

MAG

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New Nostalgia By Monika Burman

I usually breeze by Toronto's music channel while surfing cable TV, but last spring I was compelled to watch as I caught a glimpse of a familiar face. That face was Stephen Appleby-Barr, and he was being interviewed at the opening of his first solo exhibition, called "Nortammag Archives", at Magic Pony. This month, the young artist brings us his second solo show, called "Invisible College", on view at Narwhal Art Projects in Toronto.

Both of Appleby-Barr's solo exhibitions focus on a group of characters who, as the artist describes, "[share] aspirations and beliefs [that] are at an odd angle with the rest of their culture." This common bond brings them together in a fraternity, or secret society, and the artwork serves as historical documentation of their membership, activities and ideals.

The "Invisible College" series is composed primarily of oil paintings, produced in a classical portraiture style with rich, deep colours, beautiful painterly qualities and a varnished finish. The scenes are full of details of the age from formal fashions, and velvet drapes to ornate furnishings, and signature wax seals. His, "Neon Rider" exemplifies the historical age, but curious details, like the horned, bag-like headdress add an element of mystery and oddity.

The characterizations of the people in these works reference, and perhaps even lionize, people in the artist's life. The cat, featured in "Punchy with Cricketbat" is a portrait of a feline friend that Appleby-Barr and his Team Macho (www.teammacho.com) mates met when they moved into their studio several years ago. As the artist described, "His name is Punchy and in his tiny body he holds the spirit of our endeavours." The painting is charming and brings some levity into the mix. In "The Invisible College", if you're familiar with Team Macho, you may spy them within the ranks of this old school hockey team.

Though he only started painting in oil two years ago, Appleby-Barr's understanding of historical painting and portraiture is evident. It's an art classic paired with the exciting imagination of the artist, and there is a definite appeal to this work with its new nostalgia feel.

Invisible College by Stephen Appleby-Barr, Through November 29th, 2009.
Narwhal Art Projects, Toronto. www.narwhalartprojects.com

Page 14: Stephen Appleby-Barr, Neon Rider, Oil on canvas, 2009

Page 15: Stephen Appleby-Barr, The Invisible College, Oil on canvas, 2009

narwhal art projects, **toronto**

