

GEORGE HUGHES

Social Predation





Crown Royal, 2005, oil, enamels & spray paint on canvas, 52 x 88 in.

In George Hughes' recent series of paintings, predators and prey are the dominant characters in a series of expressive vignettes that underscore notions of power relationships and the implied violence within these relationships. Hughes operates in multiple directions at once—from a spontaneous-seeming field of chaos where images abruptly collide to a more concise depiction that is stripped-down, blunt, and emphatic. Throughout, Hughes is recognizing violent impulses while using specific gestures to undermine the violence and reveal its essential absurdity.

Two flies copulating on a bed in the work *Crown Royal* is a salient case in-point. A strangely unexpected and violent image, it is also immediately revealed as minuscule and ridiculous, fueled solely by a fluorescent spray of alcohol. Hughes reduces the participants to insignificance, draining the act of any implied or potential violence.

It's a method Hughes utilizes repeatedly, particularly when using animal imagery, where the predator/prey relationship can be acutely rendered. In Hughes' world, animals typically viewed as predatory—eagles, pit bulls—are presented as insidious mutations, which one might anticipate would accentuate the threat they represent. But for Hughes, these mutated versions dissipate the threat level of these icons.

As indicated by a couple of his titles, these renditions are called "figmentations," a beautiful non-word that cobbles together "figment," "imagination," and (since we're talking painting) "pigmentation." *Figmentation 2*

Fruition, 2003, oil, enamels, fabric paint, photographs on canvas, 72 x 100 in.

A Study of Figmentation I, 2006, oil & enamels on canvas, 42 x 68 in.





adroitly illustrates Hughes' dismantling of a presumed threat. The painting appears to be all study virility, a pit bull/handgun so masculine it has two triggers, both poised and ready for action. Hovering over a ground of deep, reflective red, it looks ominous and powerful. Yet, closer inspection reveals that its one visible eye is dead and lifeless, despite its tough dog demeanor, and it takes nothing more than the flimsiest air mask to serve as a muzzle. In other words, it is all posture.

Figmentation 1 contains more elements, but the same formal maneuvering is taking place. An oversized and imposing gun form extends from the front of an animal, apparently so powerful that it must be contained by an equally-imposing length of chain. But Hughes is operating in mirror images in this painting. The implication is of a two-faced masculinity. The gun-beast's hindquarters, as seen in the small mirror, are

puny. In the foreground, we see the hindquartered beast more clearly, a piggish lump of dissected masculinity, sausage-like banana penis jutting out, erect but ridiculous. Accentuating its piggish aspect, Hughes has added an entrail-like patterning to the walls, a pasty allusion to intestines and innards. Ultimately, Hughes is suggesting that, no matter the size of your gun barrel, you're still just a piece of meat.

The implicit violence of power relationships is real to Hughes, but in no way intimidating. Time and again, he sees this threat of violence as just so much bravado. In *Falcons and Teddy Bears*, he sets up a confrontation that ought to be lopsided as a falcon/handgun, military stripes on its wing, faces down a subordinate teddy bear form with a none-too-subtle iconic death head between them. Curiously, the encounter takes place on an easy chair, an object so friendly and accommodating that

it almost entirely deflates the threat represented by the falcon. Look a little closer and you notice that the teddy bear looks entirely unconcerned.

There is more than a little humor wafting through Hughes' ruminations on power relationships. In *Libido*, power is conferred to the feminine as a predatory falcon is adorned in a yellow bikini. It's a somewhat hobbled power, as the bikinied bird is dissected and one-legged, standing alert but looking somewhat dumb, perhaps a little more pigeon than falcon. Situated not atop a pedestal, but cloistered within a pedestal-like form, its rarified presence is accentuated and shielded from the prodigious but feeble-looking ejaculate spurting from the male proxy of cannon/toothpaste tube.

In *Other History*, Hughes speaks absurdity to power with a touch of autobiography. A portrait of the artist's face appears as a speck within



the fallopian tubes rendered on the left of the canvas, while the bottom third of the work is dominated by a collaged melange of images of the artist's father, from a portrait of journalists in Ghana. Dominating the center of the painting is an ardent anti-colonial imprint, a denial of barcode uniformity and the goat-headed military figure, vainly attempting to secure its dignity while perched in a urinal. Even the predatory image in the work, a lion's head, is represented merely by its lack, its skeletal remain. In a final affirmative gesture, we see a lightbulb hanging a dead falcon—to Hughes, a good idea can string up pernicious power.

An earlier work, *Fruition*, collapses several of Hughes' preoccupations into one work. There is the hybridized bird, a stuffed-shirted male looking a little preposterous, eyeballing a female form—head replaced by an apple, she is literally the apple of his eyes (of which there are several). Sketches of war vehicles hover around, suggestions of burgeoning male power, but they're muted and it's the more salacious images of alcohol and ice cream that attract the eye. Off to the side, an exploded view depiction of male genitalia reveals the one not-so-subtle truth: as with the rutting flies spritzed with Crown Royal, the internal combustion here is identified simply as "BREW."

If one has doubts about the limits of power and violence, particularly the limits of masculine power, *Mortality* makes the starkest case of any of Hughes' recent paintings. The allusion could not be more obvious, a headless slab of carcass partially wrapped in bandages. Well, not exactly headless, as the head of a penis peeks out from the tip of the bloodied mass. The solid blast of color Hughes infuses the center of the work with energizes the inert form, making it appear even more violent and terrific, as though its violent impulses still pulsed through its deadness. But there is no denying its rigor.

It's muscular, masculine, meaty, and dead.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator

Libido, 2006, oil & enamels on canvas, 72 x 96 in.

Falcons and Teddy Bears, 2005, oil & enamels on canvas, 47 x 68 in.





Other History, 2005, oil, enamels, acrylic & photographs on canvas, 72 x 96 in.



Mortality, 2006, oil & enamels on canvas, 38 x 65 in.



GEORGE HUGHES • Social Predation • November 18 to December 21, 2006

GEORGE HUGHES, also known as Kwesi Afedzi, was born and raised in Ghana. He grew up in four major cities in Ghana: Accra, Sekondi-Takoradi, Kumasi, and Cape Coast. His late father George O. Hughes worked as a Journalist for The Ghanaian Times and later as a Public Relations officer for the Sekondi Takoradi City Council. His mother Cecilia Hughes at that time worked as a petty-trader in housewares. During his formative years as an artist, George received the fundamental principles of the relationship between the corporeal and the supernatural from his mother who introduced the young artist to the late Sofo Ola, a Nigerian priest who emphasized in his teachings the practice of austerity.

George studied painting at The Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, College of Art from 1985-1991 where he earned a BA in Art specializing in Painting and Drawing and also an MA in Art Education. He also earned an MFA in Painting from Bowling Green State University 2001.

From 1991 to 1993 while living in London, George washed dishes by day and painted at dawn. He moved to the United States in 1994 after a major solo exhibition of his London works were exhibited in Accra, Ghana at The Artists Alliance Gallery.

Since moving to The United States, George has continued to make art and exhibit alongside teaching art at several tertiary institutions. He has taught art at The University of Toledo (1997-2001), Bowling Green State University (1999-2000) and The University of Oklahoma (2001-2006). He is now a Visual Studies professor at The State University of New York at Buffalo.

George's work has been shown extensively at Mabee Gerer Museum, Shawnee, OK; Livingston Gallery, The Hague; Galerie Xenios, Frankfurt am Main; Artooteek Zuidoost, Amsterdam; Museum voor Zuid, Goes; Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, OH; Gemeente Museum, The Hague; The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown; Schlot Jazz Club, Berlin; Artists Alliance Gallery, Ghana; The Loom Gallery, Ghana, and several other locations.

George is represented in Germany, Luxembourg, Austria, and Switzerland by Arco based in Herzogenrath, Germany. In Ghana he is represented by Artists Alliance Gallery.



A Study of Figmentation II, 2006, oil & enamels on canvas, 40 x 60 in.



The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts



Hallwalls' visual arts program is supported by generous grants from the New York State Council of the Arts and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.



HALLWALLS

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

341 DELAWARE AVENUE, BUFFALO, NY 14202

WWW.hallwalls.org