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FAME, WHAT'S YOUR NAME



You could say Dawn Mellor is "celebral": She makes smart art that mocks our obsession with celebrities' stupidities. Her paintings show far-fetched fantasies that put pop stars and tabloid regulars in situations that exaggerate their real-life trials and bumbles—Christina Aguilera with arrows piercing her buff little bod à la Saint Sebastian, for example. The London-based 37-year-old is showing her work at Studio Voltaire, southwest London's only artist-led gallery, through October 28. It's better than a copy of *The Sun*, we promise—as were her answers to our questions.

What do you think we, as fans, want from famous people?

I think that there has developed a kind of equivalent to the class system in how we measure a celebrity's worth. Where the divisions used to be made by fans of particular genres of music, the quality of films made, etc., now we seem to have created a group of celebrities who are despised, humiliated, and mocked.

But you don't only paint D-through-Z-list celebrities.

Even the so-called quality products of A-list celebrities or independent film stars and musicians don't escape the scrutiny of paparazzi photographers and tabloid journalists. It's as though there is an attempt to destroy the celebrity's perceived narcissistic ego and, even more sinister, to encourage self-destruction. The public's (or a large proportion of it) desired form of entertainment has shifted somewhat from the music and films produced to the use of stars as scapegoats.

Are you suggesting that schadenfreude is more entertaining to us than the entertainment celebrities intentionally produce?

I think the situation is more complex than simple schadenfreude. Those who engage in [this culture] seem to define themselves as a group, in a quasi-religious pagan way. The celebrities' destruction, after a series of highs and lows, seems to serve a ritualistic function, giving the public a sense of power and catharsis.

You did a fashion show with Mike Stokes—how did that come about?

I wanted an event at the opening [of my show] that would have an element of disrespect for the paintings I was installing, but would also have a relationship to notions of celebrity and glamour. Mike came up with the idea of a fashion show and I was instantly excited. If only out-of-work and frustrated fashion designers could have a collective punk DIY attitude and put on shows in unexpected environments, instead of just waiting for employment. Both Mike and I are interested in smashing boundaries between different cultural forms. There has to be a more exciting option than artists making bags and jewelry.

—Ana Finel Honigman

Vile Affections, 2007, Dawn Mellor. Installation shot. Photo: Colin Guillemet, courtesy of Team Gallery, New York
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