

Arts & Reviews

It's not what it looks like

GALLERIES



COURTESY EDWYNN HOUK GALLERY (BELOW)

Above: Joe Zane's portrait of art forger Elmyr de Hory is itself a forgery: It was painted at a factory in China.

With fake books, forged portraits, and more, Joe Zane's show riffs cleverly on identity

By Cate McQuaid

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

"I am what I am," sang Popeye the Sailor Man. He had it good. Ever since Picasso fractured and distorted the human face, art has questioned the solidity of personal identity. Throw in the aliases and fictions purveyed online, and "multiple personalities" defines not a psychiatric disorder but a way of life.

Joe Zane dives into today's unnerving mist of nebulous identity in "Personality," his clever, funny show at Allston Skirt Gallery. He takes on the cult of personality that can surround an artist. He dreams up notoriety for himself by creating a book about his work, which he fictionally publishes under the esteemed Phaidon imprint. And he fashions what looks like a neon-sign version of his signature. In an ironic nod to the more modest reach of Zane's career (he's a young local artist), it's made of vinyl and does not light up.

The highlight of the show is a series of portraits of art forgers, such as the late Elmyr de Hory, who famously sold a piece to the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University in the 1950s, saying it was an original Matisse. He's raffish and avuncular here in a lime green sweater.

Zane didn't paint the portrait, though. He sent a small photo of de Hory to a factory in China where anyone can have oil paintings made for \$75 a pop. So Zane's portraits of forgers are in their own way forgeries — presented as his, but not his (although he credits royal-painting.com in Xiamen, China).

A soundtrack to the installation features cover bands that make versions of famous albums; Zane drew copies of the album covers, such as Eurosmith's take on Aerosmith's "Permanent Vacation." Tricky iterations of original and copy reverberate through this exhibit as if the gallery were an echo chamber, to the point where "original" is nearly meaningless. And yet anyone who knows Elvis Costello's "Oliver's Army" will recognize, if you truly listen, that the music here doesn't measure up.

That's where Zane is so effective. He makes you truly listen, and truly look. And in the end, you may not know anything more about his identity, but you might be a little more in tune with your own.

Joe Zane: Personality

At: Allston Skirt Gallery, 450 Harrison Ave.,
through April 1. 617-482-3652,
www.allstonskirt.com.