



## hanging with friends

**thom lessner's "snakeskin lightning" is the kind of exhibit that's easy to hang out and have a beer with**

*by melissa starker*

he moved to philadelphia to pursue his style of art, but thom lessner still loves his hometown. with family here—including sister liz, proprietor of betty's—he visits columbus often, and sometimes brings his work along if he's got a place to show.

most recently, lessner was represented by mailing-label-sized pieces in the group exhibition *die kase hause* in july at mahan gallery. he's made a speedy return to the space, taking it over in september for a show that places lessner's work beside two like-minded artists he's lured to the city, andrew jeffrey wright, a studio mate of lessner's at philadelphia's space 1026 artists' collective, and lori d., a former californian now living in vancouver.

a few days before the show's opening, artwork was scattered across the gallery floor, awaiting what would probably turn out to be a lengthy installation process. with most of his own work out of its bubble wrap, lessner paused to explain that wright came up with the title, *snakeskin lightning*, inspired by lessner's mention of the columbus band snakeskin halo. "it's a bad name, but in a neat way," lessner said.

he doesn't mean to offend the musicians who came up with it; he just has a firm appreciation for tasty bits of trashiness in music and pop culture. the gallery mates come from a school of artists who don't have much use for art school, who embrace a naïve style that often brings to mind a more accomplished, prolific version of teenage doodlings. it's good-time art created for the enjoyment of artist and viewer, the kind that's easy to hang out and have a beer with.

"these are my top choices," lessner said of the artists he's brought to mahan. "i love a lot of people, but i feel like we're all on the same level. no weird egos, we just want to make cool stuff and have people see something they didn't expect."

if you've seen lessner's art, you likely do know what to expect, but you may also be anticipating another look. no one captures the original incarnation of van halen, the essence of its former frontman, "diamond" david lee roth, or the utter mediocrity of his replacement, sammy hagar, with such obsessive verve.

the artist presents new work on these and other musicians at mahan, such as a large, 3-d portrait of thin lizzy and a flat, compact depiction of the cars. lessner also gives both bands their own set of commemorative, hand-painted pennies. he explained that he's recently begun moving away from straight portraiture to add a narrative element to his work, as in a fantasy encounter between sade and zapp's recently deceased roger troutman.

lessner credits exposure to lori d., in part, for the new direction. the two met after some friends in los angeles helped get her a show at space 1026 and they kept in touch, collaborating on a 'zine that mixed his figures with her illustrated stories about random people she's met. "now i finally got her to ohio," lessner said.

helping with the installation, d. had uncovered a few of her own paintings. they're compelling, childlike fantasy illustrations, evoking an era before concerns about proportion or the illusion of depth.

"i imagine a time when oral tradition was part of communities," she explained. "there was something magical to the stories. i like to celebrate people that i encounter. i like finding narrative situations that i can paint as contemporary folk tales."

delayed in his car trip from philly to columbus, wright was represented only by a stack of screen prints that displayed an interest in trippy decorative forms and the cartoon universe, through a one-on-one basketball game between bart simpson and his black self.

on the trip here, the artist described his widely varied contribution to the final show over a cell phone. the prints will be accompanied by drawings and a video presentation titled *ich bin ein manipulator*, a sequel to wright's award-winning animated short about body image absurdity, *the manipulators*. like the original, wright formed the new motion picture from magazine clippings, sharpies and wite-out.

he'll also bring a new 'zine the three artists have worked on together, which includes a screen print on virtually every page, according to lessner. it will be a featured item in one of wright's other concepts for the exhibit, "a dream merch table" that makes original art more affordable for the buyer and pocket money more accessible to the artist. t-shirts and tote bags printed by lessner and wright's handmade buttons, with absurd sentiments like "baby dangler" (a nod to michael jackson) and "guns are for nuns," will also be stocked.

"you salivate over it and want everything on it," wright explained, mustering his inner huckster. "you know, for the people."

"snakeskin lightning" is on display at mahan gallery through september 30. call 294-3278 for details.