

## i want candy

Clayton Porter's monstrosities of desire

by Marin Sardy

ONE DAY LAST SUMMER, Clayton Porter showed up to work at Bruce Nauman's Cerrillos studio to find maggots falling out of the ceiling. A pack rat living in the walls had died, spurring an intensive effort to solve Nauman's ongoing mouse-and-rat problem. What's striking is that as tall, affable Porter tells the story, he doesn't seem disturbed or squeamish. In fact, he speaks of it with a nearly misty-eyed absorption. A glance through the 29-year-old artist's body of work may explain why.

This is the guy whose most recently shown piece (at Santa Fe's William Shearburn Gallery, last summer) displays a mouse-headed monster devouring a small child. This is the guy who, in 2006, built a Victorian dollhouse, placed it in a gallery, and then let six mice run amok in it. "I ended up really making it pretty fancy for them, and, you know, they just destroyed everything," says Porter, whose plain language belies a rigorous creative process. "Mice build their nests out of whatever they can get hold of—trash or Bruce's prints that are worth hundreds of thousands of dollars." But why the fascination with rodents? "We do the same thing. They're sort of a reflection of us."

It didn't take long for his approach (which, for all its grotesqueness, is more matter-of-fact than dark) to get the College of Santa Fe graduate noticed by local critics and a handful of devoted collectors. Porter has the ambition to match. Since his college days, he has had pieces in nearly 30 exhibitions, including one at what is now the New Mexico Museum of Art, all while scraping together a living through a dizzying range of art-related odd jobs and even vying for a spot on the Bravo reality show *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist*. (He made it to the semifinals.) He's now following his first solo show—*Noxious Empire*, at the Center for Contemporary Arts in 2008—with a more fully developed second exhibition, *Dear Hart, Dog Dick*, up this July at former CCA visual arts director Cyndi Conn's new Palace Avenue art space, LaunchProjects.

With the themes of consumption and destruction as his cornerstones, Porter works with a unique vocabulary of emotionally loaded objects such as lollipops, sex toys, digestive organs, and cancerous growths, as well as a whole pantheon of cartoonish beasts. Presenting these in a style that combines meticulously crafted graphite drawings with brilliant bursts of color and mixed-media sculptural elements, he seamlessly conflates contradictory symbols into a single visual language. And it's this fusion that gives his work its power: It reveals the hopeless entanglement between our basest desires and purest aspirations.

Porter traces his obsession with obsessions to his 20th year, when his mother died of cancer, hurling him into a period of intensive questioning of his beliefs. As an art-history minor, he found affirmation in European vanitas paintings and hunting scenes by masters like Peter Paul Rubens—work that dealt with the impermanence of all things. He also came across the work of Japanese contemporary artist Takashi Murakami, whose use of animé-based imagery inspired Porter to include the everyman element of comic-book-style drawings into his own art. By the time he emerged from grieving, Porter's new appreciation for the creation/destruction dichotomy—and our related coping mechanisms—had spawned an entire mythology of bizarre creatures



Clayton Porter, no title (work in progress), graphic and acrylic on paper

that became the basis for everything he's produced since.

"We're always looking for something to fill us, to satisfy us," he says, "and often we never really find the end of that." In *Dear Hart*, for instance, he takes on the human urge to hunt down what we love most. At his Cerrillos Road studio/bachelor pad, he shows me sketches of deformed man-beasts with candy-striped eyes "that shoot out of their heads and wrap around running deer." He's even throwing around the idea of hiding each piece behind "a shroud of balloons," which viewers would have to pop to access the drawings. "If they desire to see the piece," he says simply, "they have to destroy something to do that."

Clayton Porter: *Dear Hart, Dog Dick*, July 8–August 1, reception July 8, 6–7 PM, LaunchProjects, 355 E Palace, [launchprojects.com](http://launchprojects.com)