



What we do is secret: Private symbologies emerge at Second Street Gallery



Morbid fascination fuels the exhibition “Subculture Shock: Death, Punk, & the Occult in Contemporary Art,” at Second Street Gallery in September. Courtesy of the artist

Brooklyn multimedia artist Tamara Santibañez, one of the seven featured in Second Street Gallery’s group show “Subculture Shock: Death, Punk, & the Occult in Contemporary Art,” was recently quoted in *The New York Times* about Latinx artists’ use of family history and heritage. She explained that though her art represents her interests in aggressive underground music, queer kink, and Mexican-American imagery, she doesn’t speak for everyone who identifies with those groups.

Santibañez makes a key point that’s transferable to the multifarious visions constituting “[Subculture Shock](#).” Some Latinx artists regularly draw from a collective pool of symbols and images with “highly individualized interpretations,” and there’s a similar essence informing the SSG exhibition.

Despite common influences, the Second Street show provides an original take on inclusion, bridging gender, sexual orientation, and a diverse set of experiences. Enlightening by delving into the darkness, the exhibition liberates viewers to relive the subcultural jolt the creators experienced during their youth—likely considered deviant acts of self-discovery. Picture it: Lunch periods fixated on piles of Satanist-themed books in the middle school library, afternoons blocking out the adult world’s cowardly warnings with punk’s existential blasts of harmonic fury, and, enticed by ghostly mentors, staring contests with masterworks of their art world predecessors before eventually forging their own illuminating truths.

These varied distillations of those experiences still need to interact in a meaningful way, and thankfully, they do.

“Group shows are often a hodgepodge of artists just thrown together with no cohesive thought,” says Kristen Chiacchia, SSG’s executive director and chief curator. “I wanted to do a show where the artists are not only looking at the same themes and ideas, but one where the result is visually coherent. I purposefully chose art that looks like it goes together.”

Each artist's personal iconography recalls aspects borrowed from punk's multigenerational history, then remixed with other subcultural touchstones. Evie Falci's pieces pull from punk's recurrent fashion choice of metal studs and black pleather. The Brooklyn-based artist insists the geometric forms reflect her own symbolic order, and the resulting trio of designs feels like a strange confluence of indigenous beadwork with astrological or alchemical musings affixed delicately to the rough-and-ready outerwear of slam dancers.

Santibañez's aforementioned influences are evident in sculptures bearing brightly-colored Latinx folk art traditions imposed on BDSM gear—a reflection of her own kink expression, but paraphernalia that has long become part of a traditional punk ensemble. She explores her fetishism further in “landscapes,” monochromatic paintings of leather bunched into magnified topographic shapes that embody desires and reflect the grim catechism of an exacting sexual subset. The three pieces create an interesting dialog with Falci's works.

Continuing the BDSM and occult theme, Jessicka Addams' contribution, “Childhood Telepathy,” an acrylic on watercolor paper, features a crying face in a cat-shaped, full-head mask commiserating with a similarly distressed disembodied cat head marked with a forehead pentagram. Perhaps best known as the singer of Jack Off Jill during the 1990s, the Los Angeles artist's chosen subject and medium is imbued with the innocent freedom of color blossoming in pointillist rainbow tears, a vibrant treatment of an undisclosed trauma.

Out in the open, and unavoidable, is the human skull: a go-to emblem of punk logos and album art, an ominous icon of the occult, and the longstanding reminder of mortality. The skull image is a ghoulish refrain played throughout the show. You'll find it smirking in the mixed-media on paper works from Brooklyn-based Peter Benedetti's imaginatively tortured and disfigured demons (“This Is Not A Pipe”). It grins through New Yorker Paul Brainard's graphite images in no less than three iterations of punk legends The Misfits' skeletal mascot, the Crimson Ghost. Danish artist Frodo Mikkelsen's paintings incorporate skulls as well, perhaps best realized in his silver-plated skull sculpture, a magical jewel crowned with tiny, detailed architecture.

Taking the concept to its ultimate conclusion, New Jersey artist Porkchop recasts Egyptian royalty, Catholic Marys, gnomes, and historical busts in the cold unifier of death. Repainting found sculptures in stark, smooth blacks, whites, and gold leaf, elicits an otherworldly ghoulishness. Details like his intimate alphabet of reimagined letters underlines the impenetrable nature of death while trading in cryptic mysticism. Porkchop's altar of unlikely neighbors represents an unfamiliar hierarchy posed with newly ranked, sinister import.

Are these artists fixated with death or is it the byproduct of reveling in a subculture with a grim view of the world? “Subculture Shock” doesn't give definite answers, but suggests there's more empowerment, freedom, and fun to be had down in the underworld than what's clowning in plain sight.

By **CM Gorey**
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Jessicka Addams' “Childhood Telepathy”