



From Chicago: USSA 2012: The Orphanage Project

ZACHARY CAHILL

SEP 09 - OCT 15

by Randall Miller

As the common wisdom goes, when an animal is backed into a corner, it will attack. In his solo show titled *Zachary Cahill: USSA 2012 The Orphanage Project* at threewalls Gallery, multimedia artist Zachary Cahill fights back against the onslaught of United States imperial power and capital that he considers a threat to free expression. The show ostensibly sprung from the artist's failed attempt to found an orphanage on Chicago's South Side, a calculated fiasco meant to highlight the hypocrisy of conservative rhetoric about rescuing the children of welfare recipients—more specifically, Newt Gingrich's reverie in which he imagines installing the saved children in a state-run orphanage. Predictably, the project collapsed due to funding issues. What is presented at threewalls—drawings, sculptures and prints that brood on oppressive US imperialism—is nothing short of a political broadside.

Like a brand, the letters “USSA” are prominently scattered throughout the show, most notably in the large pink MDF wood blocks that make up *USSA (2011)*. In blurring distinctions between America and the former Soviet Union, the show's primary conceit rests on the assumption that viewers unquestionably recognize the authoritarian similarities between the two countries.

The bear, Russia's traditional spirit animal, is Cahill's overarching metaphorical embodiment of empire and paternalistic state authority. *Chicago Bear (2011)*, featuring a Care Bear with a hammer and sickle on its tummy, is a poster from an ink jet print series titled *USSA 2012: The Orphanage Project Posters (2011)*. In another poster from the series *Orphan in the Graveyard (After Delacroix) (2011)*, a bear clutches an image of Delacroix's painting *Girl Seated in a*



Zachary Cahill. *Orphanage Birth*, from *USSA 2012: The Orphanage Project Posters*, 2011; inkjet print. Courtesy of the Artist and threewalls, Chicago.

Cemetery (1824). The phrase “Our Propaganda Eats Your Art,” which appears in another part of the show, would be a fitting subtitle for this piece. But bears also appear in entirely different contexts, as outlaw creatures such as artists and members of the LGBT community. Within a matrix of thirty ink drawings, the word “bear” is defined as a gay subculture known for its heavy-set men. These are curious points of reference that begin to give definition to Cahill's interest in orphans as marginal figures.

Amongst the noise and the unfettered political growl of the show, Cahill's more subtle ruminations on fringe communities are nearly lost. The art presented bellows with the bombast of agitprop, and in offering a forceful response to the rightward shift in the nation states of the West, the artist risks credibility by playing fast and loose with comparisons between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. Propaganda eats art, but it can also wreak havoc on resistance strategies.