



LUIS GISPERT CHEERLEADER SERIES 2001-2002
KENDALL CAMPUS ART GALLERY • MIAMI-DADE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Luis Gispert's "Cheerleader Series," 2001-2002

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In Luis Gispert's video *Block Watching* (2002), a pretty blond cheerleader improbably laden with gold jewelry vamps, wriggles and Hip Hop dances before the camera while gazing provocatively out at the viewer, lip synching (and her movements coordinated to) the sounds of an extended car alarm. The piece is funny, clever, even charming. Once encountered, it is impossible to hear a car alarm without envisioning Gispert's gyrating lass. Like the sounds made by the alarm, the work resonates in the viewer's mind, calling up multiple levels of meaning and association through its confusion of cultural stereotypes and codes, i.e., cheerleader costume/"ghetto girl" jewelry, pep rally cheer/car culture and Hip Hop, innocent virgin/sexual provocateur.

Block Watching is part of Gispert's "Cheerleader Series," which consists of two videos and eleven photographs produced between early 2001 and late 2002. The young women featured in these works wear the familiar, perky little costumes and regulation white socks and sneakers of cheerleaders. Most sport a profusion of gold jewelry—chains and charms on wrists, ankles and around their necks, large earrings, rings on every finger and clunky Rolex watches. The majority has exceedingly long, elaborately polished fingernails (acrylics). A few suggest stereotypically white (and blond) suburban teenagers; others are black, Hispanic and Asian. In the photographs, the cheerleaders are set in range of tableaux and quasi-narrative situations. Some of these are instilled with a sense of wonder, while others are quite mundane. In *Bowling Ball* (2001), two young women compete for a jump ball, as in basketball, but it is a bright red bowling ball that hovers overhead (invisible suspension wires play an important part in these works). *Three Asian Cheerleaders* (2001) presents a pony-tailed young woman ascending like the Madonna in a Renaissance painting, looking down at the Pieta offered by her companions below. In *Car Girls* (2002), two cheerleaders in heavy glamour make-up sit in the back seat of a limousine, one of them appearing to be in a particularly anxious state.

Working with high intelligence and considerable insight, Gispert plays with and subverts expectation and American cultural stereotypes. He derives his imagery from American popular culture—from movies, television, advertising and music videos—as well as from high art. Gispert's work is also informed by his experience of having grown up in Miami in the 1980s, particularly by the city's strain of Hip Hop music known as Booty Bass (popularized by groups like 2LiveCrew), as well as by car culture and drug and gang warfare. Hip Hop, which originated in New York City in the late '70s and spread to Miami, Detroit and Los Angeles by the mid-'80s, has since not only extended into "ghetto" style and rap but has transcended its original racial, social and economic spheres to become a nation-wide youth culture. Thus while purposefully exploited and exaggerated in his work, Gispert's hybridization of codes is reflective of today's multi-cultural stew.

While the "Cheerleader Series" was produced in New York, where the artist currently resides, his Miami background played a significant part in the formulation of *Hoochie Goddess* (2001). The cheerleader in this photograph hovers in the air, her closed eyes, posture, hand gestures and gold jewelry suggesting a Hindu goddess or Buddhist Bodhisattva, both symbols of benevolence and peace. This young woman's teeth, however, are bared and threatening, an impression reinforced by the saber-like nails on hands held in what the artist has indicated are Miami street gang signs and by the fact that the gold charm dangling upon her chest is in the shape of a gun. This gun, which recurs elsewhere in the series, is the Tek-9, an inexpensive automatic pistol invented in Miami, which is now used nationwide and referred to frequently in movies and Hip Hop lyrics.ⁱ In these same lyrics, the term "hoochie" is used to refer to a sexually active woman.

As in the other photographs in the series, the "goddess" figure is not set in the everyday world, but against a continuous green backdrop showing no demarcation between ceiling, wall and floor. A trick of cinematic matte photography (Gispert received a BFA in film from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1996 before going on for his MFA in sculpture at Yale), a Chroma-Key Green background is used to place the figures in luminous, indeterminate space (in film, the green screen would be replaced by a projected image). "Gispert views the green color as a "utopian background" upon which the viewer can project any "idealized" image."ⁱⁱ The green backgrounds

are at once atmospheric and flat; although vague shadows are seen and space appears to enclose the figures, the green surface presses the images of the cheerleaders up against the picture plane, isolating and silhouetting their forms. This iconic treatment of the cheerleaders enhances the artifice of the whole. Gispert's symmetrical organization of the cheerleaders in some of the works and careful balancing of figures and compositional elements in others are further manifestations of the artist's formal economy and control. The green color, which unites both the works of this series and each individual work's surface, can also be understood to connote a certain freshness and purity that seems appropriate to the subject of cheerleaders, both through associations with suburban lawns and playing fields as well as with expressions of wholesomeness, robust health and athleticism.

At the same time, cheerleaders stand as enduring objects of lust. Consider, for example, the 1978 porn classic *Debbie Does Dallas*, in which a small town girl will stop at nothing for a shot at becoming a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader (a PG version is currently playing on New York's Broadway), and the recent award-winning movie *American Beauty* (1999) in which Kevin Spacey plays a suburban father engaged in an intense midlife crisis who becomes erotically obsessed with his daughter's cheerleader friend. In Gispert's photograph *Wraseling Girls* (2002), two young women wearing cheerleader uniforms, gold jewelry, acrylic nails and the like engage in combat, as in a scene from the World Wrestling Federation television show. The pose, as the artist has revealed, actually derives from two old master sources—Bernini's *Rape of Proserpina*, but more importantly, Pollaiuolo's *Hercules and Antaeus*.ⁱⁱⁱ The expressions on the women's faces are clearly those of sexual ecstasy, the combination of "cat fight" and implied lesbian lovers here being among the ultimate clichés of male erotic fantasy. The many reflections of light that glint off the women's lips, teeth, skin and jewelry in this rather dark image, further objectify the cheerleaders and serve as reminders of a parallel body of work—Gispert's reconfigured go-cart sculptures composed of car accessories, gleaming chrome, hardwoods, leather, fake furs, rhinestones and stereo speakers emitting throbbing bass sounds—that also gives representation to hybridized emblems of masculine desire.

The works in Gispert's "Cheerleader Series" stand in opposition to the pornographic imagery they often invoke. They are dispassionate, highly staged and abstracted (formally controlled) representations of objects of passion that not only deflate desire, but objectify and mock it through humor, artifice and the intellectually provocative composite nature of their imagery. As Gene Moreno observed of these works, "They make us interrogate ourselves, interrogate looking, lusting, thinking, not thinking, the habitualization that blunts desire's unregulated drive."^{iv}

In *Laundry* (2002), the last work in the "Cheerleader Series," the tiny tops and skirts of the cheerleader uniforms are hung like wash upon a line that extends across an endless expanse of sky. The laundry line is a thick gold chain and the clothespins are covered in gold leaf; rather than being secured, the line floats freely at one end, leaving the whole to flutter in the breeze. While representing the artist's farewell to the series (the models have gone home and the uniforms hung out to dry), the photograph also deifies the cheerleader yet again as an enduring symbol of desire (both female and male: the conventional female desire to be and the male desire to have) and as an American (red, white and blue) ideal.

i Conversation with the artist, May 6, 2003.

ii Email from the artist, May 14, 2003.

iii Conversation, May 6, 2003.

iv Gene Moreno, "Ouverture: Luis Gispert," *Flash Art* XXXV (November-December 2002).