

WASHINGTON, DC

## Cameron Spratley Von Ammon Co.

Pour one out for Johnny Reb. While white nationalists are once again ascendent in the United States, the icons that carried the Lost Cause for decades have taken a back seat. Today's extremists just don't put the same kind of stock in the Confederate flag. The militants who attacked the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, flew any number of racist banners—for law enforcement, MAGA, the Three Percenters, Kekistan, Pepe the Frog, and more—but appearances of the Stars and Bars were much rarer.

Chicago artist Cameron Spratley disinterred one of these lapsed symbols: a “rebel” mascot in full grayback regalia that was used by Willoughby South High School in suburban Cleveland until 2017. The figure is indistinguishable from similar mascots used by hundreds of schools across the country, including the “raider” mascot at the former Stonewall Jackson High School in Manassas, Virginia, where Spratley grew up. The artist employs this caricature to point out the types of incendiary markers that posed as quaint historical artifacts for more than a century. Most are now gone, but certainly not forgotten.

In Spratley's exhibition here, “Angels with Filthy Souls,” the artist positioned his cartoonish cadet as a token for an unacknowledged undercurrent of millennial-era aesthetics. The soldier in *REEEEENACTOR—Confederate Landscape* (all works 2025) and other paintings is squat and puckish, a constipated little grunt. However, the figure is lore-accurate, drawn just like the mascot used by Willoughby. Some had clown noses, while others featured more dramatic alterations: In *General Mente—Captain Shit* and *Small Soulja*, the men were racially bifurcated, appearing exactly half Black and half white. Spratley renders his subjects with a digital fuzziness that makes them look pulled from a high school's Geocities page—a digital realm where so many rebel soldiers made their last stand.

A number of works, like *Small Soulja*, were riddled with bullet-hole decals: Hundreds of low-res gunshot blasts covered the paintings, the spray extending out onto the gallery's walls. This grainy allover installation positioned Spratley's project within a specific millennial milieu, an after-school limbo falling somewhere between Looney Tunes and *Wolfenstein 3D*. Bricolage elements throughout the show helped to fix the time and place coordinates as undeniably suburban and utterly Y2K, resonant with the emergence of both first-person shooter games and high-school massacres.

*MdAiAxSoOnN (after LeRage)* illustrated how little race—and more specifically reactionary racism—factors into nostalgic assessments of

early millennial aesthetics. The piece nods to Arthur Jafa's 2017 *LeRage*, a life-size grayscale cutout of the Incredible Hulk smashing the ground. Alongside his own drawings of the Hulk, Spratley includes found images from online interracial pornography and the 2000 box-office flop *Leprechaun in the Hood*. Over these pictures he foregrounds two mirror-image mascots, this time a Johnny Reb in gray and a Billy Yank in blue. These elements from either side of the Mason-Dixon Line are equal halves of an incongruent whole.

The artist's elevation of this mascot points to a series of voids. Each animated bullet hole is a micronegation, with Spratley taking aim at the authority of art, maybe, or prefacing the audience's reaction to his message. This secessionist toon is a blank entity, with beady eyes that might thirst for states' rights (to do what?) or some first downs. The fact that this hackneyed figure was repealed by the community in Ohio (and in Manassas and elsewhere) suggests a shift in values but also a submergence of sentiment. Something is lost in translation when a Confederate soldier gets swapped out for an eagle or a cowboy.

The whole notion of a rebel mascot was to give communities permission to say the loud part quietly. That this racist cadet has formally vanished from school uniforms doesn't make it any less potent as a formative image. The fact that such effigies have also disappeared from the far-right fringes suggests that hate has curdled into something different and new. But Spratley's exhumation of digital Dixie was focused squarely on normie America. In the rapture of a cartoon Confederate the artist finds an echo of the Lost Cause that still resonates widely.

—Kriston Capps