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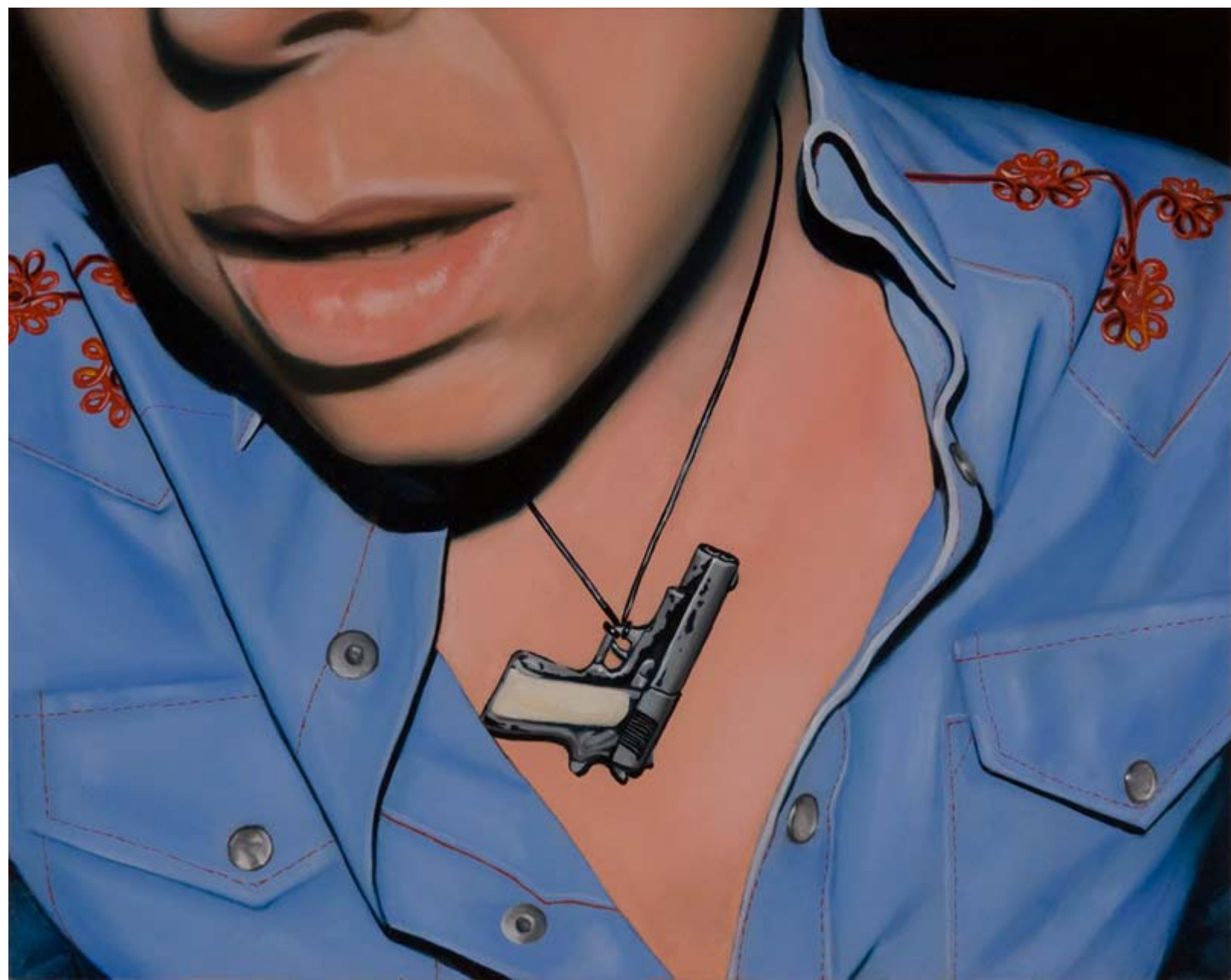
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Jay Norton, *Suicide King*, Oil on Wood, 36 x 48, 2009.





Jay Norton, *I Can't See Myself at 40*, Oil on Panel, 10 x 8, 2010.

A Subconscious and Conscious History of Hormones, Sex, and Violence

Midwestern Musical Company
1830 Locust
816-931-6962
Kansas City
Bad Reputation. New Work by Jay Norton
March 4th-31, 2011

By BLAIR SCHULMAN

Between cold-eyed views of adolescent hormones run amok and sympathetic depictions of youth on the edge or deep into the pool of legal offense, a series of paintings by Jay Norton exposes the outcast and misfit kids of American society. Norton's unusual vantage owes as much to the nature of his day job as a jailhouse mouthpiece as it does to any culturally circumspect point of view.

Shown as a playing card, *Suicide King*, (Oil on Wood, 2009) is a chilling double likeness of Virginia Tech mass murderer, Seung-Hui Cho, holding a gun to his head. A floating banner reads "You did this to me" and hearts in each corner bear the number 32, his victim count of the April 2007 massacre. Thus, is set the tone of the work.

Providing an ur-leadership role to the young and disaffected is *The Pioneer*, (Oil on Wood, 2009) a particularly frightening look at Kip Kinkle, one of the black trenchcoat-wearing assassins who made Columbine a household word.

An initial glance of these paintings shows a clear determination from Norton to provide some empathy for subjects, marginalized by society for decidedly sociopathic behavior. A defense attorney by trade, he would be well-positioned for the role of outsider artist, though this seems to be countervailed by his role as a father. Law school came before art school and the paintings' meticulous construction and formal composition belie his lack of formal training. Norton makes work depicting the "young and dumb," marginalized, cut-off and criminal. It is this very thing that leads him to want to represent people accused of crimes. As Norton says, "I can usually see the human side of people and empathize with them to some extent."

In the past, his images have been used as album cover art, including Austin-based rapper Black Nasty. His style bears a kind resemblance to artist Lynn Curlee, best known for Black Sabbath's 1980 *Heaven and Hell*. The venue, Midwestern Musical Company in Kansas City's East Crossroads, has the look and feel of a honky-tonk and Norton's works have the right look in the right place.

Works like *Banned in D.C.*, (Oil on Panel, 2010) fit right in. A shirtless black youth with a twisted rainbow behind him may seem clichéd until the viewer realizes this is Lee Boyd Malvo, the teenager who was half of the D.C. sniper duo. The effect of this revelation with a very loud rhythm section thumping in one's head making it shake at the awesomeness of Norton's chutzpah to render these images in the first place, let alone allow them an iota of sympathy. This pastiche of gloomy subject matter and feel-good color is where Norton succeeds the most.

The Twins, (Oil on Panel 2011) on the other hand, is a seemingly gratuitous work of a young topless woman in pigtails with a donkey. Her youth, beauty and nakedness seem void of anything beyond transparent double-entendre innuendo. But, perhaps, there is an insinuated question asking which twin is the ass that is intended.

Norton also touches on the insular world of death metal, which can frighten even the bravest music fan. *Four Horsemen*, (Oil on Wood, 2008) are four kids in a mosh pit — a tangle of limbs that makes sense only to those who understand the amphetamine-fueled energy of the music it provokes. *Filipino Badass*, (Oil on Panel, 2010) A man in denim jacket and full ski mask can be seen as erotic and somewhat menacing and maybe as a reference to Chris Burden's *You'll Never See My Face in Kansas City, November 6, 1971*.

Some viewers may tend to be disgusted by Norton's imagery. Is it necessary? Is it important? The answer is yes. Norton is but one in a long line of artists who have sympathetically portrayed the disaffected and even if the images seem T-shirt-ready, on any given weeknight the basic cable lineup broaches "investigative reports" of sociopathic subjects (some in suits and ties holding political office) claiming the "high" ground of journalistic license. On one level, this is entertainment of the most



Jay Norton, *Filipino Badass*, Oil on Panel, 10 x 14, 2010: The heavy metal guy with the face mask on.

obvious sort. On another, it's difficult to negate the pathos of these subjects and the affection they likely never received.



Jay Norton, *The Pioneer*, Oil on Wood, 36 x 48, 2009.



Jay Norton, *Black Rainbow*, Oil and Pencil on Panel, 20 x 16, 2010.



Jay Norton, *The Twins*, Oil on Panel, 24 x 18, 2011.