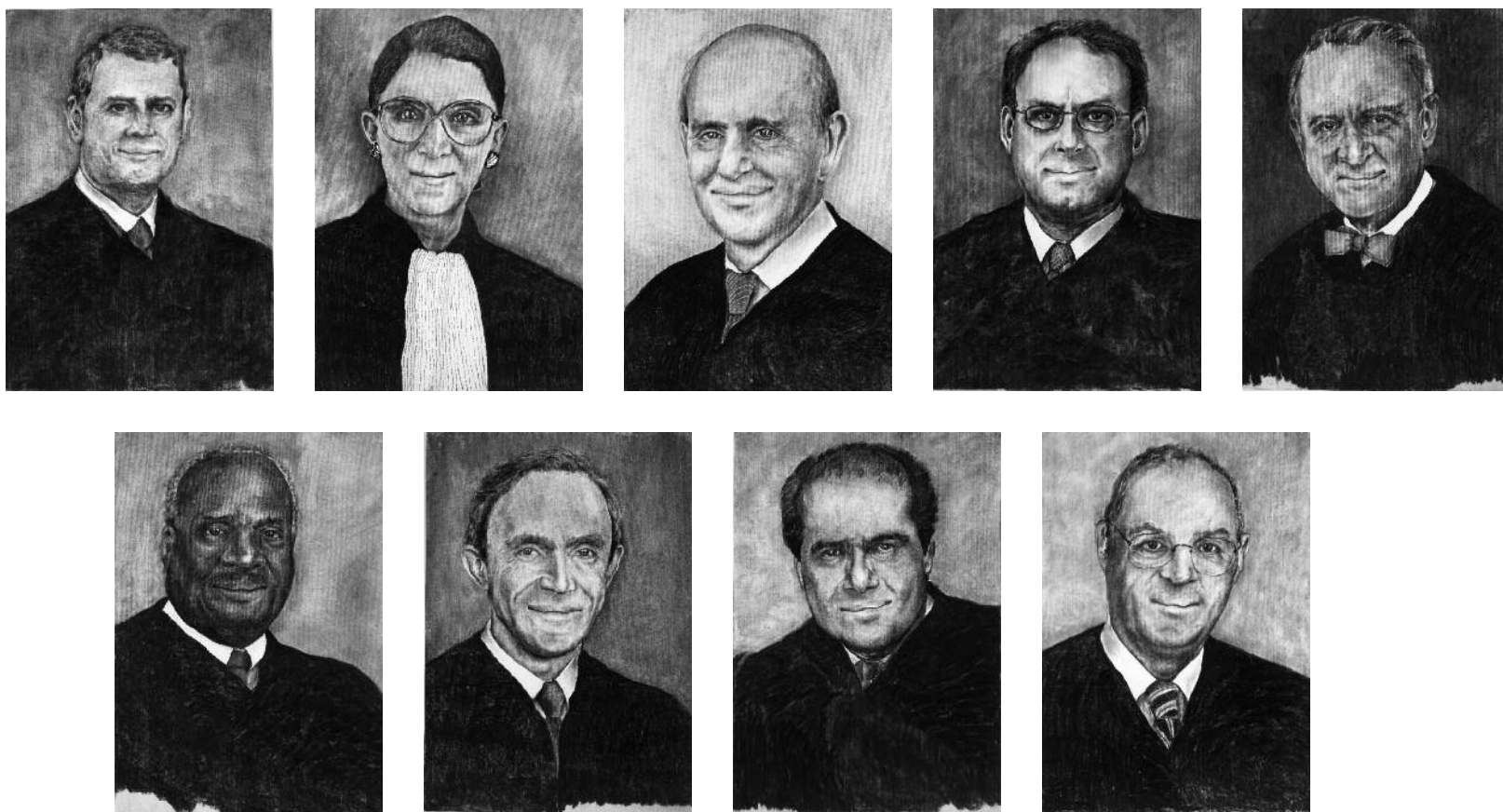


The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637

Museum Hours
Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5 pm
Saturday, Sunday: 12 - 5 pm
Closed Mondays
www.renaissancesociety.org



Paul Chan *My laws are my whores*

March 1 – April 12, 2009

Opening Reception: March 1, 4:00–7:00 pm
Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00–6:00 pm

Pimps Up

Rain or shine, it's my habit, about five of an evening, to go for a stroll in the Palais-Royal. It's me you see there, invariably alone, sitting on the d'Argenson bench, musing. I converse with myself about politics, love, taste, or philosophy. I give my mind license to wander wherever it fancies. I leave it completely free to pursue the first wise or foolish idea that it encounters, just as, on the Allée de Foy, you see our young rakes pursuing a flighty, smiling, sharp-eyed, snub-nosed little whore, abandoning this one to follow that one, trying them all but not settling on any. In my case, my thoughts are my whores.

Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 1761/1774

By the time Diderot finished *Rameau's Nephew*, The Enlightenment was conscious enough of itself as a movement to embrace its own caricature. If anyone had earned this right it was Diderot. His imprisonment in 1746 following publication of *Letter on the Blind*, in which he openly questioned the existence of God, helped unify the circle of French intellectuals known as the philosophes. Their use of empiricism to challenge a Christian worldview defined the so-called Age of Reason. As humanists, the philosophes' writings touched on a range of subjects that would eventually evolve into discrete intellectual disciplines ranging from economics to natural history, and from the physical to the social sciences. Their critique of the morals, beliefs and laws regulating social relations was based on an inquiry into the origin of society. There was no shortage of paradigms to overturn as the philosophes were trying to understand the world in human rather than divine terms. Of the topics where social theory and a critique of morality would converge, none could form as volatile and complex a nucleus of discussion as sex.

Regarding sex, however, Enlightenment thought was distinguished neither by its critique of morality nor its consideration of sexual relations as being at the basis of society. As a staple of mores the world over, sex, by default, lends itself to any critique of morality. And the teleological relationship between sex and society has been part of a Western intellectual tradition since Plato's *Symposium*. Instead, Enlightenment thought was marked by its use of sex to consider not the origins but the limits of society. Within a Christian framework, humankind was created in God's image. Sex, however, in confirming humans as animals, literally spoke to our lower rather than higher selves. In an Enlightenment discourse challenging a Christian worldview, pleasures involving a regression to base instincts then became the site of transgression. As a result, sexual sovereignty was cast as the supreme expression of individual freedom. This last line of thought was indelibly inscribed into the trajectory of modernity by none other than the Marquis de Sade.

My laws are my whores. The immediate question raised by this provocative title, namely who pimps the law, belongs less to Diderot, from whom it was derived, and more to, say, Jean Genet. In answer to this question, Paul Chan has graced the entrance to his Renaissance Society exhibition with charcoal portraits of the nine United States Supreme

Court Justices. As an artist whose work is informed by his political activism, Chan has never been one to shy away from pointed and scathing satire. The snarky hyperbole of *Re: The Operation* (2002), a 27 minute video in which Chan uses the genre of the soldier's letter home to flesh out the psyches of former president George W. Bush's inner circle, while highly entertaining, is also tragically on the mark in its depiction of an utterly vainglorious administration. In what was surely a surfeit of script-worthy material, Chan's wit rose to the occasion. By comparison, the drawings of the Justices are a restrained affair. Their stilted quality is not a parody as much as it is an announcement underscoring their source in state portraiture. The only feature suggestive of caricature is the eerily recurring, smug, beatific grin that translates into a sense of detachment. Hung in the upper portion of the gallery, well over viewers' heads, the Justices are literally above it all. But they are not the overseers in the sense of a panopticon. Instead, the Justices have been thrust to a more remote, ethereal, yet expansive realm of authority, making for a notable shift of tone in Chan's work as his target has changed from the executive to the judicial branch of government.

Whereas the executive branch embodies the government in action, the High Court is the government in its guise as law, which does not avail itself to an accountability of the directness leveled at the presidency. This does not, however, preclude Chan from asking the simple question, who is the law, just as one might ask who is the president. As an answer, Chan, a champion of the literal, offers up these nine charcoal portraits of the Justices. But the larger question for Chan is, what is the law, specifically human law. If the remainder of the exhibition is taken as an answer, then, in a word, it is sex.

The portraits of the Justices find their corollary in fourteen large text-based drawings done after characters from works by Sade. A bowdlerized redux of the language describing the various characters' sexual exploits and misfortunes, these drawings, although strictly text-based, nonetheless qualify as portraits albeit linguistically. These drawings are also studies for fonts which Chan has produced and made available on his website nationalphilistine.com. Each letter and symbol on the keyboard corresponds to a titillating phrase so that once installed, anything typed is rendered nonsensical pornographic drivel. The loss of control over what one types is metaphorically orgasmic. In addition to computer-based fonts, Chan has also had other texts translated into his fonts, as is the case with the episode of *Law and Order* featured on the plasma screen monitor. Chan translated the dialogue into one of his fonts and then reintroduced it as a running subtitle after removing the audio track.

In forsaking the figurative for the textual, Chan's interest in sex proves to be something other than the pornographically explicit sense that comes to mind when one thinks of Sade. For Chan, the discourse of sex is where an inner law of human impulses and desire interfaces with an outer law responsible for regulating

and/or containing libidinal forces. Marriage. Adultery. Sodomy. Pederasty. Rape. Incest. Sexual harassment. Prostitution. The state's regulation of sexual relationships is arguably at the heart of the social compact as liberty's limits are mapped within the most intersubjective of realms. The efficacy of the social compact in maximizing the pursuit of happiness is then mirrored in sexual relations as spelled out by the law, which over and above origin and limit, comprises the very structure of society. More significant than being a form of authority, a society's laws are its architecture, which in Sade's case was a cage whose bars he spent the better part of his life rattling. Chan's juxtaposition of Sade and the Supreme Court Justices constructs an historical trajectory in which the United States is unavoidably to be viewed as the child of the Enlightenment. For better or for worse, Sade's thought remains with us in perpetuity. Chan, however, is hardly interested in Sade the overly celebrated libertine. Of greater importance is the relationship between sex and the law, in which sex, as a basis of society, is also an issue for which the law achieves a degree of opacity, revealing its role in structuring society at its most fundamental level. For Chan, this is yet another layer of overtly political subject matter he has been steadily plying for the last decade.

Chan belongs to a generation of artists and collectives that are heir to debates about the relationship between aesthetics and politics; debates that emerged in the wake of a neo-autonomous minimalism on the one hand and wide spread social unrest of the 1960s on the other. Told from the present vantage point, however, what were once two camps now find themselves as partners in an expanded field of cultural production. The question of art's relationship to affecting social change used to be fraught with a tension confirming the art world as a bubble with a discrete inside and outside. Thanks to the likes of Chan, activism, which once stood firmly outside the bubble, has become indispensable for the manner it informs a range of practices such that politics is no longer a quality of the work of art proper, but has instead become a way of looking. Likewise, the reverse is true. Activism may be viewed culturally, making its means and ends the subject of critique usually reserved for art.

This two-way dialogue has helped dispense with false categories such as "political art," and allowed artists to adopt a broader range of methods available to them on an as-needed basis. In this respect, Chan is a posterchild for the post-medium era. His output includes activist pamphlets, production of large scale performances (mounting Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in New Orleans' lower 9th Ward), a website, drawings, collages, video installations and last but not least, several single-channel videos which in and of themselves display a range of approaches. Chan's transition to a new body of work has taken place on the still-warm grave of the Bush presidency. Just as there was a need for socially engaged practices before George W. Bush's Presidency, the same applies afterward, even if at a minimum to facilitate the transition from anger to hope.

Related Events

OPENING RECEPTION
Sunday, March 1, 4:00–7:00 pm
featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00–6:00 pm
in Cobb Hall Room 307
(directly below the gallery)

LECTURE
Monday, March 2, 5:30pm
Paul Chan

As his work suggests, Chan always has something to say. His career as both an artist and activist serves as an invaluable example of the social, political and cultural forces that have shaped contemporary art over the past decade. This event is co-sponsored with the University of Chicago, Open Practice Committee. It will take place in Kent Hall room 120. FREE

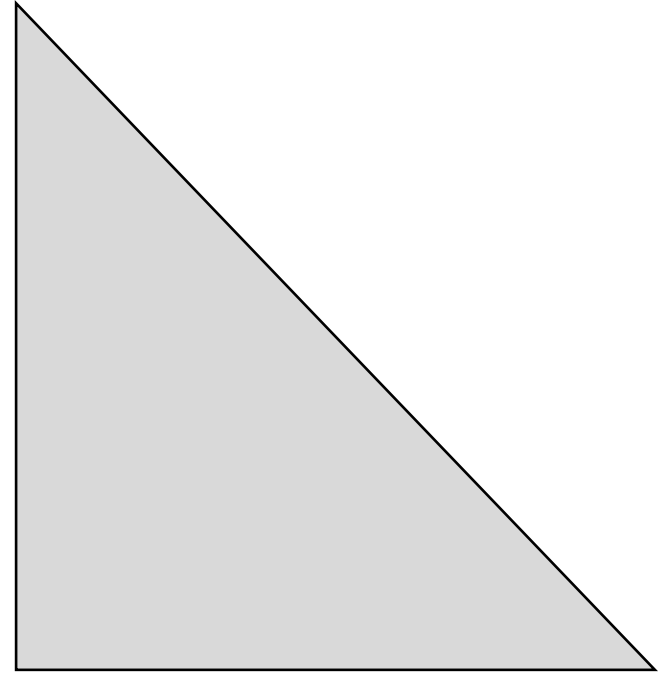
LECTURE
Sunday, March 8, 2:00 pm
Bernard E. Harcourt
Professor of Law and Criminology,
University of Chicago

*"You are entering a gay and lesbian free zone":
On the radical dissents of Justice Scalia and other (post-) queer.*

Examining Justice Antonin Scalia's minority dissent over *Lawrence v. Texas*, the landmark ruling in which Texas sodomy laws were struck down, this talk will raise questions about the implication of *Lawrence* for the ongoing judicial sex wars and criminal law. Bernard E. Harcourt is the Julius Kreeger Professor of Law and Criminology at the University of Chicago Law School. He serves as the Faculty Director of Academic Affairs and is the Director of the Center for Studies in Criminal Justice. This talk will take place in Cobb Hall room 403, directly down the hall from the gallery. FREE

This exhibition has been made possible with funding from Alphas Foundation; the CityArts Program of The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, a municipal agency; Christie's; The Danielson Foundation; The John R. Halligan Charitable Fund; the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Princeton; The Peter Norton Family Foundation; Nuveen Investments; the Provost's Discretionary Fund at The University of Chicago; Pritzker Foundation; The Siragusa Foundation; and our membership.

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My laws are my whores, 2008, set of 9 charcoal drawings, 39.5 x 27.5" each



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mmm slsh ahhh..ohhulp
aahgh sssh ohhoo slsh ahhh mhn

My laws are my whores

~~Paul Chan~~

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