

naked truths



notes on the margins of the white body (allan de souza)

My intent in paraphrasing the title of an artwork by Glenn Ligon, *Notes on the Margins of the Black Book*,¹ is to follow a similar, almost archeological method of excavation around a set of given images. To tease the edges, as it were, in search not necessarily for answers as answers might not exist, but for the right questions and for the unspoken and unspeakable meanings hidden within silence.

Ligon's piece was an exploration of discussions around and in response to Robert Mapplethorpe's infamous portfolio of black men. In this exhibition, *Naked Truths*, the black body is noticeably absent. Rather than see this as an unfortunate omission, I want to consider it as a critical and curatorial decision. Paradoxically, the invisibility of blackness makes itself hyper-visible and reveals its nemesis: whiteness.

(I should clarify that whiteness constructs itself as the absence of blackness, that is, the absence of any darkening or *polluting* taint. Racially, this ideology of pollution has been applied across the spectrum of skin colors to even southern Europeans, so my use of "blackness" here is not melanin-bound.)

It's a truism that the human body does not exist innocently, but bears the increasing weight of history's readings. It exists as a sign, to be read and interpreted through permutations of desire and fear. If the body is not innocent, its representations are even less so. How then to read this exhibition?

Like any viewer's, my vision is partial. The seemingly simple act of viewing is clouded by a desire to see myself represented. Not in the simplistic form of a mirror reflection, but in terms of historical and political identification. I (in this broader sense) want to look at paintings and not feel omitted, fetishized or, worse, erased.

As a viewer whose history is rooted in colonialism, when I look at paintings of white bodies I might expect to feel my own absence: that colonial trick of having one's own image extinguished and substituted by the colonizer's visage. What is astounding to me when I look at the work in this exhibition, is that I do not feel this absence, this sleight of face. Though the paintings here do not represent me pictorially, I feel that I am a key to their formulation. This paradox, then, is my starting point for viewing this exhibition.

These paintings crawl unpleasantly under the skin. They are a world away from the seductive keyhole voyeurism of, for example Degas or Bonnard. If I were required to trace a lineage, I would begin my search with paintings that proudly display their ugliness like stigmata, collecting en route perhaps Achimboldo, Grunewald's *Crucifixion*, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* or paintings of the Neue Sachlichkeit or Bacon, de Kooning, Lucien Freud, . . . This is no accidental lineage; *Naked Truths* proceeds from defined strands within Euro-American art history and the artists within the show freely and gleefully quote from it. But they do so in ways which expose underlying social and psychic crises.

While the *Truths* of the title may be too emphatic a declaration, work in this exhibit nevertheless delves behind certain masquerades of modernist painting, grasping for the possibilities of psychic representation. The bodies in this show are not draped languorously across beds, nor caught in inviting enticements. There are no nudes here, no porcelain nymphs prancing through idyllic landscapes, only the hard physicality of nakedness within surroundings which themselves assume attributes of the contained body. Everywhere I look, billowing ripples of flesh surround me with their repulsive mortality; cuts, wounds, lacerations, purse their ghastly lips at me. If beauty lies within their maws, it does not hide within euphemism, under make-up, behind facade.

Yet even in this nakedness, there is no truth. Living as we do in the age of televised courtroom trials, we know all too well that truth does not exist and if it did it would be irrelevant. The only thing that matters is interpretation.

In my discomfort with the starkness on display, I also admit a certain ease. I do not feel deceived, as I do, for example, by the empty arabesques of Matisse. His lightness and airiness, his positioning of the female body as just another form; his beauty to be appreciated from an armchair reeks to me of evasion. His work seems too much an escape from the rigors of life, from this physicality of the body, from the encroaching demands of post-modernity. From crisis. And yet, the lightness of his work is also a reflection of the very success of the colonial enterprise (in North Africa), when ideology itself—the structure supporting and creating the surface—becomes invisible.

Within the oeuvres of Matisse, or Delacroix, or Gauguin, or from occasional pieces from artists too numerous to mention, there is the fetishization of the colonized body, and behind it all—the true subject of the works—is the white gaze. By the act of looking outwards, and especially at the Other, the artist avoids the sight of himself (it is usually a him). While scholarship has focused on orientalism and primitivism as staples and even foundation stones of Euro-American modernism, it has only recently begun to consider the beneficiary of these appropriations and demonologies: the construction of an elevated, sanctified whiteness.

This is the difference: my reading of work in this exhibit is that through the ruptured surfaces, it exposes the structure bolstering this ideology which encompasses whiteness. At the same time, it reveals the psychic cost of maintaining it.

If there have been crises with painting, the body, and identity, they have occurred partly as a result of the fracturing of that racialized, masculinized vision. Of course, that vision has never been monolithic or homogenous, but never before has it been under such a concerted attack. Now, the subaltern talks back, the popular perception of feminism has shifted from one of burning bras to wringing jockstraps, and the cringing pansies of yesteryear are today's placard-carrying queer activists. The Euro-American body, identity and consequently painting are indeed in crisis: crises which form a subtext for the selection of works for this exhibition, and my own responses to them as a viewer.

The work reveals these crises by shifting away from the body as distanced Other, as objectified model, as abstract form; and towards the body as representation of self and identity. There is a long history of pained self-scrutiny, as in the self portraits of Egon Schiele. However, such a widespread self-conscious portrayal of the self through the representation of others' bodies seems to be a recent phenomenon.

When Guido Reni or Mantegna painted St. Sebastian, we have no sense that it is a representation of the artist himself, but when Margo Machida in this exhibition paints Yukio Mishima as Sebastian, she even begins the title with "Self Portrait as . . ." Both references, Mishima and Sebastian, operate as myth encompassing readings of masculinity, desire, denial. We know that as a boy Mishima first masturbated to a book reproduction of Reni's St. Sebastian. Furthermore, Sebastian was the patron saint invoked against the plague, a scourge believed to have been inflicted by Apollo's arrows, hence the continued vitality of the image through the Middle Ages and its resuscitation in the age of AIDS.

Mishima, perhaps the most well-known Japanese outside Japan, has become, by reason of that limited knowledge, a cliché of Japanese masculinity. For Machida, to portray herself with the white-face of *Kabuki*, flanked by Mishima's inverted head and Sebastian's pierced torso, is to play on such stereotyping, fracturing the hagiography of masculine martyrdom.

In *Noli Me Tangere*, Machida again portrays herself in white, but this time as a ghostly apparition sandwiched between an erupting volcano and a newborn infant. The title is from the words spoken by Jesus to Mary Magdalene, meaning literally "do not touch me." Like the historic book of the same name by the Filipino writer Jose Rizal, Machida's painting presents a warning as well as an admonition against colonizing interference and occupation. Her (use of) whiteness acts as a form of invisibility and erasure.

At first sight, Delmas Howe's paintings perform opposite functions from Machida's. Despite depicting that most frantic of male activities, the rodeo, his paintings are as frozen and iconic as any altar-frozen moments from the sudden unleashing of animal power and the frenzied attempts to tame it. Like the simultaneous parody and assertion of gay archetypes by the band, The Village People, Howe's hyper-masculine figures are both lust-inducing, sexualized demi-gods and repulsive, unemotional caricatures; hot and cold as it were. This conflicted push-pull is reflected by his almost operatic painting style, its grandiosity both magnificent and trashily kitsch. Even the outbursts of gestural paint strokes—so different from the carefully delineated figures—are contained within strict, structural devices of fences and gates.

Like its antecedent, *Birth of a Hero I*, in *Birth of a Hero II (The Holy Instant)*, a parade of men seemingly prepare for the next rodeo event, while in their midst erupts a naked figure. Only the two nearest cowboys seem to detect the presence of this Hero, and even then—their eyes slightly glazed—they don't seem to fully see him. Vision and visibility become metaphors for the expression and sublimation of gay desire. Beyond the veil of sightlessness, through the closet door lies the moment of revelation.

Howe's paintings, both in style and content, are representations of conflict—or perhaps conflicted representations—of desire and its constraint. To return to my initial proposition: it is the couching of homoeroticism and the mythology of the American West within a language of classical mythology and Christian martyrdom that posit these paintings as constructions of whiteness.

Where the conflicts in his work escalate to the fever and pitch of crisis is within *Birth of a Hero III (The Martyrdom)*. The blond, heavily muscled, Aryan Hero sits astride a bucking white-faced, black/brown-bodied bull (bear in mind Margo Machida's white-faced self-portraits). In the background, wooden scaffoldings suggest the crosses at Calvary, the place of skulls. Unlike the virginal Christ and the virtuous Sebastian who refused the advances of a fellow centurion, this soon-to-be saint, a murderer-saint of Genet awaiting execution, surrenders not to death but to lust. His eyes raised or perhaps rolling back into his head in divine ecstasy, his arms thrown wide in capitulation, his martyrdom is to the untamable dark power surging, literally, between his legs.

Attila Lukacs's paintings operate within similar parameters, incorporating myth, martyrdom, and menace. Using a paragon of whiteness, the skinhead, Lukacs plays out scenarios of lust and threat. In this trio of paintings he uses the style and formal constructions of Mughal miniature painting in jolting contrast to their subject matter. *Love in Separation: Rejection* works in three parts, almost like a Francis Bacon crucifixion. At each wing is a tableau of a ritualistic, highly sexual murder-in-progress.

Carved into a tree trunk is the familiar lovers' heart pierced by an arrow. The legend within it alludes to the flippant Christian rebuttal that if God had intended homosexuality, he would have created Adam and Steve. Is this the garden of Eden, and the events we are witness to the results of eating off the tree of knowledge? If this were so, then the black, centrally-placed dog-like creature slinking away behind the prostrate body of a skinhead becomes indisputably satanic, its pointed ears transformed into horns.

Hanneline Røgeberg's figures become emblematic of psychic dislocation, icons of the interrupted process of individuation. Prevented by some force from becoming whole, they struggle to be freed from restraint; at the same time afraid to be cast away, to be outcast. Her figures clasp each other, tentatively, obsessively, with a dread of letting go, of functioning independently. Against empty, chilling landscapes, they grapple in alienated sex, offering their bodies in hopeless search for a human connection. Like participants in an encounter group from hell, the alienation of their bloated bodies is wrenching as they struggle to save each other.

Røgeberg's figures are clearly and distressingly in crisis, but one steeped in pathos. Her figures are caught in the brooding misery of a northern European winter in the tradition of Edvard Munch rather than the desert fever of Howe's cowboys or the sun-bleached colors of Lukacs.

Masami Teraoka's *Confessional Series* includes an image of the artist on his knees in a hysterical *Crying Game* scenario, having just discovered that his presumed female lover has in fact a dick, an enormous dick. But other signs suggest that it is not the moment of discovery. The artist holds a couple of unfurled condoms, presumably already used. He himself, identified as male by his mustache and clearly a self-portrait, does not have a penis. It is not that he is castrated, an emasculated male; through the thatch of his pubic hair is revealed the merest suggestion of labia.

This convolution of sexual organs is a recurring theme in Teraoka's work. In the *Masturbation Series* from 1970s, the artist depicts two women fucking, one penetrating the other with—if not a penis—a very life-like dildo.

Despite the usage of the visual language of pornography and fetishism (the she-male rather than the transsexual, the black stockings and stiletto heels), this latest series is quite clearly allegorical. All the images take place within the confined space (the closet) of confessional booths. Again, the references to Christian martyrdom: the she-male drips, instead of stigmata, red fingernail polish; a haloed she-male grapples with a Komodo dragon, playing on the archetype of St. George. In *Vampire*

