

HEYD FONTENOT

DALLAS

Texans need to develop a more embattled relationship with regionalism, and Heyd Fontenot is just the artist to lead the fray. Most Texas artists are rightfully loath to be associated with the term—both in the sense of parochialism and in its reference to a Depression-era painting style. To be a regional artist anywhere means that you have been around for a good while and that you make work connected to the place where you live, which is notably not New York or London. In Dallas, it might also mean that you make paintings influenced by the Dallas Nine, a group of regionalist artists from the 1930s. It does not mean that you make ginned-up, sexed-out portraits deconstructing the term's inherently banal machismo—*unless* you are Mr. Fontenot.

In *Heyd Fontenot: Get Your Wood On*, the artist transforms certain tropes of Texas regionalism—State Fair ribbons, kitschy star-shaped wooden plaques, taxidermy and other homey hunting prizes, and the Texan star—the stuff of bawdy, seductive interiors [Conduit Gallery; June 13–July 18, 2009]. Named for a Louisiana specialty dish—a chicken stuffed inside a duck inside a turkey—the mid-sized wall installation *Turducken* features the bust of a gold-encrusted billy goat with a flokati goatee and long beard made out of grey-white horsehair above which hang three wooden star-shaped plaques. Across the gallery, Fontenot again tweaks hunting trophies and the Texas state star, turning them into a hybrid between interior decoration and installation art in *God's Brown Eye*. Here, he painted a gallery wall bright pink. At its center, he embedded three stars—one inside the other—with the largest made from a furry brown cowhide found at ebay.com, that notably misses its uppermost leg. Animal horns emerge from the central star-shaped wooden panel. In both of these sculptures-cum-installations, Fontenot turns the spoilage of male hunting prowess on its head, colliding the rawness of the ranch into the *délice* of Versailles.

In the drawings and paintings, which may well be Fontenot's best works, viewers find a poignant mode of consciousness-raising. Nonchalantly nude men and

women float in depthless space on wood panels covered in a clear varnish. They canoodle at whim: male on male, female on male, female on female, male on male on male next to female, male alone thinking, female casting a glance backward. Their collective lackadaisical demeanor belies, if not underscores, the progressive gender politics at hand. This is art inflected by the caricatures of regionalism with the subtle intention of knocking down the walls of conventional gender practices, which Cracker Barrel, a fount of “regional” arts and crafts, has stalwartly championed.

The distorted eyes of Fontenot's figures unite the doe-eyed style of the 1960s-1970s painter Margaret Keane, who sold work under her husband Walter's name, and the more generalized body-surrealism of current blue chipper John Currin. In graphite-and-ink on paper and oil on wood panel, Fontenot's figures seem thoughtfully mid-coitus or poetically en route to orgy. The oil on wood *Five Panels, Six Stars, David Riding Chris*, 2009, shows man on man, David riding Chris, on man next to a woman looking lazily over her shoulder. Two panels flank the central one. To the upper left, a tow-headed man pierces another's ear. To the upper right, a woman crouches in a pretzel-like position. All are nude and nonchalant. Beneath both side panels are Fontenot's signature too-many-legged Texan stars.

Texan exceptionalism might be alive and well in the sentiment of “Don't mess with Texas,” but it takes on a new, more radical and progressive form in the work of Fontenot.

—Charissa N. Terranova