Exhibition text by Felix Ashford

'XIX: Homegrown' at RTA Productions is a collaboration between Sean Pearl and Zachary Thompson. The project launches a second edition of their text Latte Akimbo*, with words by Thompson and illustrations by Pearl.*

Painted in 1616, 'The Merrymakers of Shrovetide' is one of the earliest works by Dutch master Frans Hals. It's also the only work that Pearl and Thompson shared with me as a reference. The painting's subject is a carnival scene. Its central figure (likely a boy in drag) is flanked by a mass of revellers in theatrical dress, limbs flailed in crude gestures. The foreground is littered with innuendos; dangled *wurst*, a garland of salted eggs and mussels, open tankards. In its bawdy humour, this painting would have been intended for a private chamber. These sorts of scenes were common, but rarely so detailed with jubilant excess. Perhaps more offensive to the average Dutch household would be its lack of moralising tone. I'm reminded of the work again now whilst standing in the current exhibition. The same kind of sympathy to those more genred things in life. As if something contemporary could also feel jovial.

The centrepiece of the current exhibition is 'Wall Painting for Sean,' (2026), a mural by Thompson executed remotely through a set of mailed instructions. In Thompson's work, the severity of these conceptual strategies is tinged by a kind of humour. What begins here as an ironic nod to the canon of LeWitt or Buren ends in a sincere appraisal. Through the labour of its execution, the work cannot be approached without sincerity.

Working primarily in copper-plate etching, Pearl's practice shows off a similar tendency. Drawing from the stock pool of 'Sailor Jerry' flash and nauticalia, his work strives for legibility that fosters immediacy in its encounter. His repeated lexicon of paper boats, cats, jolly rogers, coffee cups, and palm trees is densified into non-narratival tableaux. The souvenir quality of each print withdraws these symbols from any interpretive context. Beyond a response to mass-culture, Pearl uses these exhausted signs out of practical necessity. There is a pragmatism behind this approach to image-production, even if his choices have some personal meaning. Rather than diminishing the work's value, the form of reproducibility he participates in slows its circulation. Techniques which once provided liberation to the artist are taken on as a burden. In the naive embrace of tradition, Pearl retreats into the extinct position of artist as 'maker' — rather than theorist or social worker. In so doing, he absolves his work of any responsibility beyond the skill of its production. He is less interested in the historical conditions of printmaking than in absorbing himself in its processes. Here, I should cite the opening claim of Thompson's text *Latte Akimbo*, that 'art is delayed by idealism.' The antidote to this, for Pearl, seems to be a kind of productive nihilism that revives meaning through a denial of its loss. I am hesitant to diagnose this any further as 'post-irony,' or to explain its humour. For Pearl, the choice to rely on print (rather than painting, for example) places his art in an alternative canon of protest and satire, à la Blake's prophecies or Hogarth's progress.