

Karaoke's Religious Ecstasy

By Chris Lee
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Forget flash mobs and Friendster—so 2003. Karaoke — which has taken on ritual proportions as the unofficial, regional pastime in East Asia—is finally having its cultural moment in the States. Think punk rock and heavy metal karaoke, porn karaoke (performers provide orgasmic audio for their favorite hardcore clips), aireoke (which is air guitar karaoke), and even movieoke. So it was just a matter of time before the drunken sing-along ascended to the realm of high art. Enter Fritz Chesnut, 31, whose *Karaoke* paintings have been shown in galleries in Milan and Brooklyn. Working from photographs he takes in New York karaoke bars, the artist captures singers in fleeting moments of sweaty reverie. “It’s all about the moment when somebody is not conscious of themselves at all,” says Chesnut. “It sort of ties into the thing you see in Old Masters, where the subjects are in religious ecstasy.” But unlike the work of, say, Bruegel, Chesnut’s paintings bear the names of the songs that inspired the emotive facial gestures they depict: *War Pigs*, *Running with the Devil* (pictured above), *Rebel Yell*. “They’re about the body language of extreme fans who know the songs by heart,” he continues. “Although somebody also remarked that the paintings look like people having orgasms.”

