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## Drawing the Bodega Guy: Tom Sanford's Harlem

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With a style that is both lurid and meticulous, [Tom Sanford](#) has made his name with paintings that seem to simultaneously exploit and criticize American excess — his series of “History Paintings,” in particular, depict grotesque moments in our recent past (Tea Party rallies, WalMart stampedes, Whitney Houston’s final moments). But much of Sanford’s practice is about spotlighting what’s *right* with these United States, especially in terms of its creative culture; he’s painted portraits of everyone from Tina Fey and Jonathan Lethem to RZA and the Ramones. For his latest show, “What’s Good In The Hood?” on view at New York’s [Gitler&\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](#) through January 18, Sanford continues to celebrate the things he loves, this time focusing on his own adoptive neighborhood of Harlem.

The centerpiece of the show is a large-scale oil painting, “A Train.” The work is a jam-packed view of a crowded subway train, loaded with New York minutia; it’s so joyful that even the rats seem to be having a good time. Various restaurants and institutions are tucked into the composition, from White Castle and Fairway to the omnipresent Dr. Zizmor. Sanford has put together a key to the painting’s characters and references, available at the gallery — the cast includes dancer Bill T. Jones, actor Neil Patrick Harris, gallerist Avi Gitler, and the artist’s son, Simon. (It also notes that the Ballantine can underfoot in the painting isn’t just litter; it’s a subtle homage to Sanford’s own father.) “My paintings are often tied to historical traditions, evoking the work of particular artists whom I’m interested in,” he said. “In the case of ‘A Train,’ it’s one part [Red Grooms](#) and one part [Piero della Francesca](#), and it’s certainly influenced by [Paul Cadmus](#). I think of it as a New York genre painting.”



Tom Sanford's "A Train," 2014.



Tom Sanford's "Heather", 2014.  
(Courtesy of the artist)

“What’s Good In The Hood?” also includes 24 ink-on-paper portraits, a quiet counterpart to the brightly energetic “A train.” “For the most part, these are people who I run into during my day-to-day life” around Harlem, the artist explained, barring a few “celebrity neighbors whose mythic presence shapes my perception of the neighborhood,” like Fab 5 Freddy. “They are friends, neighbors, and people one runs into — like the guys who work in the bodega I frequent (Abdul on 149th); local hustler types like Gold Boy and Swag who come by Gitler & \_\_\_\_\_ when we’re hanging out; Eric, a.k.a. Blue — because he hawks BlueRay movies for a living — who walks his dog by the gallery all the time; or Lauren and Tara, who respectively own [Harlem Public](#) and [Hogshead](#), my two favorite bars.”

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