

IVAN WITENSTEIN'S UNCLE JOHN'S BAND A Project of Public Art Fund

Uncle John's Band, 2005
Fiberglass and epoxy resin, 9 x 12 x 11 feet
Sculpted in collaboration with Herb Witenstein
A project of Public Art Fund program In the Public Realm
Courtesy Derek Eller Gallery, New York

Huckleberry Finn and Jim from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Gandalf the wizard from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* come together in Ivan Witenstein's *Uncle John's Band* (2004), a sculptural investigation of the ways in which these two classic, and sometimes controversial, books have been variously interpreted in recent years. The three larger-than-life figures of Ivan Witenstein's *Uncle John's Band* form an unlikely trio, brought together across time and fictional genres to appear side-by-side on atop a river raft. Like many of Witenstein's works, *Uncle John's Band* also presents the viewer with a bizarre juxtaposition, drawing its iconography from disparate sources whose relationship isn't readily apparent.

Witenstein's recent figurative sculptures—rendered in fiberglass and epoxy resin—draw upon an astonishingly rich array of historic and cultural sources, combining visual references to comic book heroes, literature, patriotism, racism, or anti-war sentiment in virtuoso form. His frequent use of politically charged material and his cartoon-like modeling of form recall American social realism. But Witenstein's layering and fragmenting of seemingly incongruent subject matter avoids polemics in favor of allegorical ambiguity, allowing for open and multiple readings of his work.

Uncle John's Band—sculpted in collaboration with the artist's father, Herb Witenstein—features characters from two seminal books of legendary popularity that have both been the subject of controversy. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was published in 1885, and that same year the Concord, Massachusetts library banned it for its coarse language and alleged immorality. In the 20th century, it became an American classic; Ernest Hemingway once noted, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." Over time, it has been praised as satire and an attack on racism, but it has also been criticized—first by the NAACP in the 1950s—for inherent racism in the portrayal of Jim, the escaped slave. It remains the center of heated debate today, ranking #5 on the American Library Association's list of most frequently banned or challenged books.

The Lord of the Rings, in contrast, has never been as controversial as *Huck Finn*. The British series became a beloved classic soon after its 1954 publication, but in recent years—especially since the

phenomenally successful movie trilogy—some critics have raised red flags about Tolkien's portrayal of a racial hierarchy among the wizards, elves, dwarves, and other creatures. Witenstein notes that he had always associated the book with his childhood and with the counterculture utopian ideals of his parents' generation; in 1998, he did an internet search on Tolkien and was surprised to find that *The Lord of the Rings* was the subject of a neo-fascist website. It is this mutability that is at the heart of *Uncle John's Band*, a work that examines the possibility that a single text can be read to support diametrically opposed points of view.

The title, *Uncle John's Band*, is the name of a song by the Grateful Dead, a band that Witenstein has described as, "not only typifying the hippy culture, but also being perpetually co-opted by every successive generation as their own 'college music.'"

About the artist

Ivan Witenstein is a New York-based artist. His most recent solo exhibition, "Here Comes the Son, Here Comes the Knight," was on view at Derek Eller Gallery, New York in 2002. His work has also been featured in recent group shows at Massimo Audiello, New York (2003); New Jersey Center for Visual Arts, Summit (2003); P.P.O.W., New York (2001); Momenta Arts, Brooklyn (2001); Atlanta Contemporary Art Center (2001); and elsewhere. He received an MFA in Sculpture from Yale University School of Art in 1999 and a BFA from the Corcoran School of Art, Washington, D.C. in 1997. He is the Administrative Chair of Fine Art at the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, D.C. He is represented by Derek Eller Gallery, New York.

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