

This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Open" competition in 2006, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Open" was juried by Catherine D'Ignazio, (Co-Director, iKatun and Member of The Institute for Infinitely Small Things, Massachusetts); Omar Lopez-Chahoud, (Independent Curator, New York); and Rachel Berwick, (Artist, Connecticut).

"Open" was made possible by grants from the Roberts Foundation, Goldfarb Memorial Trust, Helen M. Saunders Trust, Bank of America, and the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign.

Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary arts organizations in the United States with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community. Programs include visual arts and public art projects, music, performance, spoken word, film and video, and creative social events designed to connect people with each other. Founded in 1975, Real Art Ways is an alternative to mainstream museums and commercial culture; its programs are made possible by a diverse and growing audience, and support from a wide range of enlightened funders.

On the cover: 2007 artist performance at Real Art Ways, The Battle Royal, featuring El Conquistador vs. a wrestler.

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.

Shaun Leonardo



2007 installation view at Real Art Ways, El Conquistador Cape (velvet and silk, 2006), El Conquistador Portraits 1, 3, 4 & 2 (edition 1/3, c-print with artist frames, 60' x 40' each, 2007), left to right.

The Battle Continues: The Vulnerable vs. The Invincible

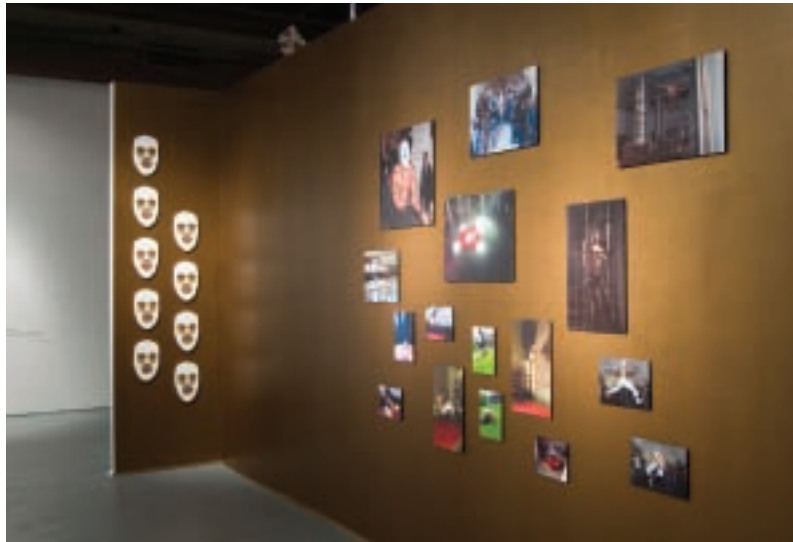
By Derrick Adams

Shaun Leonardo's performances are part of a highly psychological process that is self-reflective and exposes various facets of the human condition. He is most notably recognized for his performance "El Conquistador vs. The Invisible Man" where, in representing the alter ego, he becomes two persons: one masked and the other invisible; both displaying aggressive, hyper-masculine moves and gestures while in combat with one another. Leonardo employs similar strategies in discussing issues of masculinity and virility through his drawing and plywood cutout paintings.

As a child role-playing, I remember running through my house, jumping off of things with a towel tied around my neck and my arms stretched straight out in front of me as if I were flying. I was invincible, or so I thought, fighting a battle between good and evil.

Saturday morning cartoons and programs like *Super Friends*, *The Adventures of Batman & Robin*, and *Wonder Woman*, with her invisible jet, inspired us all to fight evil or to become evil, and the *WWF* gave us personalities and fighting moves to mimic. Leonardo's investment in the uses of Superhero mythology as a point of reference in his work is paralleled with the real life posturing

Shaun Leonardo received a BA in Painting from Bowdoin College in 2001 and an MFA in Painting from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2005. Since 2004, Shaun has staged wrestling matches against invisible opponents and, most recently, other professionally trained wrestlers. He has exhibited work at the RUSH Arts Gallery in New York City, The LAB in San Francisco, the Ice House Cultural Center in Dallas, and the Diego Rivera Gallery at the San Francisco Art Institute. He currently lives and works in New York City.



2007 installation view at Real Art Ways, Self-portrait Luchador 2 (sign enamel and gold leaf on plywood cutout, 13' x 8' 3' each, 2005), El Conquistador vs. The Invisible Man (limited edition c-prints, 2006–2007), left to right.

of Lucha Libre (Mexican wrestling), a world of entertainment that is familiar to most who grew up in front of a television.

Leonardo's performance began early on the day of May 12, 2007, when a small group of us were invited to accompany the exhibiting artist, whose pseudonym is El Conquistador, as he debuted his latest performance piece as part of his solo exhibition at Real Art Ways. Among the entourage were close friends, fellow artists and curators, and, to make the trip even more interesting, a few necessary strangers Leonardo found through the classifieds online who were in his studio earlier flexing and stretching. We later learned that they would be collaborating with him on his performance that day. Escorted in a chauffeur driven luxury mini bus, there we were, along with his big brother, who is the hype man for all of his performances, now taking on the role of esteemed bartender (at lease for the bus ride).

We gathered our things and began to take to the road. Entering the bus, as we're about to leave the artist's studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Leonardo appears decked in a powder blue velour warm-up suit, streamlined sneakers and

star-studded sunglasses. He pops in a mixed CD, gives a nod to the driver and proceeds to pull off and that's when the party really begins. At that moment, we all realized we were on an official celebrity tour bus, equipped with a video compilation of past performance highlights from the continued battles between El Conquistador and The Invisible Man, compiled in a fast edited documentary, compliments of video artist Michael Paul Britto.

Leonardo's newest performance entitled "The Battle Royal" is accompanied by a Hall of Fame inspired installation making this exhibition comparable to a major pop culture production like that of a *WWF* Wrestler with a touring schedule.

We pull up in front of our champion's next battle arena, Real Art Ways, where outside on the lawn and awaiting the bus is a crowd of curious spectators who heard about the great El Conquistador.

Inside the exhibition space is an elaborate installation construction by Leonardo, which includes artifacts and memorabilia from our reigning champion's past battles. The inventory includes a list of objects, starting with a long red velvet and silk cape positioned in the middle of the space, suspended by wire and presented as a sculptural form.

Mounted on the wall is a mask encased in glass and pair of blood stained pants also encased in glass, which were all once worn by El Conquistador. There are also several large portraits taken of the prized fighter posed in a variety of monumental settings, courtesy of photographers Mariana Bersten and Morten Smidt, arranged in ornate gold frames surrounding the space. Below the photographs there are three quotes displayed as wall text and borrowed from various sources:

"So the dilemma we faced was simply this: how were we, as creators, going to say something new about this Nearly 70-year old character." (Jim Lee)

"Lo que ves... No es lo que interpretas y lo que lees, Se cambia en la traducción de lo que entiendes..." (Papo Colo)

"Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"
(*The Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison)

On the opposite wall are a series of video stills highlighting past performances and in a remote corner a repeated masked image of enamel and gold leaf on plywood cutout, entitled self-portrait "Luchador 2". In a separate room, there is a projected video from past battles.

When the vulnerable vs. the invincible are at play, we welcome the spectacle. The simple fact that his opponent is not apparent to us reveals how we all possess inner-demons or personas that we battle. In the video, the act of mirroring one's own image is presented in the form of entertainment and is proven effective time after time. As the performance is executed, the audience soon becomes convinced he is in battle with someone or something, and begins to cheer for the opponent that they easily recognize and relate to. Leonardo, a muscle bound guy, comes to the wrestling mat, ushered in by hype men and high-energy theme music that gets the crowd to a mental space almost as if they were in a coliseum of sorts.

Outside of Real Art Ways the performance begins but this time the masked El Conquistador is accompanied by five identically masked men who all join him on the mat for battle to the (simulated) death. The masks are all the same, so it appears as if there are now six sides of El Conquistador, and he will be fighting against them all. The music stops and they proceed to lunge at one another. Soon the competition becomes fierce and some are left with bruises, bloody lips and noses, unlike Leonardo's previous performances where his opponent is invisible. In those battles he only inflicts pain on himself through his own stunts. This battle lasts for quite some time, but like all fights, it eventually filters down to the last man standing: the strongest, the one with the most control, or Leonardo's representation of psychological battle, the self.



2007 artist performance at Real Art Ways, The Battle Royal, featuring El Conquistador in reflective victory.

Derrick Adams, Visual Artist, has a BFA from the Pratt Institute and received an MFA from Columbia University in 2003. In 1996, as the founding Director and Curator, he established Rush Arts Gallery and Resource Center, a non-profit, alternative exhibition space, in Chelsea. He has taught and lectured at Columbia University, the Maryland Institute College of Art, and the University of Tennessee/Knoxville, and has served on many art related panels, juries and committees. His own work has been exhibited in the Brooklyn Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Greater New York 2005 PS1/MoMA. His awards and residencies include the Marie Walsh Sharpe/Space Program NY, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, and the Agnes Martin Fellowship.