

## Brothers Grimmer

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STEVE RAMOS — AUG 24, 2005 2 PM

Read the synopsis of *Barbaric Stories*, the joint show by the hidden gem artists Jimmy Baker and Matt Coors at Publico Gallery in Over-the-Rhine, and the theme is fear. Yet the scares they gather have nothing to do with the daily reports of worsening conditions in Iraq, the 16 Ohio-based Marines who were killed over a three-day period in early August or Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a soldier killed in Iraq who's been holding a vigil outside of President Bush's ranch until he comes out and meets her.

Baker and Coors reach beyond the everyday news for their horror stories. They're interested in folklore no different from the famous fairy-tale gatherers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. But what they do with their fairy-tale subjects is beautiful and miraculous.

Baker's work is a throwback with dark colors reminiscent of Heavy Metal album art. There is a lampoon of Hollywood memorabilia with a detailed police shield from the movie *Terminator 2* made of silver resin.

His best piece, "The Interceptor (After Mad Max)," a bicycle painted in camouflage colors and enhanced with spikes and metal plates, hints at the detailed craft and absurd humor of a Damien Hirst sculpture. Baker shows craft in the bicycle sculpture, and when you learn that the bike is chained outside the gallery like any ordinary bike, you wonder if his time was well spent.

Baker brushes with kitsch when borrowing images from apocalyptic sci-fi movies for "Fantastic Distractions," a series of five small wall sculptures that resemble snow globes.

They're cynical and yet bittersweet. His fascination with science fiction and '70s-inspired colors are perfect counterparts to Coors' figurative drawings and sculpture.

Baker is focused on science fiction and environmentalism. Coors looks far back to a time of dragons and other magical beasts. They seem to sync emotionally and creatively, but their artwork battles each other for control of the small gallery space. There is a competition between these two artists, and that battle for attention makes *Barbaric Stories* the best art exhibition in recent months.

While Baker is dark and cynical, Coors offers work that's playful, approachable and every bit as skilled. A wax jack-o-lantern is true to size and picture perfect. "Here Be Dragons" is a world map with hand-drawn folk monsters and the fears that exist all over the globe. Found branches, a wall drawing and seven detailed balsa wood sculptures of small birds make up the highlight piece of the exhibition, "The End of the World."

There is magic at work in Coors' drawings, whether in ink or acrylic paint. He's focused on his ideas and committed to folklore and mysticism.

On the Sunday morning I visited the gallery, one could hear the sermon from Old St. Mary Church just around the corner. Its front doors were open to ease the summer heat, and I could swear the sermon was about accountability.

*Barbaric Stories* covers the same theme, reminding its viewers that we are responsible for the scares in our lives. The names of the work all have a meaning, offering something to grasp for Baker's abstract work and further explanation for Coors' figurative sculptures and drawings.

The dichotomy is thrilling. Coors is humorous and Baker is more sinister in his outlook. Baker reduces a birdcage floating from the ceiling into a black object of filth and despair.

The show is not about the war per se. It's about all acts of barbarism, whether real or imagined.

*Barbaric Stories* was at the Black Floor Gallery in Philadelphia before opening at Publico, and it is a strong follow-up to the gallery's recent show featuring work by Keith Benjamin and Tony Luensman, proof that it's a key space for seeing good, often challenging artwork.

The best thing to say is that it's impossible not to react to this show. It's also a chance to evaluate their work and say what you like and what you want it to be.

One thing is clear: Baker and Coors are two of the best of Cincinnati's young artists. They are painters and sculptors in a world of illustrators and package designers. They are not household names, not even in Cincinnati yet, but they are pioneers.

*Barbaric Stories* hints at new classics. Let's hope that Coors and Baker never become dull, irrelevant sacred cows.

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