

Family Resemblance

John Casey's dark, absurdist humor makes sense these days.

By *DeWitt Cheng*

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The visionary 15th-century Flemish satirist Hieronymus Bosch was criticized as a creator of unholy follies that insulted the human form and its Creator (and prototype). One perceptive defender argued, however, that Bosch painted man not as he appears, but as he truly is — to the spiritual eye and moral imagination. **John Casey's** distorted, disjointed, unstrung puppet figures — lugubrious clowns with gigantic *piñata* heads (sometimes disfigured), glovelike hands, and tiny or nonexistent torsos — might be similarly dismissed, absent an underlying belief system like Bosch's, were it not for the obsessive conviction that they embody. Casey, fascinated since childhood with "monster models, war dioramas, dinosaurs, and horror movies" has created "odd creatures" for thirty years. He described his current show of drawings, wall installations, and freestanding sculpture, *Distant Cousins*, in a recent interview with Theo Konrad Auer, as "a continuation of my exploration of 'emotional biomorphology,' a phenomenon ... in my alternate world where people's physiques morph based on their emotional and psychological states of mind. The beings that inhabit this other world are similar to us humans, but they live by different physical and biological rules. They are related to us ... like cousins thirteen times removed ... Distant Cousins."



John Casey's "Red-Handed Magicians Get Their Comeuppance."

In dreams, the sleeper has adventures that resolve unconscious dilemmas and conflicts. In Casey's creative dream work, Freudian motifs emerge — although the artist mocks explanations of symbolism as "blibitty-blab." In the life-size sculpture "He Will Show Us the Way," a Boy Scout stands poised with his walking stick, oblivious to a red hose or tree trunk that sprouts from his face — like Pinocchio's nose or a snowman's carrot. In the plywood cutout wall installation "Defender," he stands, now as glassy-eyed as Little Orphan Annie and noseless, warding off with his stick a gigantic hovering male head seemingly made of flesh, rubber, metal, and wood, its wandering red eyes regarding us with stoic resignation. A similar colossal head appears in the drawing "Wagoneer," this time loaded onto the back of a Western-style buckboard attended by a headless farmer; however, tree trunks or stalagmites now protrude from his eyes and nose, and buckshot

craters litter the skin around his woody or fibrous mask while a mouth full of eroded teeth seems to emit a low wail. Also showing: Don Porcella's pipe-cleaner sculptures and a large Swarm group show (is that redundant?). Through May 10 at **Swarm Gallery** (560 2nd St., Oakland). SwarmGallery.com or 510-839-2787.