

Image-Painting-Text

Conception

On a dark evening in the city where only spires pierced the fog, I rode my motorcycle across the Manhattan Bridge into Brooklyn, then cruised through Crown Heights in the listless haze to Images—the bar with the buzzing and flickering pink neon sign—where Sam, William, and Max were meeting me. We were planning a show at Garis & Hahn. Over drinks I said, “It’s the summer. Let’s do something Dada or Surrealist. Make the opening a Nueva Cabaret.” Pushing down his fedora, William said, “No press release on the front desk with that shit nobody reads.” Sam, pointing a finger, said, “What excites me is that we have a writer curating. Let’s use that.” He sat back and scratched his beard. I offered, “How about writing on the wall?” Max said, “If you’re thinking what I’m thinking.” I said, “Blocks of text between paintings.” “I like it,” Max said. He added, “I thought William and Sam could each make a work inspired by the same painting.” William: “Why not an old photograph? Why not a whole series of images?” Sam: “We can send them via email.” “This is great. Kyle will also share images.” “I will write a literary collage.” Max, squinty, red-faced, and smiling, said, “Come on, people will love this,” and I lifted a victorious fist that rose like a reverse asteroid and was lost in the caverned vision of drunkenness and the bar’s extinguishing light. Candles were going out one after the other until everybody else had gone home and still we drank, laughed, drank, smoked, and near dawn I dropped off William who lives around the corner from the asylum that housed Basquiat’s mom.

Growth

The hominid smashed the femur bone onto the beast's skull as clouds gathered and swarmed above him. Saturday night at the movies, leaning back in a red chair turned brown with years of summer sweat, jeans greased, leather jacket slung over my shoulder, bike parked outside, I thought of Sam's neon paintings. They are hard to place. There is Warhol, but in the neon there is no irony, no blatant relation to, or appropriation of, consumer culture. Instead the neons embalm and preserve images, associating Sam in part with an artist like Damien Hirst, who literally embalms dead animals and preserves strange scenes in glass vitrines. Actually there is Oldenburg too. Just like any curved stick has potential in the *Ray Gun Wing* I see images bursting with neon potential all around me. The color gets under my skin. It creeps into my vision when I'm at the museums and as I sat there in the dark chamber with popcorn—scared of pink-haired gunmen parading in below red exit signs, tossing up the smoke bombs, shooting me, the moms and children—trying to lift my head above the billowing wave of anxiety; breathe in, breathe out, I told myself, catching blasts of images on the screen; and while a primordial drama of life, death, and murder cut to strange machines waltzing in space, I—still not wholly calm but reasoning that if it was going to happen it would have happened already—considered this: everywhere there are neons that Sam just hasn't made yet. Like a rogue shadow that appears in the bedroom, the imprint of the pigment is there.

Immersion

In *Image-Painting-Text* there is a cohort of headless schoolgirls. There are four limbless gymnasts. There are two slabs of meat on a level scale suspended from a pole that stands before mountains that lie beneath a pink horizon. There is one politician on a billboard puckering his lips and grasping the jaw of a ram. Growing like some bizarre, globular bacterium in William's work is a Surrealist landscape of men, beasts, objects, oddities, and architecture. I have a savage pilgrim's desire to poke pins into the entire map. Upstate I rode my bike all over the Hudson Valley, passing beat-down barns and mansions. Off the highway in a vast field where a few trees stood with branches rustling dreamily in the wind there was the most peculiar home. It was an old, rotting, dilapidated estate standing ominously before the Catskills. I rode closer and parked my bike near the skeleton of a jet plane that had been cast away on the field. Inexplicably, almost impossibly, there were four gigantic billboards surrounding the house. The furthest to the right featured a man on his knees, bent over with branches of foliage sprouting from his backbone. On his face there was some sort of perverted, ribbed, conical butt plug of a mask. I was disturbed, possessed, aroused and headed blindly toward the house, but no! A squadron of headless soldiers riding elk charged toward me, obviously out for blood. As a manic glee invaded my entire being, I ran back to my bike and rode off, the gang of monsters behind me. Far away, when I no longer felt the horrible gaze and heard the trodden beat of hooves behind me, I declared, "The artistic process is an ongoing effort to understand!" and my voice flew freely and proudly like a bald eagle surveying the sea.

Disillusion

Enchanted and riding fast on the highway I lost control, skidded, and crashed. A black wave of melancholy rushed through me and then swelled under bruises and oozed out from cuts on my skin. Everything around me looked dull, meaningless. I kicked my bike and screamed, my bewildered fit of ecstasy falling cruelly to a frenzy of impotent rage. My voice echoed briefly and fell flat, caught and squashed in the humidity; while atop a stupid flagpole a flag featuring the fin of some whale flapped noisily like a squawking pheasant. What the fuck. I tied a red bandana over my eyes and sat down cross-legged in the middle of the road. In this state there was zero possibility for art appreciation. Picasso could have risen from the grave with a brush in one hand, a canvas in the other, prancing around, looking for an easel, exclaiming "Uno más! Uno más!" and I would have punched him back to death. A question: what does the woman in *L'Absinthe* think when she looks at herself in the painting *L'Absinthe* when she's filled with the ennui that Degas captured with his brush? Answer: probably not much. "Ha!" I said out loud, and on that sad and lonely road leading to who knows where it occurred to me that while there are some paintings that capture the bitterness and stale horror of melancholy I am still searching for the painting that can thrust me out of my narcissistic squalor when I am caught up in piles and piles of that shit, mouth and eyes full of it, thrusting my hand out, fingers unfurling like sticky feathers on a sick pigeon's wing.

Denouement

I ditched the motorcycle and walked along the empty road at twilight. I wrapped the bandana around my mouth like an outlaw. Houses appeared less and less frequently. Every once in a while a family of deer would poke their heads out of the forest and, once seeing me, run away scared. Then the forest ended and vast desert stretched out on either side of me. The occasional car wreck or billboard loomed. There was a grazing buffalo and we looked deep into each other's eyes. I walked on. The sun set and two moons shined above me. The bandana, hot with breath, slid down and scarfed me. I walked until the morning. I heard the call of seagulls and smelled the familiar scent of the ocean. Around midday I reached the shore. Far off and miles of sea away there was a city. ○ sprawling future metropolis. I swore that one day I'd make it there and when I did those staggering, massive buildings would rise on either side of me and the awesomeness of that scene would fill my entire body with a hope and terror of some irreconcilable kind and I would dance naked like a madman, limbs bursting like neon lightning in the storm at midnight. Then all sensation would drain, giving way slowly at first, then quicker, to ennui. And in that empty moment—one thousand images lay siege upon my fragile mind—I would wonder, what am I looking at? Who cares? Nobody. Still I pounce on the page with my pen like the artist flinging paint at his canvas.

—*Kyle Kouri, 2013*