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Review: Police, violence and an artist who paints to provoke

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A raw rage runs through Forrest Kirk's paintings of police officers at Chimento Contemporary's new space in West Adams. The provocative images are indictments of police violence, attributing it to racism and an obsession with power. The techniques Kirk uses are sometimes ham-fisted, but the same could be said for the subjects he portrays.

"Judge, Jury, and Executioner" is an over-the-shoulder view of an officer pointing his gun at some unseen target. Superimposed on the side of his head is a murky image of a group of people with African features. One of them has a red "X" on his chest. A member of this undifferentiated mass has clearly already been marked for execution.

In "Paranoia Gland," Kirk identifies a new organ, a pinkish lump on an officer's brain stem that is presumably the source of unjustified fears. Similarly, in the sculpture "Police Mind," he has transformed a map of the brain by covering large areas with words such as "privilege" and "power." It's not subtle, but it gets the point across.

Another sculpture, "Jay Walker," is even more literal. It consists of a car door, painted to look like a blood-stained police car, upright in the middle of the gallery. Through the window, one sees a sculptural head, painted black. A paper tag, as if from a piece of clothing, hangs on the door. It features the work's title in a stylized script. The piece is a critique of racial profiling and excessive force, but it might be more powerful if it weren't so obvious.



More successfully jarring are images that depict cops in fantastical settings. The diptych “Black Magic” depicts officers performing magic tricks using black male bodies as props. A white female officer pulls a black man out of a hat, while a male officer levitates a prone (dead?) black man through a hoop. These images capture a casual disregard for black dignity and life.

Even more bizarre is the triptych “Serpent Staff.” In the left panel, the officer has a serpent’s head and carries an ornate golden staff, also serpent-headed. In the center is a rough-hewn sculpture of the staff, and on the right is a painted close-up of the jeweled snake on the staff’s head. Here, the officer has become a species of super villain with a connection to some mysterious, ritual power.

There’s a hopelessness to these works. They suggest that police abuses either proceed directly from physiology or are connected to some dark, unknowable force. With a stream of police killings of black men, it is hard to see a way out.