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# art agenda

by ALAN GILBERT

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## *Sadie Benning's "Green God"*

CALLICOON FINE ARTS/MARY BOONE

The internet and its social media spawn have made modes of communication increasingly seamless, with displays of personhood now embedded in a post or link. And while the democratic polyphony of voices has perhaps never been greater, so too is its expression through corporate-owned technologies. Ever since Sadie Benning was a teenager making short videos with a Fisher-Price toy movie camera in a working-class Milwaukee bedroom in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the artist has foregrounded the seams, the fractures, the not quite fitting in.

Those early videos brought Benning much-deserved acclaim before the artist turned 20, and they still feel groundbreaking in their fragmentary reveal of a queer identity that tentatively—yet joyfully—coalesces into a whole. In an age of unabashed selfies, it's curious to see these works frame small slivers of the body (an eye, a hand) in a slow exposure of self over multiple videos and years. Along with making video, film, and, later, digital animation, the artist also participated in Riot grrrl zine culture (and was an original member of the band *Le Tigre*), and it's possible to connect that format's literal cut-and-paste technique and aesthetic with much of Benning's output up to the present.

This includes the two-part exhibition "Green God," held simultaneously at the artist's primary New York gallery, Callicoon Fine Arts, and Mary Boone Gallery's uptown location. The former contains the kind of work Benning has been producing over the past few years: painting-objects that are the result of a laborious process which involves making a sketch on a digital device, projecting the drawing onto a piece of wood, outlining it, then sawing the whole thing into parts, painting each piece, before



1 (Left) Sadie Benning, *Airplane Painting*, 2015. (Right) Sadie Benning, *Green God*, 2015.



2 View of Sadie Benning, "Green God," Mary Boone Gallery, New York, 2016.



3 View of Sadie Benning, "Green God," Mary Boone Gallery, New York, 2016.

reassembling the original like a jigsaw puzzle or collage. The segments fit smoothly but not perfectly, with small gaps, indentations, and rises. Everything connected yet separate.

Benning applies this technique to figurative and abstract images, sometimes in combination. A version of *Crowd* (2015) appears at both venues. At Callicoon, rows of lumpen figures painted white evoke the title's description; at Mary Boone hair, eyes, and mouth have been etched into a similar work entitled *Faces* (2015). One of the dual exhibition's two titular paintings, *Green God* (2015), appears at Callicoon as a slightly cartoonish portrait of a deity with green lips and pupils: worshippers are free to fill in any missing details and project desired—and feared—features. It stares across the gallery at *The Crucifixion* (2015), with a much more somber red, blue, and black palette depicting an outlined female figure in place of the more expected male savior.

Belief is another kind of technology—a technology of the self that sculpts the subject while helping it, in turn, construct reality. More specifically, belief functions as ideology's lubricant. It has an affective charge. While Benning's exhibition at Callicoon is a carefully curated selection of representative recent work, at Mary Boone the artist explores new territories. Here, photographs and small religious figurines are incorporated into the paintings, whether embedded within their wooden surfaces or perched on small ledges: found Polaroids, black-and-white photos, and digitally outputted abstractions alongside inexpensive little wooden idols and Christian icons.

Less interesting than what one believes is the process of belief itself—after all, one person's god is another person's devil, and vice versa. In comparison with the more visually static works at Callicoon, *Priest* (2016) features images of coming and going (a pickup truck and a cleric, respectively), while *Soccer Jesus* (2015) has arrived at a crossroads. History appears as well at Mary Boone in the media Benning uses (photographs from multiple decades) and in imagery such as early American Pilgrims who metaphorically reconnect church and state—and in the current geopolitical climate, religious belief and reactionary politics—which the so-called founding fathers sought to sever.

Belief is also a collective experience, and whether in terms of medium, composition, or theme, Benning's work mingles the shared and the individual, e.g., the unique face in the crowd; not painting *as* sculpture, but painting *and* sculpture. *Airplane Painting* (2015) at Callicoon inserts into the larger piece a series of small works on canvas. It also functions as a sequence, evoking Benning's earlier videos and digital animations, as does the installation at Mary Boone of seven pieces hung side by side, creating on a larger scale the assemblies of parts contained in each one. And while the aligned paintings are meant to be sold separately, their film-frames quality is striking, briefly bringing Benning's work full circle, except that the artist has always seemed too restless for fixed categories and forms.

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4 Sadie Benning, *Crowd*, 2015.



5 (Left) Sadie Benning, *Nature*, 2015. (Right) Sadie Benning, *The Crucifixion*, 2015.



6 (Left) Sadie Benning, *Eclipse*, 2015. (Right) Sadie Benning, *The Owl and the King*, 2015.



7 Sadie Benning, *Priest*, 2016.

1 View of Sadie Benning, "Green God," Callicoon Fine Arts, New York, 2016. (Left) Sadie Benning, *Airplane Painting*, 2015. Acrylic gouache, casein, and wood, 37 3/4 x 97 1/4 inches. (Right) Sadie Benning, *Green God*, 2015. Aqua resin, wood, casein, and acrylic gouache, 81 x 46 inches. All images courtesy of Callicoon Fine Arts, New York, and Mary Boone Gallery, New York. Photo by Chris Austin.

2 View of Sadie Benning, "Green God," Mary Boone Gallery, New York, 2016. Photo by Adam Reich.

3 View of Sadie Benning, "Green God," Mary Boone Gallery, New York, 2016. Photo by Adam Reich.

4 Sadie Benning, *Crowd*, 2015. Aqua resin, wood, and casein, 74 x 97 inches. Photo by Chris Austin.

5 View of Sadie Benning, "Green God," Callicoon Fine Arts, New York, 2016. (Left) Sadie Benning, *Nature*, 2015. Aqua resin, wood, and casein, 29 x 40 inches. (Right) Sadie Benning, *The Crucifixion*, 2015. Aqua resin, wood, casein, and acrylic gouache, 81 x 61 inches. Photo by Chris Austin.

6 View of Sadie Benning, "Green God," Mary Boone Gallery, New York, 2016. (Left) Sadie Benning, *Eclipse*, 2015. Aqua resin, wood, casein, acrylic gouache, photograph, and found object, 51 x 34 inches. (Right) Sadie Benning, *The Owl and the King*, 2015. Aqua resin, wood, casein, and digital photograph, 89 x 59 inches. Photo by Adam Reich.

7 Sadie Benning, *Priest*, 2016. Aqua resin, wood, acrylic gouache, photograph, digital photograph, and found object, 51 x 34 inches. Photo by Chris Austin.

8 Sadie Benning, *Soccer Jesus*, 2015. Aqua resin, wood, casein, acrylic gouache, photograph, and found object, 46 x 70 inches. Photo by Chris Austin.

9 View of Sadie Benning, "Green God," Callicoon Fine Arts, New York, 2016. Photo by Chris Austin.

10 Sadie Benning, *The Owl and the King*, 2015. Aqua resin, wood, casein, and digital photograph, 89 x 59 inches. Photo by Chris Austin.



8 Sadie Benning, *Soccer Jesus*, 2015.



9 View of Sadie Benning, "Green God," Callicoon Fine Arts, New York, 2016.



10 Sadie Benning, *The Owl and the King*, 2015.