

CODY CRITCHELOE

SSION

BOY



First things first! It's SSION, pronounced "shun," as in mission, fission, ambition—all apt words to describe the gesamtkunstwerk or total work of art that is Cody Critchelo and the queer punk/performance/art band he invented ten years back as a high school student in Lewisport, Kentucky. In the time since then, SSION has released 4 full-length records, toured extensively throughout the United States, and enjoyed cult status among fans and music writers who have lauded Critchelo as everything from Out magazine's Hottest Artist of the Year to "Prince's love child"ⁱⁱ to the "one true master" of "high-concept sleaze pop."ⁱⁱⁱ Despite gushy reviews from tastemaking music blogs, indie magazines, and the mainstream press, SSION has largely (and only until now, one hopes) escaped the attention of the contemporary art world and critical art press. Here's why, I suspect: SSION is more fun than we think art should be. Critchelo's songs are catchy, not abstract, and his visuals and live shows are crafted to appeal to more than an art-going crowd. SSION could easily cross over to become a pop phenomenon—a potentiatiy (or prophecy) which, in a stroke of self-reflexive genius, Critchelo has already written into the narrative arc of his work to date. The story of SSION is a raucous, loughed up, camp parody of Critchelo's own life, in which a small-town punk kid hooked on doughnuts and pizza follows his dreams with razor focus to emerge as a svelte, smoky-eyed pop star embraced by adoring crowds. And here, it seems, is the catch. While the annals of art and film give us plenty of examples to draw on for theorizing the artist's alter ego (Duchamp's *Rose Sélavy*) the image-obsessed dandy (Warhol, Hirst, Koons, etc.) the high-camp auteur (Waters, Jack Smith, and recently, Ryan Trecartin) and the concept band (Yoko Ono, Tracy and The Plastics) the discourse is less prescribed for an artist and musician who straddles all of these genres while aspiring to create work that actually is pop in the broadest and most populist sense of the word.



SSION, *Wolves Eye* music video still from *Fool's Gold*, 2009.



SSION, *Warm Glove* music video still from *Fool's Gold*, 2009.

SSION's first feature-length film, *BOY*, affords a fresh opportunity to consider the band's work in the context of popular media and within the discourses of contemporary art. To situate the work in this way is to necessarily highlight a degree of fluidity, criticality and complexity in the work that far exceeds the typical coming-of-age movie or arena concert experience.

BOY brings together nine separately shot but jointly conceived music videos for SSION's 2007 record *Fool's Gold*. The movie opens with an animated sketch of the teenage Critchelo hanging out and smoking cigarettes with his female muse and imaginary best friend known only as The Woman (played by Shannon Michalski). A detour on the pair's afternoon drive delivers them to the Church of Satan, where, oozing youthful ennui and amused by the idea of a grand Eternity, Critchelo gamely signs over his soul by charging a fifty-dollar initiation fee to his mother's debit card.

The title *BOY*, we soon realize, is offered with a wink: Critchelo's work is as avid in its excavation and bending of female archetypes as it is dedicated to Critchelo's own journey, which can't be separated from the intensely powerful influences of the women around him. As in earlier works, the character of Critchelo's mother is treated with equal parts sentimentality and scorn. (A graphite drawing accompanying the *Fool's Gold* album depicts Critchelo's mother with pleading eyes and a blank field where her mouth would be.) In *BOY*, Critchelo's choice to join forces with the Dark Prince kicks off a delightfully genderfucked Oedipal battle. An otherwise absent father figure is ghosted by the coy queen who plays Critchelo's "Ma," and who willingly submits to Critchelo's taunts and recriminations for a youth lived with one foot shoved in the closet. "I only walk like a fag cuz of all of my blisters," Critchelo snarls, "and I only fuck girls cuz you and dad never gave me a sister. That's what I did...that's what I do...that's who I am...that's what I choose."ⁱⁱⁱ

Writing about women in Andy Warhol's films, Jennifer Doyle notes how "many of the most significant gay male artists of the twentieth century frequently put women in their work, not only as iconic placeholders for an idealized, deconstructed, or camp version of femininity but as crucial allies in the attempt to make a livable life out of a world organized against the minority sexual subject."^{iv} *BOY* invokes this strategy with a generational twist: in the twenty-first century, Critchelo and The Woman blaze trails for each other, with Critchelo going so far as to yield his total project—fame, career, control—to The Woman by the end of the movie. Even if we read this move as somewhat suspect (could *BOY* really be a feminist movie?) it is difficult to imagine Andy Warhol making a film about gifting the Factory to Valerie Solanas.

The boys in *BOY* can't be overlooked, of course, and there are plenty of them in variations to suit and stimulate most any kind of gaze. In "Street Jizz" they figure as waifish urchins and bottoms in tightly whities partying on Critchelo's bed, which has eyeballs for bedposts and a headboard significantly emblazoned with the letters R.I.P. As the young Critchelo comes further into his own, he's backed by a band of classic punks, and later, by a group of stoic cave guys whose long beards and loincloths contrast sharply with Critchelo's tonsure-like do. "It feels real," Critchelo intones over their orgiastic brawl in a bonfire, "when all the dudes cry...or at least try...I think I'm gonna cry...I really wanna cry...."^v

SSION, *Day Job* music video production image from *Fool's Gold*, 2009.



SSION, *BOY* production images and video stills, 2007-2009.

Whenever a big, glassy crocodile tear does roll down Critcheloe's porcelain cheek, he flicks it off, despite the Woman's betrayal in "Warm Glove" and a total female takeover in "Bullshit." Critcheloe's character is nothing if not resilient, and after being wheeled off in a chair by the Fortune Teller (played by DeDe DeVille) at the end of "Bullshit," he sheds his mermaid tail to rise to full fame and glory with a concert performance of the song "Clown." Feted by confetti and roses, the energized pop star seems unstoppable until in the midst of his next song, "Fear Us," he is confronted by The Woman, who has undergone a parallel transformation from carefree youth to hard-edged power broker and celebrity in her own right.

The pleasure of SSION's excesses, and thus the satisfaction of spectatorship, tends to accumulate in details which Critcheloe has a way of making look off-handed. In actuality, SSION couldn't exist without the dozens of collaborators who move in and out of the group's various frames of production as costume designers, musicians, set painters, camera operators, photographers, and so on. Likewise, SSION's hilarity and skillful manipulation of signs don't come from just one voice, but from a cadre of artists (mostly under age 30) for whom the legacies of Woodstock, Stonewall, Waters, the Cockettes, early MTV, AIDS, Punk, Nancy Reagan's "Just Say

No" to drugs campaign, "Pee Wee's Playhouse," "Roseanne," *Nowhere, Wild at Heart*, etc. are living texts, to be appropriated and overwritten alongside PerezHilton.com and Courtney Love's Twitter feed. The fact that many of these collaborators are too young to remember what the onset of the AIDS crisis, for example, felt like, means that they are free to remix it in whatever way they wish. The burden of history isn't lifted or swept under the rug in this scenario: rather the rug is snapped up, chopped up, and reconfigured into an "omni-sexual"^{vi} survival parka replete with spandex pockets, belts, convertible hoods—everything a globe-trotting pop star and his entourage need to survive the next great culture war or apocalypse.

BOY is SSION's most ambitious project to date, but already the band is at work on a new record and a new set of projects. At the time of this writing, it remains to be seen what will happen to Critcheloe's character, to The Woman, and to her fearsome backing band, Waiting to Exhale. Will Critcheloe ultimately reclaim the power he's ceded to his fierce heroine and shadow? Is there much time left for The Woman? Or will Critcheloe remain in a state of expertly played Warholian affect, a "gay/punk Forrest Gump" apparently content to let the golden confetti blow where it may? Only time and Critcheloe will tell.

Stacy Switzer
Artistic Director
Grand Arts
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Notes

ⁱBoy George, <<<http://twitter.com/theboygeorge>>>, Summer 2009.

ⁱⁱJessica Hopper, "SSION has come a long, long way," *Chicago Tribune*, May 29, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱSSION, "Ah Ma," *Fool's Gold*, 2007.

^{iv}Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 75.

^vSSION, "A Wolfe's Eye," *Fool's Gold*, 2007.

^{vi}Ari Fish quoted in Alice Thorson, "The Break-Out Artists," *Kansas City Star*, July 26, 2009.

SSION, *BOY* production image, 2009.





SSION, BOY production images and video stills, 2007-2009.

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SSION, BOY production image, 2009.

