

## Zoë Charlton

By Cara Ober

Zoë Charlton is an instigator. Even from just a short conversation, you can see the mischief in her eyes. It's as if she is, at this very moment, thinking up a wicked and delightful scheme that involves you. Her enthusiasm and her laugh are infectious, so it's no wonder that Zoë's artwork possesses the very same qualities.

When you see a Zoë Charlton drawing, you first notice what isn't there. The drawings are large—human sized—and there's a lot of white space. There's no background. There's no frame. Then you notice the white tube socks with pink stripes fading into the white. After that, you realize you're looking at a nude female figure—she's got large breasts and hips—and there's a...clipper ship protruding from her ass! Huh? Or, she's wearing nothing but water wings. In another, nothing but a Klansman hood and a gold leaf halo.

Mostly female and African-American, with a few hermaphrodites mixed in, these nude figures are often posed lasciviously and at other times ambiguously. Props from contemporary culture abound—air fresheners shaped like pine trees hint at a faux idea of cleanliness, top hats are reminiscent of Abe Lincoln, while the tube socks, pulled up high, are a reminder of basketball in the seventies. All of the contemporary symbols Charlton chooses revolve around modern-day black culture and stereotypes. She draws them classically in pencil with lots of

loose sketchy marks and the occasional flash of bright color.

These oddities, coupled with the traditionally drawn nude figures, make the images anything but conventional. Memorable in their combination of awkward and beautiful elements and always darkly humorous, these drawings have propelled Charlton into the spotlight. Reviewed in ARTnews and Art in America, Charlton has exhibited her drawings in New York, Chicago, DC, Zurich, and in a number of national and international art fairs.

Originally born and educated in Florida, Charlton and husband Rick Dulaney both moved to Texas for grad school. After earning her MFA and a teaching stint in Texas, both moved to the east coast when Charlton was offered a fulltime teaching post at the American University in Washington, D.C. They applied to and were accepted into the live/work studio residency program at the Creative Alliance at the Patterson, so the couple moved to Baltimore. After just two years, Charlton says she is becoming more involved in the art scene here, and preparing for a solo show at Connor Contemporary in fall, 2007.

As part of their Patterson residency, Charlton and Dulaney exhibited a collaborative installation in the main gallery called "There Goes the Neighborhood," in which the couple filled the gallery with hundreds of garden gnomes, care-

fully cultivated grass lawns, and small white picket fences. The punch line of the piece is that the gnomes' skin tones were repainted in five different shades of brown. Rather than complaining about blatant racism and 'white flight' to an idyllic suburbia, under Charlton and Dulaney's hands, the installation made a clear statement of inequality, but in a hilarious and ironic way.

Charlton's artwork about race and sex in contemporary American culture is a hot topic right now. Artists like Kara Walker, Joyce Scott, and Kerry James Marshall have all been propelled to mega-stardom and featured in huge museum exhibits all over the world. Typically, there is a certain amount of implied violence, dark shadows, and a bitter taste left on the tongue when viewing this type of work (and for good reason). Charlton's work has a similar sting to it, but is always accompanied with an authentic belly laugh. Her drawings and newer video works are more like inside jokes and, like a good joke, are shocking because the artist pokes fun at herself as much as at her audience's assumptions about race and sex. Because they are self deprecating, they allow us to be included in the joke, rather than being accusatory or threatening.

Zoë Charlton's work has been expanding lately, to include collaborations with different artists and also video work. In "Token," an exhibit at Pyramid Atlantic in February, 2007, Charlton collaborated with four different artists—in drawings, in video, in sound, and in sculptural installation—to explore the different definitions of a token. Charlton, being the curator and collaborator, was forced to assume different roles, as well as to work in multiple modes at once. Besides an exploration of American cultural values and assumptions, "Token" ended up being a litmus test for all types of artistic collaborations, illustrating the flexibility and growth potential inherent in such projects. According to Charlton, she learned that "there's no formula for good artistic collaboration—except to listen carefully to the other person and to take risks."

When I asked about her latest endeavor—learning to shoot and edit video—Charlton was more facetious in her answer. "In my next project I'm swimming with forty naked men,"



*Surprise, Surprise (from Undercover Series)*  
2006, mixed media 12 x 12 inches

she said. Huh? "Well, I'm dealing with the idea of swimming in this video work and the swimmers have to be naked." Based on Charlton's current body of work, I expect to be surprised by these video pieces and I expect to laugh. A lot.

Zoë Charlton received her MFA degree from the University of Texas at Austin and her BFA from Florida State University in painting and drawing. Charlton has had residencies at the Skowhegan School of Painting and at The Creative Alliance in Baltimore, MD. Her work has been included in national and international exhibitions including the Contemporary Art Museum (Houston, TX), the Studio Museum of Harlem (NYC, NY), Wendy Cooper Gallery (Chicago, IL), Haas & Fischer Gallery (Zurich, Switzerland), and the Zacheta National Gallery of Art (Warsaw, Poland). She is represented by Clementine Gallery (NYC, NY) and Conner Contemporary (Washington, D.C.). She is on the faculty at American University in Washington, D.C. and previous experiences range from being an animator for Flat Black Films in Austin, Texas, to teaching positions at Missouri State University (MO) and Southwestern University (TX). Her work has been reviewed in *ARTnews* and *Art in America*. :UC