

# Stonehouse, Kao combine quirks in playful ‘Hair Club’

Rafael Francisco Salas, Special to the Journal Sentinel *January 23, 2017*



Artists Fred Stonehouse and Raeleen Kao collaborated on “Twins” and other drawings on display at Tory Folliard Gallery.  
(Photo: Tory Folliard Gallery)

For “Hair Club,” on view at the Tory Folliard Gallery, Fred Stonehouse and Raeleen Kao have concocted a mad-libbed series of collaborative drawings that transform their idiosyncratic, artistic quirks into whimsical, poignant golems.

Hair, and its connection to identity, gender and sexuality, governs the narrative of these drawings. Kao’s individual work revolves around hair, her drawings often eliciting the damp, stringy locks of Japanese Yūrei ghosts. Stonehouse’s own lumpy homunculi are pretty much all bald. Both artists have remarked that their drawings are an unconscious form of self-portraiture, so the mashed-up figures they have created for this exhibit seem brought forth from a surreal, schizoid universe. I mean that in the best way possible.

Kao would begin the drawings by creating beautifully wrought locks of hair. She drew braided, wind-blown and bobbed dos in minutely detailed graphite. These nascent drawings were then sent by mail to Stonehouse’s studio, where he would riff on them, adding his bent and defeated personalities from the head down.

A female figure with a spotted salamander’s tail for a body is attached by her hair to a trousered man with dragonfly wings.

He seems to be falling slowly away as the female covers her eyes in grief. A disembodied pair of scissors severs their conjoined pates, separating them. The drawing is called “Divorce.”

Another couple, “Twins,” are also bound together, their braids tied in an inextricable knot. They have no arms, but their legs kick and paw at the ground, trying to get away from themselves. Their mouths issue a radiating energy that surrounds them and comes together in the air above, an abstracted, unknowable language, one red and one black. These dynamic hatches allude to speech, breath, or perhaps even the soul. The drawing feels like a funny but terrifying vision of hell, the twins cursed to spend eternity fighting to escape each other.

Stonehouse’s figures rarely include women, as they usually revolve around alter egos of the artist. He stated, “my jug-headed characters deal with my own, particular jug-headed, male identity.” The elegantly coiffed figures in this show bring a new sensibility to a typical Stonehouse figure. “Nymph” shows a nude woman in pigtails, knee deep in water. She leans forward to curiously gaze at the viewer, her five eyes open wide. There is a levity and a coy eroticism in the drawing that does not usually appear in Stonehouse’s work. I was surprised to find myself reminded of Rembrandt’s sexually charged painting of a woman bathing in a stream.

While the drawings don’t take themselves too seriously, they remain sophisticated. The range of drawing styles and the variety of marks within each individual work is rich. Folky, flat passages echo the boots of one of Bill Traylor’s musicians. The minute marks of Old Master drawings by Hans Holbein share space with the graphic dashes and stabs of street art. Combined they create a sumptuous visual vocabulary. As drawings, they speak to the immediate and experimental nature of making art. They are documents of deep creativity leaving the minds of these artists directly through the hand.

What is perhaps most engaging in these drawings is the sense of play and discovery that Kao and Stonehouse seemed to experience in making them. An energy of improvisation is infectious in the drawings. They remind the viewer that though art is painstaking and cerebral, it can also be filled with humor, and certainly in this case, delight.

Fred Stonehouse and Raeleen Kao’s “Hair Club” is on view through Feb. 4 at Tory Folliard Gallery, 233 N. Milwaukee St. For more information visit [toryfolliard.com](http://toryfolliard.com).