

The Propeller Group Take on the Art World's Celebrity Fixation

No country for poor men

By Christian Viveros-Faune

published: September 25, 2013

Courtesy the artists and Lombard Freid Gallery



Lenin as Calvin Candie in *Django Unchained*, 2013

Details:

The Propeller Group: 'Lived, Lives, Will Live!'

Lombard Freid Gallery

518 West 19th Street

212-967-8040, [lombard-](http://lombard-freid.com)

freid.com Through October 26

"Are celebrities the new art stars?" asked a *Newsweek* cover story in July. A few months later, certain windy developments (or popcorn farts) that passed for world-shaking events on TMZ and CNN answered in the affirmative. In the wake of Miley Cyrus's art-inspired twerking and Jay Z's bombastic Picasso-grubbing, it appears no better representatives of art's embrace of commodity status exist today than folks who have morphed into commodities themselves. For them and their millions of Twitter followers, art is now the ultimate bling.

Take Leonardo DiCaprio. A famous face who is new to collecting, the star recently raised an incredible \$31.7 million at an art auction for an environmental charity (making it the highest-grossing such charity event). Internet speculation abounds that he is a lost relative of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, and that he may also—in rumor if not in actual fact—soon headline a gazillion-dollar Hollywood biopic about the former Russian leader. What better idea, then, than to celebrate the union of one of the planet's top actors and the historical figure who inspired the world's greatest number of concrete monuments (they are also, conversely, the mostly toppled)—through a series of uniquely cast, hand-embroidered, and gold-plated objets d'art? Call it Sellebrity Suprematism.

As unlikely a starting point for an art exhibition as commissioning George W. Bush paintings of Arab sandals, that turns out to be the relentless conceit for "Lived, Lives, Will Live!," a terrifically well-timed exhibition of anti-celebrity art by the Vietnamese-American art collective The Propeller Group. In town for its first-ever solo New York show, this mixed-media posse has become expert at portraying the results of global culture under the influence. A group that has already demonstrated a local proficiency in matters of art, politics, and communications—their contribution to the Guggenheim's current show of art from Southeast Asia is a poker-faced Madison Avenue-style ad campaign extolling the benefits of Communism—they have also smartly chosen Chelsea as the perfect location from which to parody art's current binge of starfucking.

Consisting of paintings, sculptures, and photographs that, according to the gallery press release, "form a new strategy where hip-hop and Hollywood converge as historical and political resurgence,"

the exhibition features three kinds of spectacularly kitschy works that would fall as flat as fettuccine if fame-trolls George Condo and Marina Abramovic weren't the art-world rule instead of the exception. (See for yourself their "collaborations" with Jay Z's "Picasso Baby: A Performance Art Film" on YouTube). An ironic but earnest take on the sycophantic state of the art, the young collective's work tartly comments on both 24-karat fame and its cubic zirconia failings. Satire, after all, has a moral backbone. Not for nothing has it been called punishment for those who deserve it.

Consider in this vein The Propeller Group's six canvases that neatly weave hairpieces inspired by DiCaprio's film roles onto vintage depictions of Lenin that once hung in Communist Party headquarters across the Soviet Union. Mostly sourced through eBay, the appropriated, made-over works make up a hilarious gallery of "if they mated" portraits—less Lenin or DiCaprio, they project instead a single, supersized persona. There's Lenin with DiCaprio's floppy haircut in *Titanic*; the Marxist revolutionary with the actor's pomaded locks in *The Great Gatsby*; Lenin the gulag inventor as *Django Unchained*'s plantation dandy. In every case, the result is the same with slight variations. The paintings constitute coiffed spoofs of colossal hubris; rugs slapped on hammy likenesses made years ago by career flatterers not unlike today's fame toadies (take a bow, Elizabeth Peyton).

Other works in the exhibition include a gold-plated head of Lenin that has been turned into a pendant as big as the Ritz (in an edition of five), and photographs of the largest Vladimir Ilyich statue ever erected (in Volgograd, Russia). Together they make up an ongoing project: an attempt to raise a new giant effigy of Lenin with a Rick Ross-style selfie necklace. It constitutes an unfinished but darkly comical monument to past fame, its future, and its mammoth consequences.