archive work, *Boy's Life*. As the title indicates, this culture is centred around the adolescent male. Shearer's many references to fantasy, witchcraft and medieval courtly life, so beloved of Goths and Metalheads, suggests a world of heroic display and male bonding that acts as a refuge from the disappointments of everyday life. With their lilting or softened bodies and long hair that veils their faces, these guys flirt with androgyny, reminding us that the male artist has always been feminised. Sometimes Shearer inserts photographs of himself as a Heavy Metal youth into his collages, displaying his identification with his material and suggesting that, for him, every portrait of an artist is also a portrait of the artist.

Recently Shearer has been drawing rock musicians in a style that emulates the ardent endeavours of a high school student who shows off his technical

proWess by doodling on his textbooks. The use of mundane art materials like ballpoint and crayon underscores the aspirational nature of these portraits while contrasting with Shearer's superb skills of execution. Shearer has also been painting Heavy Metal musicians and pop singers in vividly-coloured oils that echo the styles of Egon Schiele or Edvard Munch and capture the decadence-meets-existential angst in their work that captivates adolescents. Presenting his subjects as modern day dandies, Shearer suggests that their embrace of social alienation may be affected, heartfelt, or a bit of both.

Cheekily drawing on strategies associated with identity politics, Shearer depicts his white, proletarian men as oppressed. The long-haired, shirtless male at the centre of *Swinging Lumpen* (2002) flips a birdy to the camera with one hand, while clutching a cigarette in the other hand, gleefully gesturing towards the linguistic links between the vulgar, the common, and the populist. For social and geographical outsiders, the worldwide web can be a vital tool of production and distribution. Shearer revels in the internet's unmediated quality and how it is both a collective unconscious and a social mirror. When he reproduces images from the web he carefully retains their irregular colour and lack of focus and mimics the computer screen's glare. The flat, uniform format of his collages and prints reflects the internet's non-hierarchical structure. Thirty years ago feminists reclaimed as 'femmage' craft projects made by anonymous women. Today Shearer appropriates culturally-degraded forms to critique social privilege and valorise scappily resistant creative expressions. Unlike his 1970s feminist precursors, however, Shearer's project is far from utopian, and is infused with a keen sense of absurdity, humour and self-parody.

Most Canadians grew up a short distance from the US border, in Shearer's case the working class town of Port Coquitlam, British Columbia. This experience of living in the shadow of a culturally dominant neighbour is as familiar to residents of Birmingham, England's second largest city, 120 miles from London and home to the Ikon Gallery, as it is to citizens of The Power Plant's home city of Toronto, a 90 minute drive to the US. Shearer's identification with his blue-collar, provincial background lends his work its pent-up energy and barely-suppressed aggression. Sampling images that reflect his sense of marginalisation and celebrate the subcultures that nourished his youthful imagination, Shearer exemplifies Oscar Wilde's definition of the artist: "It is only the unimaginative who ever invent. The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes, and annexes everything."<sup>1</sup>

