



Kelly Towles Underdog

Mixed Media Paintings and Digital Prints
December 17 - January 29

ADAMSON GALLERY
406 7th Street NW
Washington DC 20004

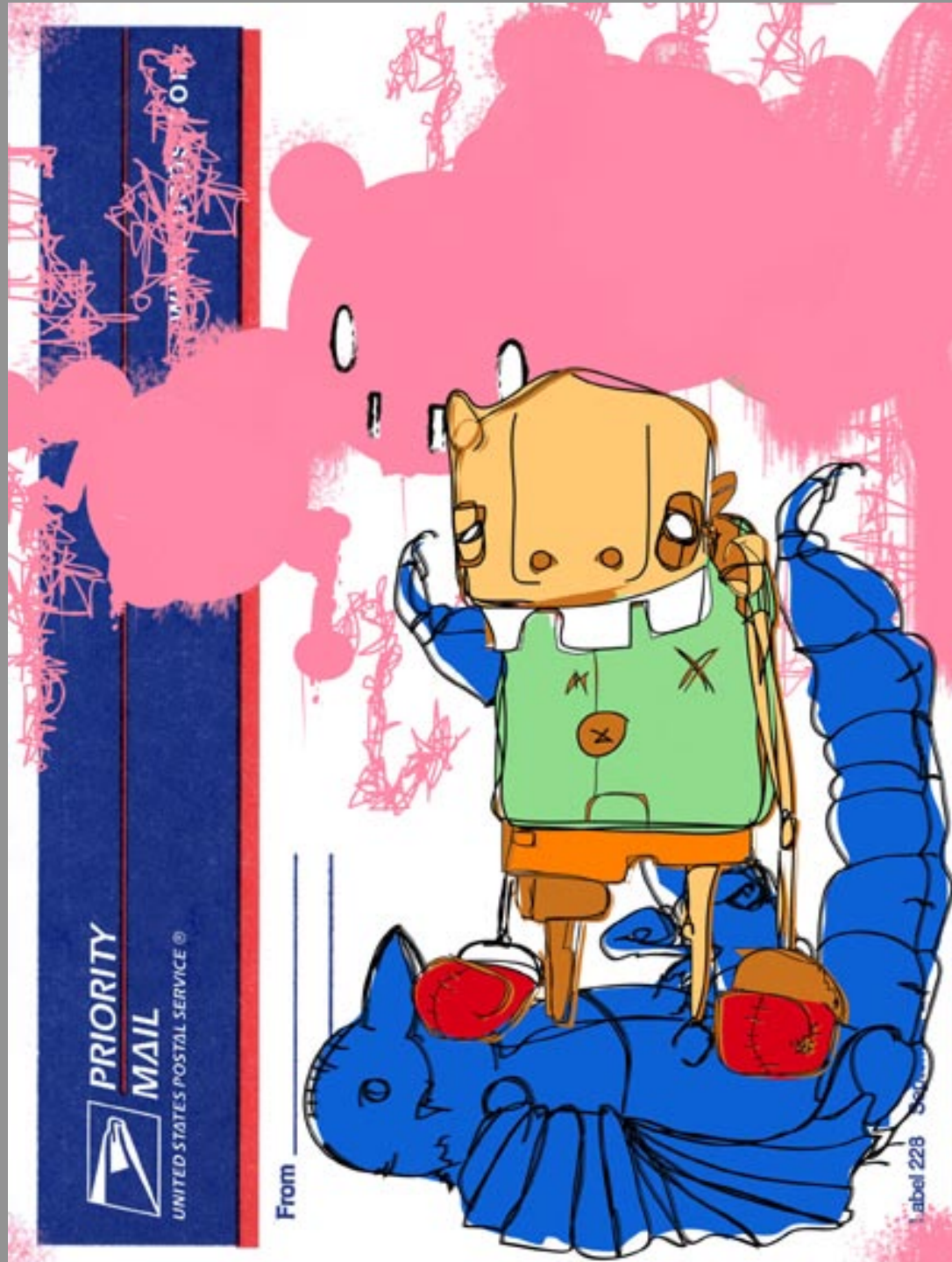
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www.adamsoneditions.com

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Power, 2004
Digital Pigment Print
53 x 40"
Edition of 7

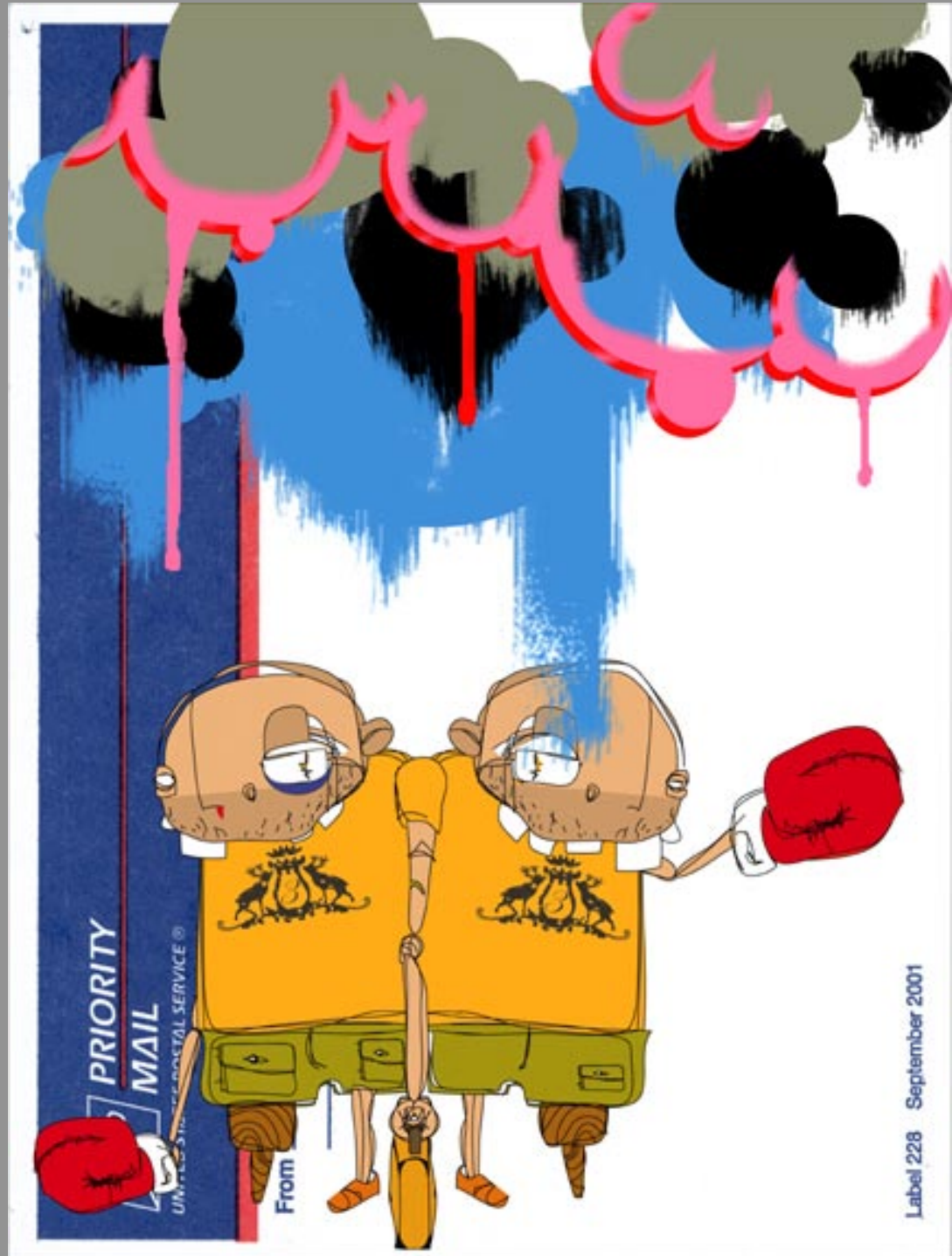
On Top of the Fallen, 2004
Digital Pigment Print
53 x 40"
Edition of 7





The Procession, 2004
Digital Pigment Print
24 x 32"
Edition of 15

Don't Make Me Tell You Twice, 2004
Digital Pigment Print
32 x 24"
Edition of 15



Label 228 September 2001



These Days Are Better, 2004
Digital Pigment Print
32 x 24"
Edition of 15



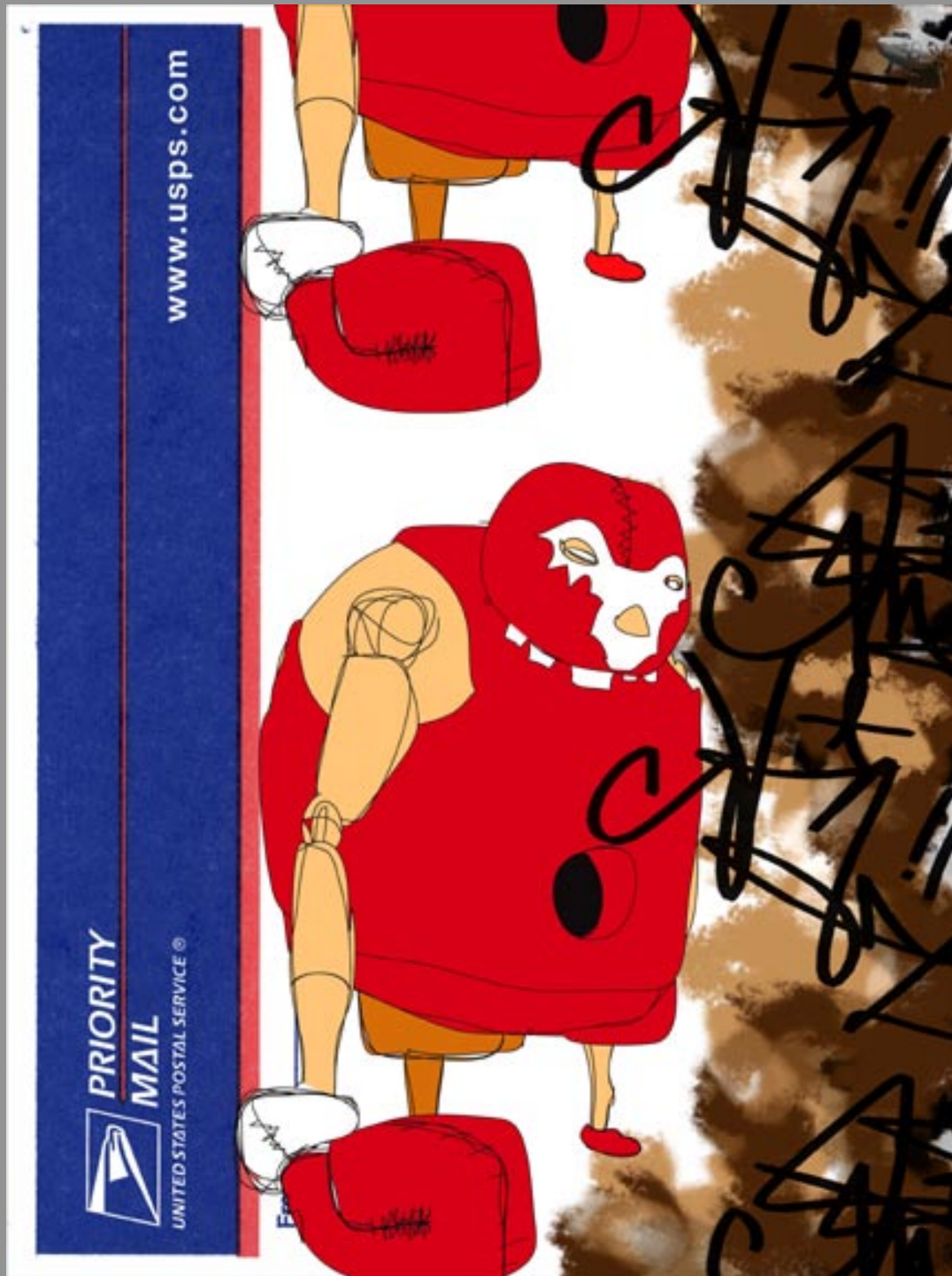
Ignite the Igniter, 2004
Digital Pigment Print
24 x 32"
Edition of 15

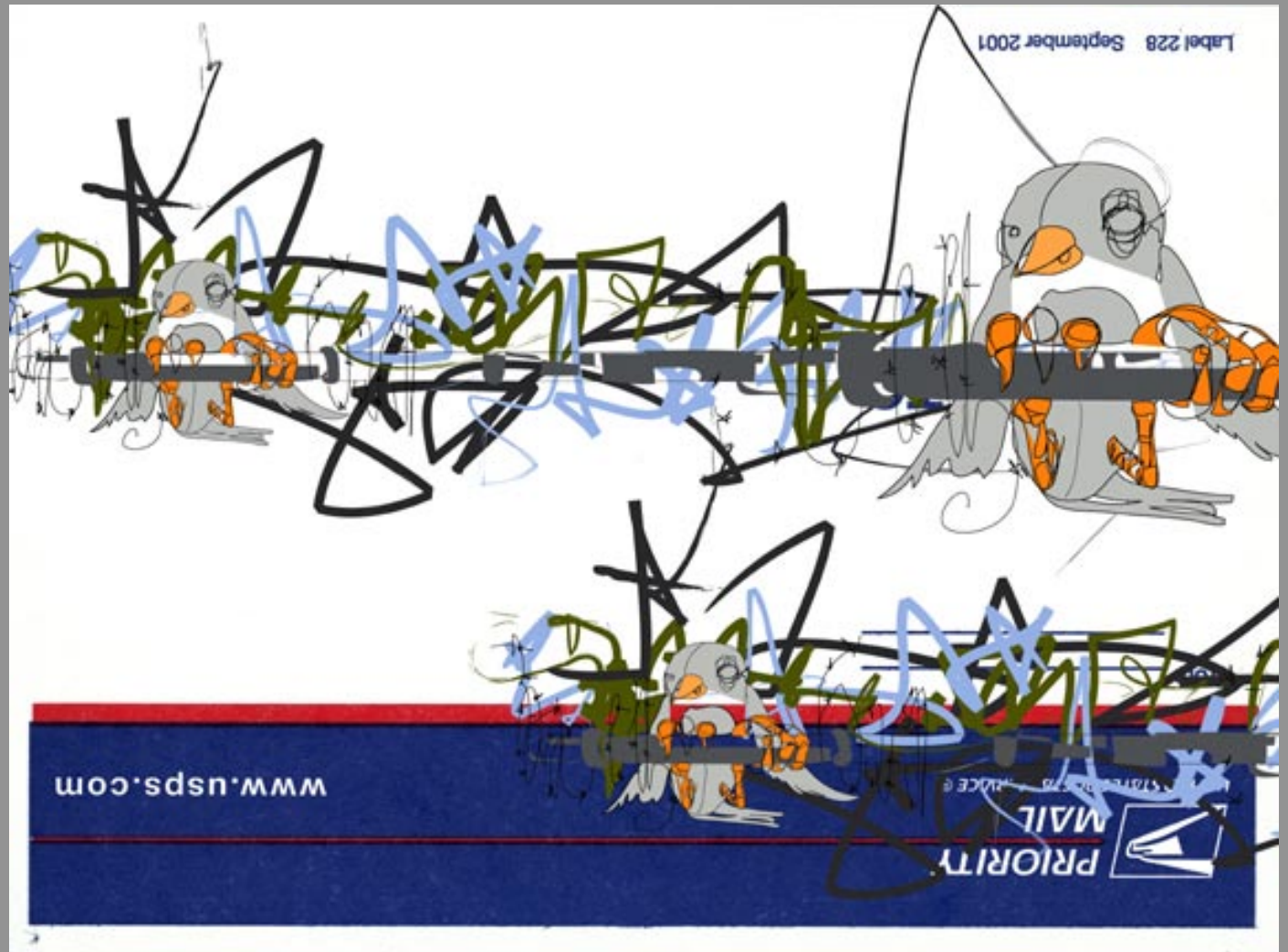
Bubble Monster, 2004
Digital Pigment Print
32 x 24"
Edition of 15



Label 228 September 2001

Crush Me Twice, 2004
Digital Pigment Print
32 x 24"
Edition of 15





On the Razor's Edge, 2004
Digital Pigment Print
40 x 53"
Edition of 7



Candy of Your Life, 2004
Digital Pigment Print
32 x 24"
Edition of 15



Sleepy Pillow, 2004
Ink on wood
8 x 6 x 3/4"

Waiting for Time to Die, 2004
Ink on wood
16 1/2 x 12 x 1"



Mommy Say I'm Special, 2004
Ink on wood
10 x 7 3/4 x 3/4"





Head of the Family, 2004
Ink on wood
14 x 11 1/2 x 1"



Fly the Friendly Fuckin' Skies, 2004
Ink on wood
8 1/2 x 6 x 3/4"



Such Great Heights, 2004
Ink on wood
19 x 12 1/4 x 1



Bean Boys, 2004
Ink on wood
16 1/4 X 12 1/2 X 1"



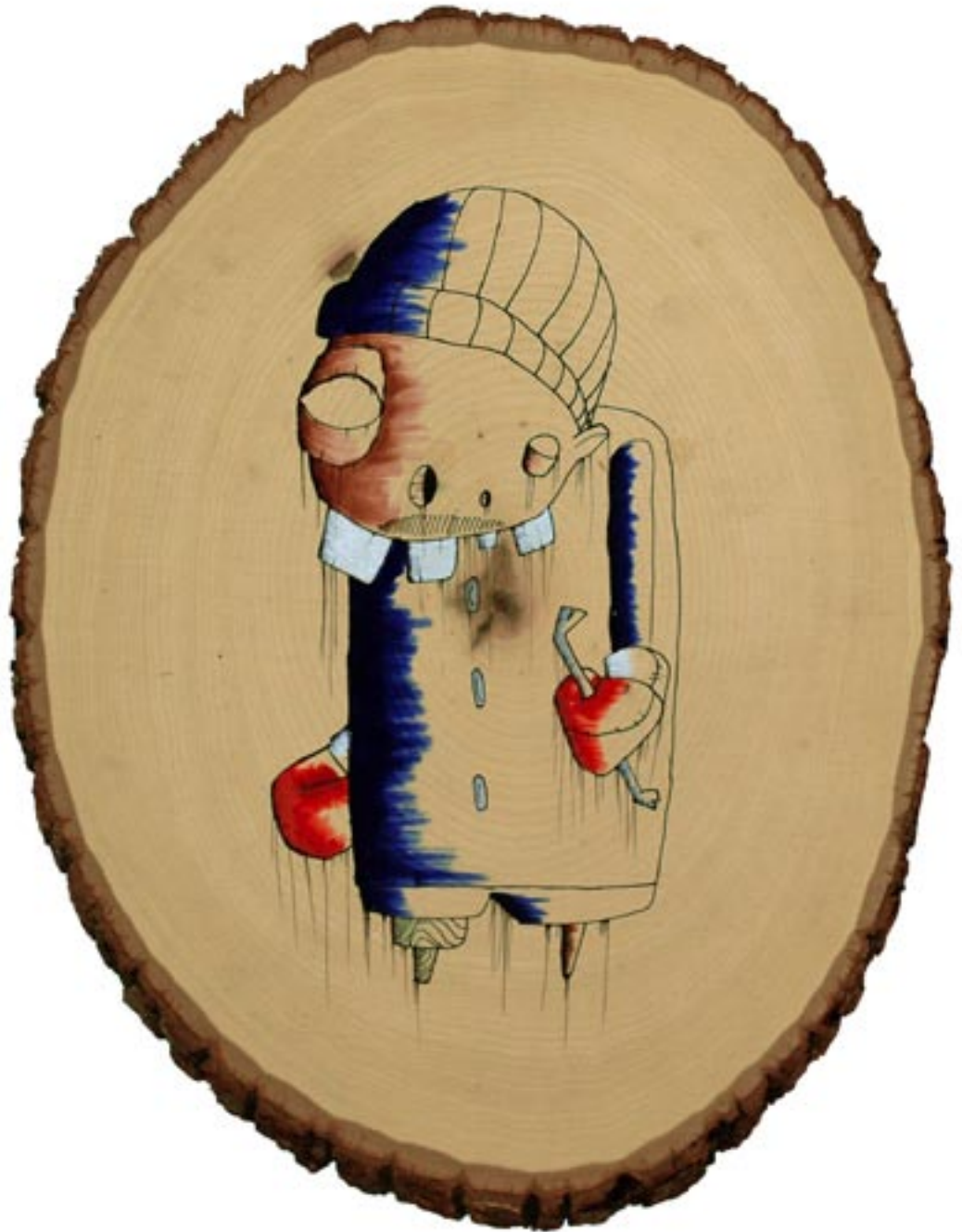
Kabuke Wood Warrior, 2004
Ink on wood
16 x 11 x 1"



Find Your Own Eggs, 2004
Ink on wood
9 1/4 x 6 3/4 x 3/4"



Cuddly, Fuzzy Bastard, 2004
Ink on wood
9 1/2 x 7 x 1/2"



Ball Buster, 2004
Ink on wood
15 x 11 1/2 x 1"



Simple Holiday, 2004
Ink on wood
14 3/4 x 12 x 1"



Little State Champ of the Room, 2004

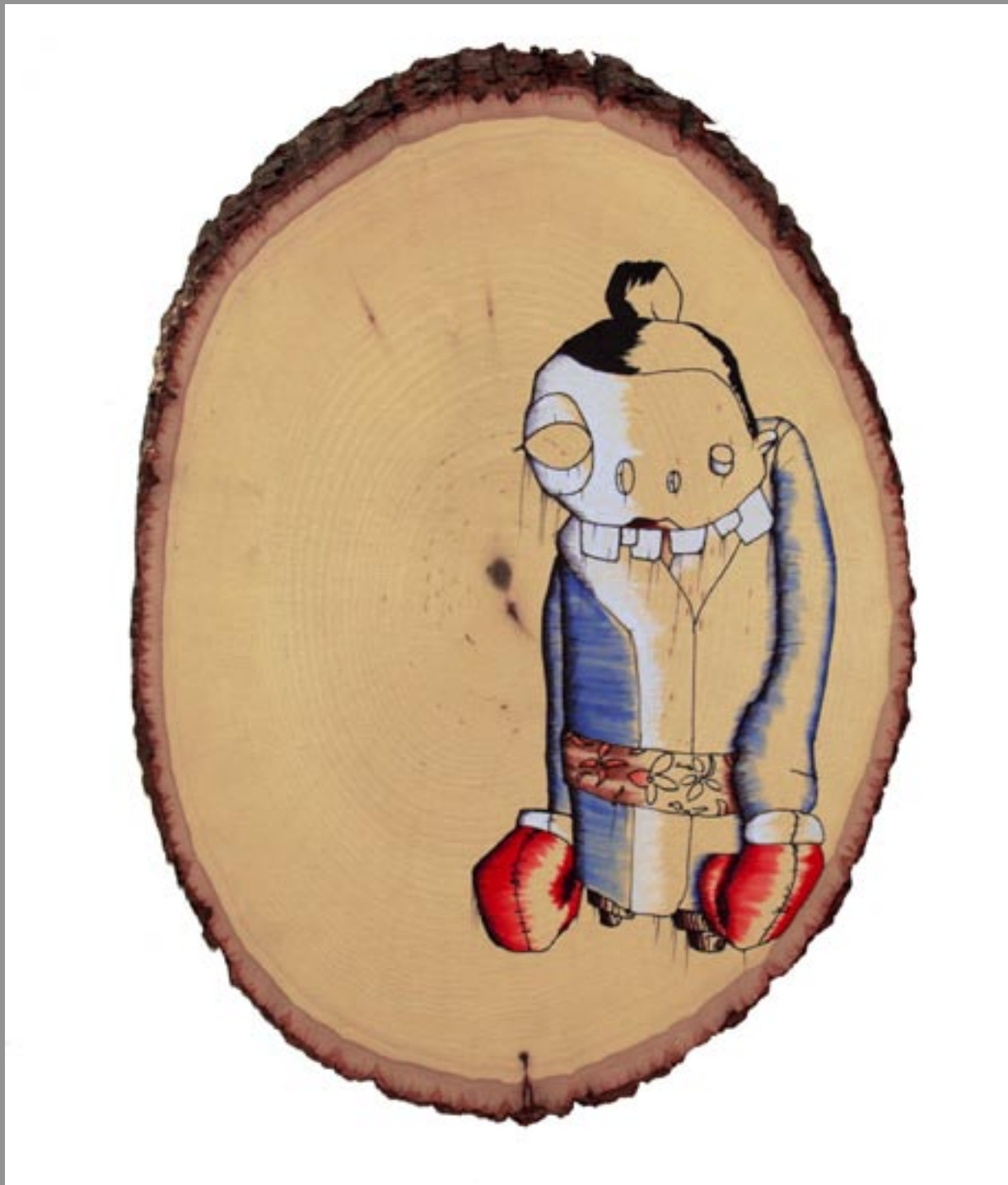
Ink on wood

7 1/2 x 5 x 1/2"



Crusher, 2004
Ink on wood
9 3/4 x 7 1/4 x 1/2"

It Covers the Past, 2004
Ink on wood
5 1/2 x 11 1/4 x 1"





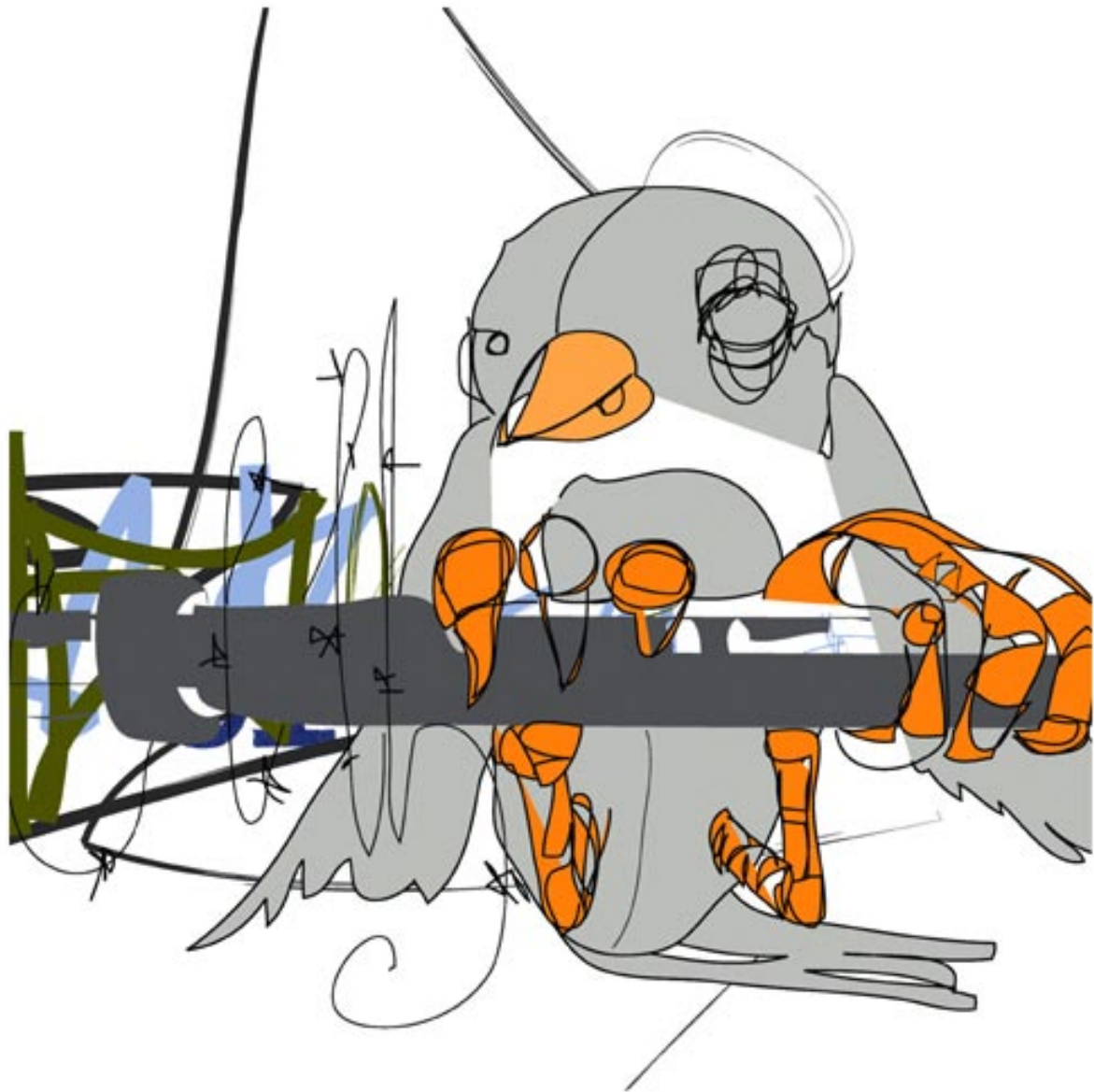
Throw the Bones, 2004
Ink on wood
10 x 8 x 3/4"



Beer Helmets Rule, 2004
Ink on wood
8 x 5 3/4 x 1/2"




Fuckin' Dunce, 2004
Ink on wood
9 3/4 x 7 3/4 x 3/4"



Detail of **On the Razor's Edge**, 2004
Digital Pigment Print
12 x 12"
Edition of 25

A Written Statement, 2004
Digital Pigment Print
13 3/4 x 10 1/2"
Edition of 25



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The Washington Times

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'Underdog' gruesomely compelling

By Joanna Shaw-Eage

Published January 8, 2005

Visitors to the David Adamson Gallery enter the macabre fantasy world of Kelly Towles' "Underdog" -- an exhibit that reveals Mr. Towles as one of the most original art talents in town.

Considering the implications of the word "underdog," the title inevitably provokes questions.

Who is the "underdog"? Are the distorted paintings and digital-pigment computer prints of down-and-out men with peg legs and broken buck teeth alter egos of the artist? What do their missing body limbs imply? Are their attached red boxing gloves instruments of violence? And what is the meaning of the downtrodden birds?

Although viewers may not immediately guess the implications of these personal symbols, they intuitively recognize the rage and black humor expressed through them. The digital print titled "On Top of the Fallen," one of the exhibit's most gruesome, shows an idiotic-looking peg-legged man jumping on a fallen bird.

Intimations of violence are introduced, as well, through a Soviet Red Army soldier cradling a flamethrower in "Ignite the Igniter" and a frustrated man firing a revolver in "These Days Are Better."

Mr. Towles, 28, describes the flamethrower's threat: "The man operating the flamethrower has to ignite it by pulling a trigger that shoots out gas -- and he's about ready to do this. So watch out."

Usually critics place the artist in a street-graffiti-comic-book-pop-art box, but his work is much more inventive than that suggests.

Commenting on his art during an interview at the Gallery, he identifies himself as the "underdog." "It symbolizes where I've come from and what I'm overcoming," says the tall, black-haired artist with just a wisp of a beard.

His "where" was a childhood of hardship and insecurity. Mr. Towles describes himself as an "Air Force brat" with the family moving frequently -- and his father deserting his mother, two brothers and himself almost as often. After the last, permanent break, his mother got a job at the University of Maryland in College Park to make her sons' bachelor's degrees possible.

"I'm still trying to understand why he left," the artist says, and his use of quasi-humorous, tragic symbols seems to sum up his attempts at understanding. For example, the legless men are powerless because they've lost important physical strengths, boxing gloves stand for life's struggles, and birds symbolize the high goals for which people strive.

Just as Mr. Towles' imagery is individual, so, also, is his use of scale and technique. In response to Laurie and David Adamson's invitation to expand his digital-pigment images to the gallery's surrounding walls, he enlarged the peg-legged men to mural-size proportions. They're strangely reminiscent of Francisco de Goya's darkly drawn "Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" prints.

Though it's obvious that Mr. Towles doesn't make pretty pictures, his ability to express tortured anguish and prolonged sadness makes his art profoundly moving and special.

WHAT: "Underdog"

WHERE: David Adamson Gallery, 406 Seventh St. NW

WHEN: 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays. Through Jan. 29.

TICKETS: Free

PHONE: 202/628-0257 or www.adamsoneditions.com

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Root For This 'Underdog'

By Michael O'Sullivan
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, December 24, 2004; Page WE26

CALLING AN ART exhibition "Underdog" suggests a lot of things, not the least of which is speculation as to whether the artist might have a bit of an inferiority complex.

After all, the last place I saw Kelly Towles's work was at the recent, much-maligned Artomatic, an uncurated discharge of art -- both sweet and smelly -- that briefly flowed forth to fill the now-shuttered Capital Children's Museum. Before that, it was on the living room wall of a private residence on the Hill, whose owner had opened her home to a fly-by-night art-show-cum-house-party intended to cultivate young and novice collectors. And before that, it was part of the D.C. Arts Center's "1460 Wall Mountables," another show open to all comers with a hammer and a nail and work that could fit inside a two-foot square.

Talk about coming up in the world.

The David Adamson Gallery, known for representing such artists as blue-chip Chuck Close, Jim Dine, Lyle Ashton Harris, Judy Pfaff, Donald Sultan and William Wegman, is Towles's new home. He didn't take long to make it his own.

Fans of Towles's work (among whom I count myself) will appreciate the modest irony of his appearance in the tony Seventh Street gallery, where the graffiti- and comics-inspired artist has done a bit of on-the-cheap redecorating, starting with the walls. If the wraparound mural featuring several dripping renditions of Towles's signature dunce-cap-wearing, boxing-gloved figure (a stand-in for the artist?) is less radical than the indoor plywood construction-site barricade the artist had been contemplating installing, it is nonetheless considerably livelier than what one typically finds in Washington.

Add to that the artwork itself -- largely, pictures of peg-legged misfits, battered sad sacks and broken-toothed losers, painted on pieces of unfinished lumber hung from visible nails by means of packing twine -- and you'll understand the show's self-deprecating moniker. Even the artist's slickly framed digital prints (mainly enlargements of images the artist has printed on Priority Mail labels, and which he was giving away for free at Artomatic) have a certain underground *je ne sais quoi* that belies their high-end presentation.

Towles, of course, doesn't merely fit into the tradition of the outsider artist (a largely meaningless designation these days anyway since the wholesale embrace of the "street" by the fine art establishment). In a sense, he's simply carrying on the age-old tradition of the history painter, except in his case the vernacular narrative is more opaque and the hero, well, less heroic.

What exactly is going on, or what has just transpired, in Towles's art is hard to articulate. One thing that's clear is that there has been some kind of struggle. Along with the boxing gloves, the swollen eyes, chipped teeth and missing limbs suggest that. In some cases, the appearance of firearms -- whether real, as in the arms of a Red Army soldier, or toy, as in the hands of a cowboy-suited child -- suggests an ongoing threat, or, at the very least, suppressed anger. Did I say suppressed? There's nothing equivocal about the rage expressed in the print of a snarling guard dog at the show's entrance.

More than anything else, though, what Towles's art exudes is a sense of bemused resignation. The world he shows us is one in which childhood is every inch as scary as adulthood, and in which adulthood is defined not by achievement but, apparently, by one's ability to handle constant defeat.

It will be interesting to see whether Towles's impending personal success spoils -- or enriches -- the artist's wry and jaundiced art.

KELLY TOWLES: UNDERDOG -- *Through Jan. 29 at David Adamson Gallery, 406 Seventh St. NW (Metro: Gallery Place-Chinatown). 202-628-0257. www.adamsoneditions.com. Open Tuesday-Friday 11:30 to 5 and Saturdays noon to 5. Free.*

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Kelly Towles: Where There's A Wall, There's a Way

'Underdog' Places the D.C. Artist in the Urban Baroque Fraternity

By Jessica Dawson
Special to The Washington Post
Thursday, January 6, 2005; Page C05

A decidedly eye-popping strain of urban baroque has flooded recent biennials and museum shows. Its practitioners wallpaper rooms with graffiti and doodles, hang pictures over murals and sometimes even paint the floor. The artists' extravagant moves derive from street art, graffiti writers and sticker stickerers, the guerrilla artists who decorate (or deface) our streets and alleyways.

Some disciples you might have heard of: Franz Ackermann, a German with a psychedelic flair for all-over painting. Barry McGee, a doodler of heavy-lidded men painted on empty bottles, paper or panel and hung over wall-size murals. And the movement's current darling: Assume Vivid Astro Focus, the one-man artist with the collective name who wowed last year's Whitney Biennial with a room of groovy lights and far-out Technicolor pictures.

Now Washington can claim its very own acolyte: Kelly Towles, a 28-year-old graphic designer for Whole Foods who opened his first solo show at David Adamson several weeks back. Called "Underdog," the exhibition encompasses not just salable digital prints and one-of-a-kind mixed-media works on wood, but also a suite of vivid wall drawings establishing both the "Underdog" concept and Towles's inclusion in the urban baroque fraternity.

Towles and his ilk domesticate street-based art forms they admire -- and occasionally practice -- bringing the urban mark-maker into the gallery and turning street style into art world commodity. For "Underdog," Towles painted a small army of large-scale antiheroes directly onto Adamson's walls.

Nearly identical of visage and painted in Easter-bright colors, they tower over gallery visitors. A generous heart might term them ugly ducklings; crueller mouths would say they're hideous. Hollow of eye, pegged of leg, thick of waist and gangly of limb, Towles's Underdogs are a macabre bunch. Each wears a pair of boxing gloves -- an effect more Rocky the Squirrel than Rocky Balboa, since the gloves weigh down their arms like lead mittens. I won't even begin to describe their demented orthodontia.

Yet the figures charm, in a way. Certainly they're non-threatening; their sloping shoulders and feebleness keep us at ease, even if a few Underdogs stand as tall as the gallery's generous ceilings. Their cumulative effect: a gang of narcoleptic, underweight and zombie-eyed adolescents.

Against this backdrop hang domestically scaled digital prints and pictures drawn directly on, or printed and stuck onto, wood panel. The wood panel pictures, though not exact replicas of the Underdogs, bear figures with a family resemblance. Many are painted as portraits on thin sections of tree trunks -- oval wood panels framed by bark and hung from twine nailed to the wall.

The presentation and the medium (Towles bought the panels at a craft store) lend the work a Montessori school feel. It's a self-conscious youthfulness that reminds me of the Canadian collective Royal Art Lodge -- charming, certainly, but perhaps a little too cute.

Meatier ideas coarse through Towles's digital prints, which feature a more sinister cast of characters. Based on Postal Service address labels (a nod to street art sticker makers) that Towles scanned, enlarged and manipulated digitally, the pictures take a more political turn. Each bears the same date, September 2001, which turns Towles's figures -- here a Red Army soldier, there an angry pit bull -- into political references. In this context, the peg-

legged Underdogs begin to look a bit like visions of war wounded.

Towles's political bent situates him as an heir to mid-1980s East Village graffiti artists, Kenny Scharf and Jean-Michel Basquiat among them, who were themselves a liberal-minded bunch. But Towles's work also links up with comic artists of the depraved sort, as epitomized by Robert Crumb. It's an exciting brew that arises not so much from individual works as from the power of his many images. Harnessing the itchiness and energy of youth, Towles has made the gallery zing.

'Time and Materials' at Irvine

Back in the 1960s, when Process art was big, artists wanted to know what happened when time passed: how natural processes, and certain materials, changed over time. Gravity was a major ingredient, as were natural processes such as condensation and decomposition. Like watching an amateur magician at work, artmaking back then was about anticipation -- not to mention uncertainty, since nobody, including the artist, really knew how a piece would turn out.

The movement's latter-day followers, three of whom are on view in Irvine Contemporary Art's "Time and Materials," attempt to update and vary the classic approach. This trio concerns itself with making work that implies the passage of time and underscores the artmaking process.

Like contemporary versions of Man Ray's photograms, Andrew Lyght sets rusting objects on paper and lets oxidation do its thing. The objects seep rust into the paper, in lieu of pigment. Since he's got a penchant for geometric shapes, Lyght's compositions counter the globby, organic forms produced in so much classic Process work. These half-circles, rectangles and saw-toothed edges render abstraction from organic processes; it's intriguing in concept but dull on paper.

Soledad Salame makes large-scale poured resin sculptures with beetles and butterflies suspended inside. They look like oversize amber shards picked up on an archaeological dig. All seem out of place in a gallery setting, as if they'd be better off outdoors (as they have been in the past). One work, seated in a metal stand, feels worryingly close to oversize stained glass.

In the gallery's back room hang John Gasper's monochromatic canvases. To make them, he applies layer upon layer of oil and wax, which he moves around with knife or brush. The endless hours he must have spent applying them may have satisfied his creative itch, but the actions don't pay off for his audience.

Kelly Towles at *David Adamson Gallery, 406 Seventh St. NW, Tuesday-Saturday 11 a.m.-5 p.m., 202-628-0257, to Jan. 29.*

Time and Materials at *Irvine Contemporary Art, 1710 Connecticut Ave. NW, Tuesday-Saturday 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Open house with artists Jan. 8, 1-4 p.m., 202-332-8767, to Jan. 15.*

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