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The
Clocktower
Gallery

JAMES FRANCO AT THE CLOCKTOWER

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You can't artfully pretend to not know who James Franco is. And, as his upcoming exhibition of film, sculpture, photography, installation, and performance at the historic Clocktower Gallery in Manhattan dictates, you also can't pretend that Franco hasn't become a creator whose ability to inhabit seemingly any cultural and vocational carapace—from scholar to soap star—informs an artistic practice wholly unlike any other.

But who, really, is the artist called James Franco, and what kind of artwork does he make? His first solo exhibit, titled *The Dangerous Book Four Boys*, is a multi-tiered discursion on the constructed essences and affectations of masculinity. Via a series of layered films, structures, and assemblages, Franco has constructed a psychological funhouse mirror in which to view these identity fragments. What is most immediately evident in the work is that Franco has taken a phenomenological approach toward the depiction of a masculine identity from childhood onward. The exhibition, which unfolds through the Clocktower's cluster of classroom-like chambers, starts with an installed heap of objects recalling in equal parts - a boy's bedroom, or a stoner's party pad, or a trashed hotel room, and ends in the space's large gallery with a refined arrangement of plywood forts, rockets, and sheds.

At the center-point of the show is a small screening room, outlined with a series of Polaroid's featuring Franco with his face covered in cream and punctuated with a fake moustache and fake eyebrows (an interpretation of the ritual of shaving taken to hyper masculine extremes). A multi-media visual essay commissioned by VMAN Double-Third-Portrait, a collaboration with American artist Carter, is projected on a dirty bed sheet near the room's right wall.



The film shows Franco cycling through a seemingly endless catalog of action hero archetypes, replete with burning motorcycles, evangelical voiceovers, gangster mob shootings, and flame-throwers—plus an assassination by a firing line (armed with flaming arrows) of a mannequin standing in for Saint Sebastian. He stands as the lone breadcrumb, offering the idea that these power-charged forays into testosterone overdrive are presented here without the complication of sexual impulse—the problem that makes Sebastian forever the target. The project seems to ask the question: what do the totems of power— specifically male power, add up to when they are pushed almost fantastically past their resolution?

In the following room, a sort of self-portrait in the form of a large pile of detritus lies in wait, full of witty signifiers alluding to Franco's work on the big screen (including a trucker cap airbrushed with the name "Tristan" and a James Dean lunch box) and to a child's life (a hobby horse takes center stage). Amid this pile are three small monitors which screen Franco's comedy sketches for the Funny or Die website. In them, he satirically teaches his younger brother how to act—and badgers him to remember the death of their cat Toby, and to use this sense memory to evoke tears. Beneath these monitors, you can see a photo that appears to be a young Franco holding a cat, and beneath this photo lies a disturbingly similar taxidermied cat, delivering a feeling of uncanny. Franco uses comedy as a methodology that can be as cruel as it is winsome.

Within this room, two films are screened, including *Dicknose Goes to Paris*, a Wes Anderson meets *Bande à part* meets the Chapman Brothers caper featuring Franco with a prosthetic Pinocchio nose of sorts. Another film, *Masculinity and Me*, focuses on the naïveté of young sexuality, where release and sterility become tied to larger cultural constructions. The films possess a compelling, undefined character. They seem to lie in another world and time.



Their content could be biography, autobiography, fantasy, stoner comedy, Gus Van Sant–esque metafiction, or the ideal integrated masculinity moving through each of those. In their irresolute, pop culture-inflected brilliance, these films link to what the artist was up to–i.e. the reconfiguration of known forms–when he made his notorious star turn in *General Hospital*, playing a murderous artist named Franco (Franco will reportedly be returning to the soap this summer, bringing along the young video artist Kalup Linzy–best known for his 2003 video work *All My Churen*).



In the main gallery, one finds an installation of sepia-tone photographs and fort-like shed structures. Films displayed within the gallery show the sheds on fire, and one shed has flames projected inside it. A “Viewing House” shed screens eight films dating from 2007 onward; a highlight is *Star Trek*, which features Captain Kirk and Spock in an ill-fated vulcan mind meld. As one reaches the end of this complex assemblage, it becomes clear that Franco has created a new palette of appropriation and conceptual agenda. In its interrogation of masculinity, *The Dangerous Book Four Boys* defines the methodology of an artist for a new decade.