Subversive, but Colorfully So
Artist Eli Sudbrack’s Work Will Be on View in Soho This Week

By GUY TREBAY  MAY 2, 2014

The phantasmagorical works created by the Brazilian-born installation artist Eli Sudbrack, who goes by the acronym AVAF (for Assume Vivid Astro Focus), are dense with connections: sexual, geographic, macroeconomic, social and political.

That his widely exhibited work — created in partnership with the Paris artist Christophe Hamaide-Pierson — is giddily colorful, slick and allusive, goes a long way toward explaining its attraction to museum curators and collectors, as well as his creative collaborators like Lady Gaga and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons.

That it is also unabashedly political (Mr. Sudbrack favors ideological terms like “contamination” and “insemination,” and his artistic avatar is a Cyclopean transsexual) offers insight into why the AVAF collaborators are less broadly known than their contemporaries here and abroad.

Days before the spring art season kicked into high gear, the 46-year-old Mr. Sudbrack, a native of São Paulo, Brazil, with a wiry mane of graying hair and a grin as broad as a cowcatcher, spoke about his latest subversions, which debut at the Suzanne Geiss Company in SoHo on Thursday.

Q. Your work, which seems so exuberant and cartoonlike, draws on sources as varied as the transsexual community, the AIDS activist group Gran Fury, the performance artist Vaginal Davis, Claymation and the Original Hulk. What’s the through-line?
produced by the predominantly American- and British-trained artists who are currently generating many of the flip trades in the speculative lower end of the market. Consciously or unconsciously, these artists are perfectly in tune with our financial times. The 2010s, unlike the 1910s, aren’t a decade proliferating with artistic “isms,” but this kind of “Flip Art,” as it might be called, is just about the nearest thing in today’s fragmented global art scene that approximates to a coherent movement.

The Flip Art aesthetic practiced by artists like Mr. Rees, Mr. Smith, Mr. Murillo, Mr. Ito and other wunderkinder is instantly recognizable. They make abstract paintings that are a clever play on the act of painting. These abstracts often employ novel — not to mention cheap — painting techniques, such as using a fire extinguisher (Mr. Smith) or home improvement products (Mr. Rees). They’re often big, and have significant wall power. Equally important, there are plenty of them. Mr. Smith, for example, has produced as many as 300 of his paint-droplet “Rain” canvases, according to dealers. Mass production allows artists to make as much money as possible. It also enables contemporary art investors, nervous of notions of rarity, to buy multiple works and to track their price fluctuations, like a commodity, on databases such as Artnet. Flip Art, like Andy Warhol’s Factory-produced Pop Art, can be as reassuringly numerous and uniform as gambling chips.

Mr. Rees stands slightly aside from the group, having limited his “Artex” canvases to a series of “only” 35, according to Tamila Kerimova, Phillips’s London-based head of the “Under the Influence” sales. Few people besides the artists themselves have much of an idea how many paintings Mr. Smith, Mr. Murillo and Mr. Ito have made.

“We don’t know,” said Ms. Kerimova, referring to the number of shiny spray-painted 2012 abstracts called “The Agony and the Ecstasy” that Mr. Ito has produced. “That’s the whole point of these works,” said Ms. Kerimova. “They don’t have to be unique. They reflect our times.”

In interviews, the Los Angeles- and New York-based Mr. Ito (born 1986) has talked about his desire to make artworks that are as “undocumentable” and limitlessly “random” as Internet searches.
in. And, so, yes, naturally that causes stress.

And to counter those forces you conjure up an imaginary race of avenging transsexual superhereos?

The images we use signify a fighting power. They’re characters of change, characters that remain powerful even though sometimes things have gone slightly wrong with them physically. Maybe they have too much silicone in their faces ... . Still, to us they are like contemporary goddesses fighting the status quo.

But isn’t transsexual superhero imagery out of step with prevalent practice, the making of inoffensive objects to fill booths at art fairs?

When we did the Whitney Biennial in 2004, people were expecting us to become the next Takashi Murakami. They wanted us to be slick and no politics. I’ve always done very colorful and attractive works. We dazzle with the work. But once you get into it and look closer, you start getting other messages.

Like the reference in your new paintings to anti-homosexual purges in Uganda, or the way you used controversial images of both the pope and Tom Cruise in the “Ecstasy” show at MOCA in L.A.?

At MOCA, we wanted to celebrate the birth of gay rights, which we could have done in a happy and celebratory way. But I’ve always been very inspired by gay and AIDS activist movements in the ’80s; that’s my lineage. As a gay person, you can never fully adapt to a world that is heterosexual at its base: We are an essential contradiction to many of the realities that constitute our world. Yes, you gain acceptance, more rights, but there is this sense that it’s not enough. I understand some artists now are afraid of politics. They want to sell. And when I started bringing in politics, people said the messages detracted from the work, were not that easy to digest. I mean, a giant female figure with a big phallus is never going to be absorbed into an art market environment.

And yet you went directly in that direction?

Sure. I always follow my gut.

Yet you have a passionate following among curators and
collectors, collaborated with Rei Kawakubo for a piece where she and her team remixed your hard drive, are showing in the former Deitch Projects gallery in the middle of art week? And you’re showing paintings on canvas, a first. Does that suggest renegade status?

In the past, with the installations, the viewer was always the center of the piece. That’s why we used an acronym and never wanted our name on the pieces. The new work was made this way not so much for the market, but because I needed to be in the studio more, to more be meditative. The reality remains that a lot of the things Assume Vivid Astro Focus has made are not collectible and were never sold to anyone.

**Do you mean the big transsexual mother doll from MOCA?**

Yes, that girl has been in storage for years. She’s cost me a lot of money. I’m still not sure exactly what I’m going to do with her. One of these days she might end up in the trash.