

## Don Ed Hardy at Track 16 Gallery

**D**on Ed Hardy has seen it all in his long and storied career as tattoo hero, custom car aficionado, publisher, designer, collector, curator and, perhaps most importantly, omnivorous student of popular culture. From his panoptical perch in San Francisco's international alt-culture mecca of North Beach, and through the once-taboo prism of tattoo culture, he viewed and encouraged the conflation of resurgent Asian, Mexican and Native American ceremonial traditions with the rebellious strains of American pop. Fascinated with the appropriation of ages-old visual traditions by mainstream youth culture in the U.S., Hardy developed an absolutely unique graphic style that throughout its evolution continually pays homage to both the profound gravitas of body art's atavistic significance and the edgy, secular tastes of modern urban tribalism. After years of dispensing magic from the electric needle, Hardy returned to his early studies in studio art. But rather than making a clean break from his professional practice, he

experiments with extremes of stylistic approach, organized into distinct bodies of work and each tied to his past in different ways.

An acrylic on pink paper series is reminiscent of Dalí's desert drawings, erecting totemic monsters and armatures of disciplined lines tensely rendering confounding figure/objects. Works like *Uncle Wiggly* and *Our Best Tracker* wreak havoc on familiar tattoo flash iconography with a dadaist exuberance. They play with faces like stylized post-cubist pop: shocks of wavy hair, hook-nosed and majestic bird spirits, tree stumps growing out of islands, feet in jester shoes, tall ships and goddesses of war. A newer



Don Ed Hardy, *Silver Fox*, 2008, acrylic on archival synthetic paper, 36" x 24", at Track 16 Gallery, Santa Monica.

series of acrylic on synthetic paper uses white ink over dark, cloudy stippled backgrounds to trace more stark but still tattoo-based imagery. *Deep Ride* features a naked sea nymph with perfect breasts riding a fierce-looking giant Chinese carp; *Muscular Bravado* depicts a king cobra wrapped around helmeted panther. But these simple glyphs merge with, or rather emerge from an almost abstract expressionist setting of black pigment pools and splashes, mottled and controlled gray chaos. *Pachuko Beach* is the most successful; with a more restrained atmosphere and centralized, heavy symbol of an anchor with a crossed stem, its bottom an arrow pointing straight down toward the sea, it seems the most authentically intuitive of this arresting but contrived idiom of juxtaposition.

The surprise masterpieces are the few and peculiar large mixed-media paintings like *Andon*. Mysterious and fascinating, its central image is an open book whose luminous pages glow creamy and soft as though viewed by candlelight. The left page is a detailed etching of a lush garden, the facing page a schematic of a



Don Ed Hardy, *Born to Love*, 2008, mixed media, 41" x 30", at Track 16 Gallery, Santa Monica.

wooden scaffold. The overall composition is arranged like a study sheet with scattered, deracinated images—a glyph at the top center “DEH 1964/2007” resides in a medieval looking crest, a skull with teeth, a banner reading “In Memory,” jumbles of partially legible under-drawing, and a smattering of other books viewed at different angles, with pages showing a surfer on a big wave paired with an old-style antique camera tripod. A floral still life completes the survey of his autobiographical and professional lexicon in this quiet masterpiece. These works are sealed in high gloss resin, poured in layers, with different media used inside each pour. Like Photoshop executed in amber, light refracts inside even the slimmest distances between imperceptible flows, creating an engaging surface and an interplay of nesting lines that starts to build dimensional form. In *Twins*, a pair of seated figures confer, their legs tucked under their chins in contemplation, bodies overlapping and translucent. One is a golden-haired girl and the other seems to be her skeleton. She is the epitome of exotic feminine beauty in the tattoo world, awash in a halo of stars and banners with words and names and other flash citations like her gold bracelet, royal blue hair, nails and eye shadow, and the heart tattoo on her own arm. All of this is gone from the skeleton of course, in a telling hint at a fundamental irony of Hardy's career: the inevitable loss of his greatest masterpieces as they go the way of all flesh.

—Shana Nys Dambrot

Don Ed Hardy: *When East Meets West*  
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