

## **ART REVIEW: Artist Duo Improvise Elaborate Mythology at Roman Fine Art**

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by Charles A. Riley II

“Safe Houses,” the current exhibition featuring an artist duo called Gentleman’s Game, at the new [Roman Fine Art](#) space in East Hampton, N.Y. opens magic casements on imaginary realms. Large, busy gatherings of images that use imprinted acrylic and mixed media—some on canvas, others on boards (the wood grain of which hovers appealingly under washes of color)—the works in the show are storyboards for a future gone awry.

Much of the story here is the collaborative dynamic between the two artists who adopted one cryptic name based on chess, the subject of their first major work in this mode. Six years ago, [Brandon Friend](#) (born in 1980 in Queens, N.Y.) and [Jason Douglas Griffin](#) (a year older, from Washington, D.C.)—who met in the art program of the University of Maryland College and shared a studio in Long Island City—gave up their solo careers to partner up, describing their work as “turn by turn mark making.”



Jason Douglas Griffin and Brandon Friend, the two-artist team that goes by the name Gentleman's Game. Courtesy Roman Fine Art.

Nonchalant in their outward appearance, the two artists are completely in earnest about their approach to collaboration, as a press release reveals: "Being both the participant and observer in this turn by turn process elevated our individual practice and challenged each of us in ways which we had not seen in our solo works."

Already intrigued by the thought of "turn by turn mark making," I was interested to learn from gallery owner Damien Roman that the two artists like to listen to jazz as they volley the compositional shuttlecock with paint, pencil or layers upon layers of printed images transferred using tissue-like paper rubbed onto the wooden surface. Their process is outlined in a brief video of the pair in action in their Long Island City studio, available on their web site, [www.gentlemans-game.com/video](http://www.gentlemans-game.com/video).

After a mock handshake and smile for the lens, they begin by taking their individual shifts in front of the work, one of them sweeping broad strokes of acrylic and spraying it with water to get it running in a long drip, the other zeroing in on a pencil addition or slapping on a rectangle of blue paper. Once an extended period of this kind of alternation has played out, the two suddenly appear in the frame working on the piece simultaneously as the density of the information begins to pile up. The center of each composition, whether vertical or horizontal, is the axis along which the two

artists crowd their layered images.

The improvisatory, often combative systole and diastole of jazz is more than just background music. Think of the competitive spirit when stride piano greats would swap places in Harlem nightclubs. Where the freshness of the impromptu makes it to the final iteration of a work, as in *NYC Big Rig*, this “turn by turn mark making” is something new and special. As Roman divulged, “When I tell artists that they work together like this, they say, ‘Come on!’”

This is far from the master-student situation of [Andy Warhol](#) and [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#). It has the natural counterpoint of two jazz musicians bumping each other off the easy pathways of theme and variations. For an intimate sense of the operation in all its delicacy, I suggest a close look at the small study on wood panel, *Safe Houses, Winter Retreat*, one of the highlights of the show.



“Safe Houses - Winter Retreat” by Gentleman’s Game, 2017. Imprinted acrylic and mixed media on wood panel, 9 x 12 inches. Courtesy Roman Fine Art.

The source materials are pulled from the Internet, printed and transferred much as the color newspaper imagery of a [Robert Rauschenberg](#) “combine” was accumulated. The most interesting items collected are the architectural details on which I found myself lingering—from castle battlements and turrets to shacks and houses stuck high up in a tree.

Beyond such details, these materials are a cross-section of the welter of information online. While mining this digital source is a turn-on for many, this reviewer is wearied by the onslaught of

“digital” or “web-based” projects at a slew of [art fairs last month](#), all of them puddle-deep at best. The hype about digital art is often a meme for the Silicon Valley mentality itself, with its “unicorns,” companies whose valuations are based on air, or mythological tech billionaire mega-collectors of art who can’t be bothered to look up from their screens.

Where [Gentleman’s Game](#) wins is when they plunge deeper, layering the transferred images with bold strokes and washes of paint or delicate drawing using pencil in fine and often delicate touches. A good example is the major work *Safe Houses*, its light-filled sky over a wild tree house assembled in facets like a good [Lyonel Feininger](#). An expensive ship hovers near the horizon of the artists’ beloved Atlantic, a crucial topos in their elaborate personal mythology, which is detailed in the Roman Fine Art [press release](#) on the show:

“In this striking world imagined by Gentleman’s Game, tenacious survival instinct and ingenuity give rise to incredible, fragmented and towering cities referencing shanty towns cobbled together with raw materials and strange alchemy. Cities built to exist upon the trees, upon the skeletons of long decaying oil rigs and the very few mountaintops able to break the surface of the great, never-ending ocean. The constant struggle for resources and land lead to a proliferation of fantastical modes of transport. Alchemists, utilizing technologies and magics both old and new, create vessels to fill the sea and air, allowing their clans to fight and maybe survive as new Gods watch over their subjects with cool disregard.”



“Safe Houses” by Gentleman’s Game, 2017. Imprinted acrylic and mixed media on wood panel, 20 x 15 inches. Courtesy Roman Fine Art.

The stately landlords and courtesans who survey this domain, the subjects of large vertical works, are like the *personnages* of [Joan Miro](#) or the Surrealists. These oddly articulated figures reminded me of the hinged paper cutouts from which Monty Python’s lone American, [Terry Gilliam](#), could conjure a stop-action sequence: a pram, for example, that devours little old ladies who coo over babies. Like Gilliam’s crude and expedient path to animation, Gentleman’s Game deploys collage techniques to juxtapose incongruous fragments.

Dystopia is currently cool (the current [Whitney Biennial](#) serves it up by the bucket), and sometimes the vision is darker than at others. As with Gilliam, I sensed a more hopeful, even comic side to these works than much of the current dystopian school proffers. The mythic method of Gentleman’s Game draws from and elaborates on movies and television, notably the 1973 sci-fi flick “[Fantastic Planet](#).”

Like [Hieronymus Bosch](#), the uber-dystopian, who fed on the theater of his day to whip up his own alchemical fantasies, Gentleman’s Game reels the viewer in on a cinematic gift for storytelling and a receptiveness to chance stimuli reminiscent of Rauschenberg, who used some of the same

transfer techniques to gloss Dante's Divine Comedy in a masterpiece of allegorical interpretation.

Unlike with Rauschenberg, to enjoy "Safe Houses" there is no urgent need to perform exhaustive exegesis or to probe the depths of allegory. Just climb up into the tree house and enjoy the view.



"Survivor Reborn" by Gentleman's Game, 2016. Imprinted acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. Courtesy Roman Fine Art.

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**BASIC FACTS:** "Safe Houses" is on view March 24 to April 23, 2017 at Roman Fine Art, 66 Park Place, East Hampton, NY 11937. [www.Romanfineart.com](http://www.Romanfineart.com)

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