Craig Drennen
SANSION

Atlanta-based artist Craig Drennen has chosen William Shakespeare's most obscure play, The Life of Timon of Athens, as the theme for his new body of work. Known first as a language-based neo-Conceptualist, and then for his drawings and paintings based on the failed 1984 movie Supergrope, Drennen has a predilection for creating new art inspired by underappreciated corners of culture that led him, most recently, to the Bard's condemned tragedian telling the story of a wealthy Greek citizen who becomes a pitiless misanthropic outcast. Since 2008, Drennen has been studying the play's dramatis personae, making a signature work for each character, but his intention was to neither affect an understanding of the play nor to critique it. Rather, as Michelle Grabner proposes in the exhibition catalogue, "Working with historical intervals and gaps, illuminations and icons, [Drennen] is building a new language that is firmly set within a complicated Shakespearean narrative."

Drennen's literary-historical muse was immediately visible on entering the show. Identified by the floral Old London red wall text that read STRATFORD-UPON-AVON, a single clock had been set five hours ahead of the gallery's local time so as to conform with that of the English town where the playwright was born and the Royal Shakespeare Company now regularly performs.

Among the eight other works on view was Dramatist Fortune, 2010, a massive two-panel oil and alkyd painting that, using a variety of scrambled letter forms, fonts, and styles, lists the entire cast of Timon of Athens. Painted on a base of abstract patches, a multitude of bright sans serif letters enlivens the canvas and reveals Drennen to be a skilled illusionist. The letter T, for example, has been rendered at many scales as a trompe l'oeil cardboard construction, the Ps as small pieces of red tape, and the letter O variously as ruled notebook paper, a flat geometric yellow circle outlined in black, and, in one case, a bulging, blue psychedelic eyeball. While Drennen claims the task of naming Shakespeare's characters with his animated letters, the active by-product is a lexicon of pop graphics where every letter is also an image.

Following this playbook of sorts were two more paintings—Third Mistress, 2008, and Thirteenth and Fourteenth Mistresses, 2010—offering references to two minor characters from the play, whose Phrynia and Timandra, who demand gold from the by-then financially ruined and spiritually broken Timon. The works are rendered in oil with painstaking illustrative detail on separate panels. Dubbed "semi-portraits" by the artist, they portray extreme close-ups of eyes and are based on photos of real individuals (both male and female) voluntarily submitted by interested citizens who heard about Drennen's project.

But the show's central work was undoubtedly Untitled (The Masque), 2010, which upends David Robbins's iconic 1986 photographic work. Talent—a 1985 installation of eighteen black and white showbiz head shots of hotshot contemporary artists (many associated with New York's Pictures generation), including Jenny Holzer, Jeff Koons, Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman, and Robbins himself. After scanning an image of this work from its illustration in the Whitney Museum of American Art's 1989 exhibition catalogue for "Image World: Art and Media Culture," Drennen had the poignets printed on individual canvases with an ink-jet laser printer. Using a ladder to gain extra distance from the work's surface, Drennen then poured acrylic and tossed globs of oil paint onto the printed-painted faces of Koons and Sherman et al., before further desecrating their doped likenesses by sticking cigaretes and Sandra into the accumulated impasto. In Shakespeare's play, the masques are lively entertainments at a banquet thrown by an apparently well-off Timon. Drennen's masquers, however, appear already mortified by the scraps of a feast's end, when dessert dishes have been clogged with coffee drips, scrunny frosting, and cigarre butts. Twenty-five years ago, Robbins commented on celebrity and the visual arts. But seeing these critiques engaged here, one is led to question whether Drennen's own appropriative tactics and tongue-in-cheek criticisms on fleeting fame and the obsessive marketing of culture have significantly advanced the discussion.

—Francine Koonz Miller