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## Joe Wardwell

ALLSTON SKIRT GALLERY

After five years of painting on guitars and two and a half years of portraying musicians, Boston's Joe Wardwell staged his own rock/art "concert" of sorts. The artist paired his new raucous romantic oil paintings and the elegant drawings that make up his "A Heavy History,"

2006, with a hand-painted electric guitar finished in gold leaf and a vintage phonograph playing his latest vinyl album, *Full Length*, 2006, which showcases his rasping, guttural voice, booming bass-playing and drumming, and boisterous guitar riffing.

"A Heavy History," a series of sixty-nine small sepia-toned pencil and ink drawings, constitutes a graphic and painterly assembly of musical big names from Jimi Hendrix, Black Sabbath, Tom Waits, and Blondie to Nashville Pussy and the White Stripes—that have inspired Wardwell's combination of heavy metal, garage rock, and grunge. Pinned to the wall in time-line style, their placement determined by their subjects' careers, the loosely rendered studies look like a salon of miniature posters, advertising everything from mainstream

rock to obscure doom metal. The best of these images—a portrait of Tom Waits at the piano (based on an Annie Leibowitz photograph), for example—capture the icons' raunchy genius with enormous energy.

Many of the characters in "A Heavy History" reappear in Wardwell's more ambitious larger paintings. *The Heaviest Painting in the World*, 2006, a four-foot-square oil, situates an operatic assemblage of heavy-metal musicians within an appropriation of an allegorical fresco by Tiepolo. In Wardwell's version, British rocker Lemmy plays his bass on a billowy cloud, attended by hoards of gesticulating rock heroes, living and

dead. The figures are painted with a lightness and a graceful rapidity akin to Chinese brush paintings, and the orange-and-red-washed sky suggests an apotheosis.

Occasionally, Wardwell incorporates his own handlebar-mustachioed likeness in his work, as a cherub hovering above an Aerosmith concert in *Aeroforced*, 2006, for example, or resting in the clouds among rocker chicks who have inspired his respect (and lust) in *School Girl Eclipse*, 2006. His fascination with the eighteenth century is also evident in the lovingly rendered sepia lithograph that he designed for his album cover. The hand-screened five-color jacket depicts a twelve-inch tondo surrounded by flamelike patterns suggestive of hot-rod detailing. Within the circle is an idiosyncratic homage to Jean-Honore Fragonard's painting *The Lover Crowned*, 1771-72. Wardwell adheres to the light-hearted look and mood of the original but updates the attire of Fragonard's pair of lovers to T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers and litters the surrounding landscape with beer cans and a guitar while a mini-skirted groupie crowns her consort with a bottle instead of a rococo laurel. Wardwell clearly feels a genuine love for the art and music that has affected him, but he keeps his nostalgia in check with a tongue-in-cheek sense of humor. The result isn't so heavy after all.

—Francine Koslow Miller

