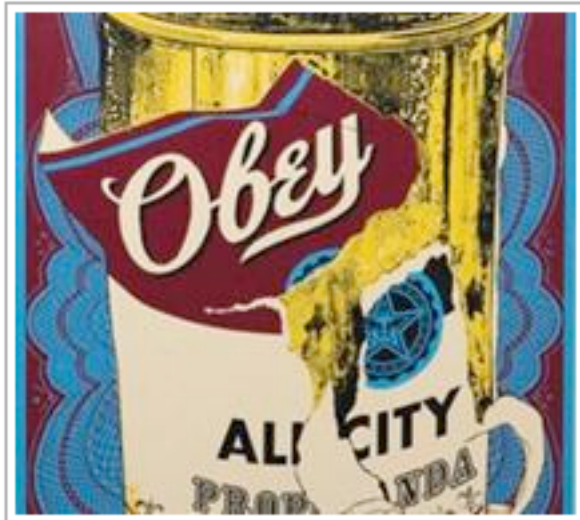




Country Club Going Cross Country

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By Steven Rosen

Extending its reach while leaving the West End

When I visited Country Club in the West End last week, it was bustling even though no other visitors were in the art gallery. Christian Strike, its owner, was too busy at his computer to talk.

His Iconoclast Editions, an ancillary company headquartered in the West End gallery, had just that day issued a new, limited-run print by Shepard Fairey, the New York-based

graphic artist who shot to fame with last year's "Obama Hope" poster.

The new print, a 200-run "blue" edition of a Warhol-inspired image of a Campbell's soup can with a peeledback "Obey All City Propaganda" label, was initially being offered on Iconoclast's Facebook page, and Strike was handling the many queries. Earlier "red" and "green" editions had sold out. (A Fairey exhibition, Supply and Demand, opens at Contemporary Arts Center on Feb. 20.)

Iconoclast has been working regularly with him since the show that Strike, then-partner Aaron Rose and then-CAC curator Matt Distel put together for the museum in 2004, Beautiful Losers: Contemporary Art and Street Culture.

So while Strike manned the computer, Distel — now Country Club's director — went with me for coffee and tea at nearby Findlay Market, sitting outdoors on a sunny day. "I'll miss this," he said, explaining that Country Club has shown its last exhibition at 424 Findlay St., a building it shares with Carl Solway Gallery and Aisle.

Beginning with the Oct. 23 opening of its next show, Aaron Morse's Kingdom of Nature paintings, Country Club will be in a new space above Voltage furniture at 3209 Madison Road in Oakley. It will allow more room for Iconoclast operations.

"This may afford us an opportunity to maybe have more work up and we might be able to keep some gallery artists' work up for a longer period of time," Distel explained. "And we're still taking on our project-based model — we like to work with artists as much as possible to build a thesis and then develop a project."

This brings up the issue of how well Country Club is doing in finding Cincinnati collectors for the work — often installation-based — by national and international contemporary artists that it has displayed since 2007.

"We're really keen to do it and it's tough in Cincinnati," Distel said. "We don't want to ignore our local constituents. Christian and I are both from Cincinnati and we love this town."

In an e-mail sent a day after my visit, Strike added, "I think Country Club is a gallery that is bringing internationally recognized artists and critically acclaimed artwork to a region that doesn't have enough of it."

"An exciting aspect of our move to Oakley is, to be perfectly honest, the convenience of the location for more people geographically," he said. "I loved our old space, but we outgrew it and felt that if we were going to move, we should consider a location that would be more convenient for more people."

But, meanwhile, Country Club and Iconoclast have far bigger ambitions than Cincinnati. This week it will open a Los Angeles Country Club operation in a historic modernist home, Rudolf Schindler's 1934 Buck House. Designer Todd Oldham will host a private reception featuring an exhibition of original work — gouache paintings by Cincinnati modernist Charley Harper. (Country Club actually opened an L.A. gallery, at a different location, in May.)

Country Club L.A. will operate more like a private dealer than a gallery. "We're treating it as a residence and everything will be dinner parties and cocktail parties, a totally different model for us," Distel said. "We don't have public hours or anything."

Meanwhile, Country Club has commissioned Fairey to do a major public-art piece — a large-scale mural, about 120 feet — to debut during Art Basel Miami Beach in early December. It will consist of a barricade covered with paintings and it will primarily be at the Fountainhead Residency property with a portion at Miami Art Museum.

"Miami is where it makes sense to make a statement," Distel said. "We've been wanting to do a large-scale project with Shepard that exists beyond the print market. He was willing and able to find time in his schedule."

As all this continues, Beautiful Losers this year finally ended its five-year touring schedule that took it from the CAC to San Francisco, Orange County, Baltimore, Tampa, Italy, France, Poland and Spain. It was on the cusp of seeing how graffiti art, skateboarding, surfing, photography, DIY music and graphic design were all coming together to great a new culture.

“That project was popular due to the amazing amount of energy that has been put out there by the group of artists I included in that exhibit,” Strike writes. “There are so many amazingly talented, creative producers in that project, ranging from film directors to visual artists that work in a wide range of mediums. Most of these artists also came from popular youth subcultures where they have enjoyed an audience for some time.”