

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

New York

Alex Sewell

TOTAH

183 Stanton Street

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Painting teenage spleen with a Photorealist's skill, Alex Sewell creates trompe l'oeil works on canvas and wood that interrogate the bulimic visual culture that bombards today's youth with toxic and violent images. A steadfast irony, however, keeps his critique from becoming preachy, as symbols of beloved pop culture (video-game heroes, rock stars) are conflated with those of high art (Jean-Michel Basquiat, Philip Guston) and peppered with references to religion, sex, and resistance movements.

Though the artist's oils are in your face and over the top, his messages are subtle, intelligent. His politics don't throttle you in the way political art can. Sewell maintains an expert balance between refined craft, authentic curiosity, and self-questioning. In *Street Fightin' Man*, 2017, for instance, a reproduction of a campaign poster depicting a shriveled Reaganesque character hangs next to a paper doll of a doughy white boy in fingerless black gloves, low-top Nikes, and a silly red headband. The figure is a limp combination of John Rambo, Snake Plissken, and *The Karate Kid's* Daniel LaRusso—a caricature of 1980s macho bravado that undermines the era's embrace of male aggressiveness and patriarchy. You can detect a child's heart in these pictures, though it's wrapped in an adult's rage. But what prevails is tenderness, not cynicism. Sewell is not a misanthrope, as his reflections on male failure are deeply felt, melancholic. The artist, seeing through our demons, renders poetic visual tales touched by the absurd.



Alex Sewell, *Street Fightin' Man*, 2017, oil on canvas, 76 x 64".

— Ida Panicelli