

Join Our Club

*Fine art? Tag art? For
Matt Distel and Christian
Strike, it's all happening
at Country Club gallery*

By Aiesha D. Little
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It's the opening reception for Charley Harper: Works on Paper 1961–1970 at Country Club, the city's newest contemporary art gallery, and 50 or so people mill about checking out the goods. Dressed in a brown corduroy jacket, a button-down shirt, and jeans, co-owner Matt Distel greets friends and family, surveying the room as attendees stare intensely at the vibrant drawings he and his business partner, Christian Strike, hand-picked from the late Finneytown artist's studio last fall. The crowd in the West End gallery mixes a few hipsters in skinny jeans with families. Parents point out obtuse details in Harper's work to their school-aged children as if they're little art collectors in the making. "See," a father says to the child sitting atop his shoulders as they peruse one of 10 original alternate illustrations from the science textbook *The Animal Kingdom*. "He was really good at drawing birds."

In a small back room, there are unframed drawings of Harper's work from his days illustrating for *Sohioan Magazine* and the scientific journal *Vector-Borne and Zoonotic Diseases*, and a television in the corner plays the CBS Sunday Morning segment on designer and Harper-ophile Todd Oldham. The video is a nice touch, rounding out the show with a cinematic tribute to the artist's influence. "I loved what he did so much," Oldham gushes to correspondent Cynthia Bowers over shots of the two men at Harper's home. "He meant and means everything to me. It was a bond, I don't know—it was, it was otherworldly."

Wearing a gray wool suit, red tie, and plaid vest, Strike joins Distel, who's chatting with comic book artist/illustrator Justin Green and his wife, exuding the kind of confidence needed by someone who sells art for a living: cool, calm, and knowledgeable. Together, the two work the room, a well-regarded mix of hard-earned curatorial chops and brash entrepreneurship. The Harper exhibition is only the second since Country Club opened last October, a feather in the cap of such a young gallery, made possible by the duo's connections. Distel is a whip-smart curator; Oldham called him a "genius" for his work on *Graphic Content: Contemporary and Modern/Art and Design*, the Contemporary Arts Center exhibition series that featured Harper's work in 2006 and 2007. And Strike, a publishing veteran at 35, has a business savvy that has attracted the likes of graffiti artist/author Stephen "ESPO" Powers, movie and music video director Spike Jonze, and controversial movie director/photographer Larry Clark. It's an alliance whose potency has yet to reach its full potential but is well on its way. "They bring different experiences to the table, which inevitably influences their approaches to the gallery as they move forward," says Country Club's part-time manager Melanie Derrick, who has worked with Distel since the CAC was housed on Fifth Street. "Give it some time and I think others will know the Country Club name in other cities and art markets."

Yes, she's biased, but luminaries in the art community seem to agree. "I think Country Club is a wonderful addition to the Cincinnati gallery scene," says Aaron Betsky, director of the Cincinnati Art Museum. "Matt has a great eye and is bringing provocative and engaging art to this community." CAC director Raphaela Platow says Distel and Strike have successfully figured out how to merge their interests. "The program is very young and cutting edge," says Platow, who worked with Distel for a short time after she took over last July. "It's a fantastic addition to the gallery scene in Cincinnati."

Country Club’s “exclusive” moniker is tongue-in-cheek; Strike and Distel want to bring art to everyone. And their chosen location—here in Cincinnati—is a distinguishing feature. As gallery owner Carl Solway did a generation before them and continues to do, Distel and Strike dare to dabble in the insider’s game of the contemporary art world, even though they’re far removed from the major art centers of Los Angeles and New York. Their goals are modest: mount four shows a year and exhibit at several art fairs, including the original Art Basel in Switzerland next month and its Miami Beach spin-off in December. “The idea is to export what we do,” Distel says. “It seems like a viable business model.”

But don’t expect future exhibitions at Country Club to have the broad appeal of Charley Harper. The two Queen City natives plan to champion the kind of artists who sprang from the underground subcultures of the 1980s and ’90s—skateboarding, graffiti art, independent music—and who, with mainstream acceptance, have morphed into well-established innovators. In doing so, they face the same challenge as other young gallerists: to defy labels that dismiss their clients’ work as merely an outgrowth of youthful transgressions. In this age of instant-everything, when exporting and importing art from around the world is easy, Distel and Strike hope that Country Club will find the buyers it needs to keep bringing critically acclaimed artists to a city that’s longing to see more contemporary work. “There’s a lot of interest in contemporary art here,” Strike says. “It’s just a matter of getting people more comfortable and involved with it on a personal level.”

MATT DISTEL’S LIFE as an art connoisseur began in earnest at Miami University when he took an art elective during his freshman year. It was 1991 and he was a marketing major, planning a career in the business world. “Art history was a gateway course,” says the native west-sider, sitting in a wobbly desk chair in Country Club’s 4,000-square-foot space, his voice a hair above a whisper. “It led to harder things.”

After a conversation with his father about changing his major, Distel, now 35, graduated in 1994 with a degree in art history. He gave independent curating a go and lead DiLeia Contemporary in Camp Washington for several years before eventually landing a gig with the Contemporary Arts Center in 2002. As the much-lauded assistant curator of exhibitions, his love of the medium shone through in presentations like Guy Ben-ner: Honey, I Shrunk the Kids, the sculpture installations and works on paper of South African artist Kendell Geers; and the mixed-media art of Skyscraper Souls: New Video and Photography by John Pilson.

Distel was named an associate curator in 2003, and a year later worked with Strike on Beautiful Losers: Contemporary Art and Street Culture, an immensely popular exhibition of “underground” art. The exhibition focused on skateboarding, graffiti, and independent music, and brought together a slew of artists who had turned the interests of their youth into high art. Graphic artist Shepard Fairey’s Andre the Giant stencils, Toby Yelland’s stark black-and-white photographs, and Margaret Kilgallen’s gritty street tags made the CAC’s pristine white walls feel...young. Since then, Beautiful Losers has been mounted at galleries and museums in San Francisco, Baltimore, even Milan, and is still in demand. It’s a calling card, proof that they can sell their edgy aesthetic to the public at large.

Edgy. That cliché, and others like it, make Strike sigh heavily. “The reason why those terms get applied to the artists that I work with,” he says, “is because of where they came from—nontraditional art backgrounds.” Those artists “grew out of some kind of American youth subculture and evolved into making fine art over the last five to 10 years. Their origins in those subcultures have sort of stuck with them to some degree.”

A few years before Beautiful Losers opened, Strike was wrapping up an eight-year run as the editor and publisher of Strength, a glossy magazine focused mainly on skateboard culture. Working out of an office building in Norwood, he and his team of writers and editors documented the ins and outs of street art; he also served as the executive producer of Strength Magazine Presents: Subtext, a compilation album of alternative bands distributed by Sire/Warner Bros. Records. Borrowing on the popularity of his magazine, the Montgomery native co-founded the project-based publishing

studio Iconoclast Editions, creating and executing touring exhibitions and publishing art books for prominent and emerging contemporary artists.

Strike and Distel talked about doing some projects together after Beautiful Losers closed. But after four years with the CAC, Distel left to accept the director’s position at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill, New York. It was a short stay. (“That situation just turned out not to be right for me,” is all he’ll say about the job.) Less than a year later, with many of his exhibitions still on the books at the CAC, he returned as a consultant. “When I started talking about coming back to town, [Christian] and I said it might make sense to expand what Iconoclast was doing and add a gallery component,” Distel says.

“Almost on a monthly basis, there’s a major art fair somewhere,” Strike says. Because of art fairs and the Internet, a fledgling gallery—even one in the Midwest—is able to quickly get its offerings in front of a vast audience. Plus, he adds, “The low cost of operating out of Cincinnati gives us the ability to take risks that maybe other galleries might not be able to take.”

From Madrid International Contemporary Art Fair to NEXT, the new invitational art fair at The Merchandise Mart in Chicago, there has been an explosion of fairs over the last two decades or so, giving smaller galleries the chance to rub shoulders with the big boys. “If we put up the money, we can have the same size booth as some place that has a street-level gallery in Chelsea,” Distel explains. “It can put us on equal footing.”

Last August, they took up occupancy in their drafty industrial building on Findlay Street, directly across the hall from the Carl Solway Gallery, and started planning their schedule. With its utopian and dystopian themes on optimism, their show I will be alright debuted last October, featuring video artist John Pilson, painter Kambui Olujimi, art/architecture collective SIMPARCH, and others, drawing praise from some and head-scratching from others. (A silkscreen print of E.T. and Osama bin Laden in a loving embrace can have that effect on people.) But such reactions are par for the course, according to Country Club’s owners. They help the gallerists suss out what will translate well in a larger art-buying market.

In December, Distel and Strike headed down to Art Basel Miami Beach where they organized a guerilla show in the lobby of the Todd Oldham–designed Fairfax Hotel. The four-day event attracted 250 people and featured the artwork of Sonic Youth guitarist Lee Ranaldo and installation artist/musician Joao Paulo Feliciano, whom Distel had worked with for the exhibition The Blues Quartet at the CAC in 2005. With Ranaldo’s ink drawings and Feliciano’s sound and light installation crackling with energy, it was a one-off “fringe” showcase of Distel and Strike’s ability to think on their feet, the kind of project the duo hopes will get word-of-mouth buzz and boost their standing in the art world.

With the exception of Carl Solway, Country Club may very well be the only other independent gallery in the city that is importing and exporting contemporary art on such a large scale. It’s a passing of the torch of sorts. “I welcome Country Club as another gallery supporting and exposing the world of contemporary art to the Cincinnati audience,” says the elder gallery owner. Solway, who opened his gallery in 1962 and has worked with a wide array of contemporary artists—including sculptor Daniel Spoerri in the 1970s, and Korean-American video artist Nam June Paik and installation artist Judy Pfaff in the 1980s—has always stressed the need for quality artwork that challenges the viewer. That’s what the two galleries have in common. “Our intentions and missions are the same,” he notes. “The only difference is that Country Club emphasizes artists of their generation while my gallery focuses on artists of my generation.” In short, Strike and Distel are out to find the next Nam June Paik.

FOR ARTISTS LIKE Justin Green, whose life in comic books and illustrations spans more than four decades, the duo’s knowledge of both fine art and underground culture is a big selling point. “They are interested in the trajectory of my life’s work,” says Green, who signed on with Iconoclast and Country Club this February. Distel and Strike are currently taking on the arduous task of cataloging

the 62-year-old artist's work, from his days in San Francisco's underground comix movement all the way through to his commercial illustrations for the trade magazine *Signs of the Times*. (Green is also an occasional contributor to this magazine.) "As professionals, they have a thorough knowledge of the field in which I'm working, my context within that field, and all the particulars of display, storage, and shipping," he adds. "That gives me more time to concentrate on producing art."

It's this full-service approach to dealing with the art world that Country Club's clients and partners enjoy most. "By taking full advantage of the Internet and constantly traveling to other venues, they're bringing the energy of both coasts to town," Green says. "They have the square footage that few galleries do and they know how to maximize it."

Strictly in terms of notoriety, Strike and Distel don't have to worry too much about promoting and disseminating Green's work outside of Cincinnati. His "Musical Legends" comics for Tower Records' *Pulse Magazine* and his 1972 semiautobiographical graphic novel *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* earned him a place in the hearts of hardcore comic book fans a long time ago. It's up-and-comers like 27-year-old painter and installation artist Jimmy Baker who really get exposure through Country Club. Baker, currently a lecturer at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, knows Distel from his days at the CAC and had done a number of regional solo shows before he met Strike in 2005. "Cincinnati has a small, tight-knit art scene and it's inevitable to know Matt," he says. "I went out of my way to meet Christian."

At the time, he was looking for a gallery and Strike was kind enough to deliver his work to Roberts & Tilton in Los Angeles, where his portfolio was a hit. The owners immediately tapped him for a group exhibition, a move that has developed into several art fair showings for Baker in New York and L.A., as well as a popular solo exhibition last year. "[Distel and Strike] are some of the few people in this city who travel enough to have exposure to the greater art scene," he says.

This is the way Distel and Strike work their connections for the benefit of their artists, cutting through the noise that can deem new artists irrelevant before they even have the chance to showcase their work. With time, they intend for Country Club to have the same kind of staying power that a gallerist like Solway has been able to attain. "I would consider Country Club successful if five to 10 years from now we have helped establish the careers of the artists we work with, we have a strong presence in the international art world, and we have helped build some compelling art collections in this region," Distel says.

For now, they're just taking it one show at a time.