



Cody Critcheloe, *Ssion, Boy*, Still, 2009. Produced by Grand Arts.

## Cody Critcheloe Makes It Loud in SSION, BOY

**Grand Arts**  
1819 Grand Boulevard  
816-421-6887  
Kansas City  
**SSION, BOY**  
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By **BLAIR SCHULMAN**



Ryan McGinley, *Dash Bombing*, 2000, C-print 69 x 92 cm.

Cody Critcheloe wants more than 15 minutes. His mission for *SSION*, the “queer punk / performance / art band” takes visionary and reactionary thinking by breathing some fresh air into the otherwise stalesness of current queer culture. Absurdities like the ‘gay husband’ stereotype on Bravo Television’s *Real Housewives* franchise and the shrill posturing of Perez Hilton get a much-needed kick in the ass by Critcheloe’s actual talent. But not to throw any one –ism on him, Critcheloe uses music, art and film to bring his ideas right to the surface in a DIY attitude borne of ACT UP, Ronald Tavel and the Theatre of the Ridiculous. Anticipating his creative trajectory, Critcheloe could easily pick up where Andy Warhol and The Factory left off.

His directorial debut, *BOY*, is an old story, titty-twisted for the future. A Faustian bargain by way of Robert Johnson in one big K-hole pretty much sums up the premise of this 60-minute film produced by Grand Arts, a non-profit art project space in downtown Kansas City, Missouri. Since 1995, Grand Arts has commissioned and assisted artists in the production and realization of ambitious contemporary art projects, providing technical, logistical and financial support while encouraging



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conceptual risk-taking and experimentation at all stages of the creative process ([www.grandarts.com](http://www.grandarts.com)). Using cardboard cut-outs and live action, the film conversely mocks and celebrates an infatuation with celebrity hyper-branding. BOY takes SSION's oeuvre and pushes the visual, and its aural, limits to capacity. Out of the back room and in your face, BOY is a sweaty, makeup-smearred group grope that leaves you quite content to sleep on the wet spot.

Critcheloe founded SSION (pronounced "shun" as in "mission, fusion, ambition") as a sixteen year-old in Kentucky. Feeling his music always had a "strong theatrical/visual side," while a student at the Kansas City Art Institute he began to employ stop-motion animation to accompany SSION's live performances. From there, Critcheloe became interested in making a movie combining these disciplines. It was then Grand Arts stepped in.

Hoping to reach an audience beyond Kansas City, Critcheloe hopes the film will "circulate in the art world as well as become something that some kid in the middle of nowhere can get their hands on and really impact them during the formative/weird years."

The story re-enacts live performances interspersed with Critcheloe telling a tale of himself and his doppelganger, known as The Woman (expertly played by Shannon Michalski), to an off-camera British journalist, or biographer, or obituary writer, take your pick. Michalski, who once moved me to near-tears in an earlier Late Nite Theatre production of Purple Rain, has the stamina, chutzpah and steely resolve to play someone with her Eye on the Prize.

Influenced and interested by strong women, Critcheloe conceives BOY as a "feminist movie." While SSION's lyrics speak for Critcheloe, it is The Woman whose laserbeam focus gets an explanation. ("She's not a dictator ... we just got into trouble together"). When asked to join the Church of Satan, it's The Woman who says enthusiastically "Sign! Us! Up!" Getting a thrill over the deal-making, The Woman relishes the responsibility with so much machismo, at one point she rubs her crotch and calls the success for what it is: "Big! Fat! Money!" You could put 9-volt batteries into her words and still not get better stimulation.

#### Genderbent Over Backwards

The men playing the women convey an image that is neither prissy nor castrating. Strong and secure, they take advantage of their feminine wiles. A perfect example is Chadwick Brooks' (also from Late Nite Theatre) portrayal as Ma. Stunned by her child's switch to the dark side, exhorts him to find normalcy ("Why don't you be a real victim and get a job.") while asking him if the sweater she wears makes her boobs look too big. The natural response is a young rebel's middle finger with Day Job.

While the main point of BOY is the music, with all the songs coming off his 2007



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album *Fool's Gold*, Critcheloe takes a passive role to the squalid negotiations, content on his role as artist. He is the lyrical soul, the one most seemingly alone, even when his fans are showering him with roses. If you wanted to spin some Eastern religiosity on this, he almost nearly absolves himself of responsibility to better evolve towards some artistic Nirvana. On a more grounded plane, he's just a boy alone in his bedroom, full of testosterone and fantasies culled from whatever television drama and back alley he can find, as sung in *Street Jizz*. Later, the film's foray into the steamy underbelly of a gay sex club (a landscape comprised of codes and etiquettes, no matter how sordid it becomes) the song *Warm Glove* is sultry and believable.

Later on, Dee Dee DeVille head fucks the poor kid as a psychic who encounters Critcheloe on a very familiar walk of shame by blowing smoke in the sad lad's face after he begs for a smoke. DeVille is another Late Nite alum. Founder Ron McGee's lamented Late Nite Theatre could be considered Kansas City's version of The Groundlings for all the excellent performers its sequined stage has spawned over the years.

The scene between DeVille and Critcheloe is revelatory as our BOY realizes, "As soon as it doesn't matter, you can do whatever you want." And from there he belongs to the world and The Woman is his chief negotiator.

Is it Art or Artifice?

*Clown*, one of the film's most "pop" scenes (and closest to an old-school MTV video on a JJ Jackson/Nina Blackwood rotation) is sweetly choreographed by dancers Ryan Lawrence and Stephanie Dixon from the electroclash duo and performance troupe, Fischerspooner. The song acts as a peak moment before success is overwhelmed by a "total female takeover". The Woman, sucking out the energy around her, acquires an entourage consisting of Madonna, Roseanne, Courtney Love (Jaimie Warren, Natalie Mayers and Venus Star). They, says Critcheloe "... were probably my three favorite women growing up. I just thought it'd be cool if they formed a band. It's a ridiculous notion but it looks great and you know it'd be a disaster ..." They buy into the mass adoration and the fantasy world to, swiping a remark about the late, great Candy Darling, become "realer and realer and realer and realer ..."

The trio makes a statement on the inanity of celebrities who will not own up to their own fame, pretending to be encumbered by the success they lustily crave and cultivate. Even the song, *Bullshit*, gives a hardy, messy, shout-out to the fakery. These women, each iconic in their own right, are proof positive, says Critcheloe, that "weirdos always do better in the lime-light."

That is the crux of what *BOY* tries to impart — take the whip that is offered and don't worry about the scars.



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