



CASE STUDY

Artist Romeo Alaeff attempts to illustrate the crux of society's paradigm shift in the most unconventional ways.

by Erika Yorio

ROMEO ALAEFF is hard to pin down. He's a visual artist who's interested in narrative devices and text. He holds a BFA and an MFA in photography, but studied biomedical engineering and mathematics for three years before switching gears. He cites computer software books alongside Machiavelli and Jung as major influences. His career has included stints animating for children's television and the dark, autobiographical documentary project *There's No Place Like You*, which chronicles, among other things, life with his drug dealer father and borderline-personality-disorder-afflicted mother. In terms of medium, Alaeff's work has spanned painting, drawing, video and, imminently, a Web-based genome project that will employ algorithms and hyperlinks as creative materials. "I don't think in terms of medium and then wrap it around a concept," he explains. "I think in terms of ideas and concepts, and the only question is, how can I convey this idea best?" In the case of his upcoming book, *I'll Be Dead by the Time You Read This: An Evolution of Despair* (set for release in December 2011 by Plume, a division of Penguin Books), Alaeff wondered how a barrage of negative thinking (his own, as well as that culled from sound bites of overheard conversations) fit in with a grand evolutionary plan. (In terms of the propagation of the species, self-sabotaging sentiments seem as much a deterrent as any.) The result—whimsical, frequently hilarious drawings of animals uttering melancholy or nihilistic remarks—renders the discomfiting emotions of our inner monologues more bearable, at once poignant and absurd. Each image winks at the cosmic joke of existence. ("Fuck," says one dinosaur, rather succinctly.) Blurring the line between high art and populist ephemera, Alaeff turned pieces from the larger work into stickers, some of which have been collected in the Rizzoli tome *Stickers: Stuck-Up Piece of Crap: From Punk Rock to Contemporary Art*. "You might see the animals in unexpected places, like

when you're taking a piss in the bar ... and the surprise of seeing them takes you off guard," he posits. "It has more reach this way. I've gotten e-mails from sightings in Marfa, Iceland, London, Tel Aviv, etc., which I think is cool." As far as scope is concerned, the artist's ongoing Bibliography project may be his most far-reaching to date. The multimedia work "is a twist on the photographic painted portrait," in which a cross-section of notables in a variety of fields, from televangelism to mathematics to journalism, are asked to curate a tower, literal and precarious, of the books that have most fundamentally shaped their worldview. Alaeff then draws the towers in copper-, silver- and goldpoint, materials that tarnish over time, "making them continually changing objects." The symbology of the work bears unmistakable traces of classical or biblical themes: the Tower of Babel, Prometheus, the Tree of Knowledge and expulsion from Eden. But the pieces ultimately emphasize conceptual mutability. "What goes up must come down," says Alaeff. "Without paradigm shifts, we would still have the same views on everything from the universe, women voting, slavery, the number zero, monotheism, etc." And since Alaeff is interested in "why we know what we know," each book list will be collected as data and input into that distinctly 21st-century vehicle of enlightenment, the Internet. On the Web site, users will be able to browse photos and videos of interviews with the original subjects and "map trends by age, subculture, nationality ... or input their own books to see who else has read them." As Alaeff adds demographics to the list of artistic instruments in his ever-expanding arsenal, it's impossible to anticipate the artist's next move. "There's always the criticism, jack of all trades, master of none," he allows. "But the more ways I can look at something, express it, deconstruct it, the more mastery I have over my philosophical concerns." •

For more information visit romeoart.com.



Image of hog with piglets above is an exclusive release from Romeo Alaeff's *I'll Be Dead by the Time You Read This: An Evolution of Despair*. Set for release in December 2011. Courtesy of Plume.