

Richard Hawkins

"Scalps, Dungeon Doors and Salome Paintings"

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The Poem

These notes toward a press release were initially intended to be a poem. For the reason that it seems like you used to meet a lot of gay poets. Not so much now though. You meet a lot of gay accountants and realtors these days. But few, if any, poets.

My poem, not finding a poet and having to take on the task myself, was to be about a sex club that used to be at that big swerve in the road where Fountain turns into Hyperion near Casita del Campo – it was called "King of Hearts". After passing through an entryway of reclaimed corrugated tin, plastered with local punk rock posters and "lost dog" adverts, you entered a junkyard realm of rusted iron bed frames and tractor tires, repurposed oil-drums and faded plastic flowers poking out between the concrete blocks and Johnson grass. Unlike its neighboring "Basic Plumbing", the "King of Hearts" décor was very intrusive and, to many gay minds, too much like a spooky back lot or the set for "Sanford and Son" to be conducive to the more serious sex that many of us might have wanted out of it.

The overt theatricality of "King of Hearts" had a very strange effect. I'm not sure if its ridiculousness dislodged the (also, in their own way, overtly theatrical and imposing) masculine codes of other bars and sex clubs nearby. Or if it was a kind of "wouldn't be caught dead in" place where, surely, you could get your business done and never ever run into any coworkers or ex-boyfriends. Or maybe it was just the last chance place for minorities within a minority: Blacks who weren't tops, Mexican kids with fake id's, big fat hairy guys before bears had their own scene, drag queens out of drag, those of us who'd never been to a gym or who were already banned from the rest of the clubs, those of us who were already super drunk on a Tuesday night but still horny, etc, etc. If furrries and yiffies had existed back then, "King of Hearts" was the only place you would've found them.

Given such a dynamic, miracles – though rare – could inevitably happen there. I've seen Mr Whipple with a 30 year old Kip Noll pinned to the front grill of an old Buick. I've seen the Incredible Mr Limpet chewing the nipples off a high school quarterback. Wally Cleaver once took the piss of Charles Nelson Reilly against an old set of badly painted gym lockers. Willie Aames was into getting fingered but got rather testy when you tried to fuck him. Ralph Macchio arrived with his favorite dildo in a Flintstones lunchbox. Erik Estrada lounged in the buglit doorway – just a t-shirt, no pants.

And the porn stars, they all lived in the neighborhood – especially the aging nameless ones from AMG over on West Adams and the perpetually downlow ones from Old Reliable. The porn that stirred up and informed so many of the desires of gays my age was primarily a collaboration between kids from the Valley and old queens living in Silverlake so while you might not always see Al Parker there much, a day would hardly pass that you didn't get mixed up with Randy Page's speed freak shenanigans. Rod Garetto must've had a lease on the old cot in one of the back rooms there. The Toby Ross surfer kids were always up for anything but would inevitably ask for a few bucks afterwards. Lee Marlin was still around and had held up pretty well. Jon King would try to pass himself off as a top (as if we hadn't seen all his films, endlessly, on a loop, over and over and over again). Kip Noll's brother Chip could always be found – stoned out of his gourd – beneath a string of burnt-out Xmas lights in a patch of weeds to the left of the garden gnome. And other brothers, my gosh!: Mike Henson and his slightly less hot brother Bill, Kevin Williams and his little brother Chris, Tim Lowe and his apparently adopted brother Jason, etc etc...

What baffles me – aside from the astounding lack of poets amongst our people – is where are these gay mystery spots now? Obviously not WeHo. And Silverlake itself has turned into a pedestrian-friendly incubator for straight couples with baby names that sound far too much like Samantha Stephens' kinfolks: Hagatha, Clara, Esmeralda, Endora, etc.

I'm sitting here now scrolling through the facepics of Grindr and it's just not the same.

My "Salome Paintings" could also be called "King of Hearts Paintings".

"Scalps"

They're not scalps in the actual sense of a hunk of hair and skin chopped from where the forehead meets the hairline. They are, in fact, faces unwound - but "unraveled countenances" or "face peelings" would not have the same connotations of war trophies or memorial tokens. (Among those associations, actually, is this interesting factoid. While most of us are familiar with the paired meanings of the victor's battle keepsake and the horror instilled by the maliciousness of mutilating corpses, there was apparently a supernatural meaning among certain Native American tribes: bodies with pieces missing would not have been able to enter the afterlife – scalps were easier to hack off than noses or ears in the heat of battle).

Viewers will obviously recognize the similarity between these new cut-up masks and older pieces of mine, also rubber masks sliced into one long strip (there's another reference here that only my sister and I might perceive – they're cut using the same method that my grandmother would pare an apple) but with pictures of heavy metal stars paper-clipped to them and titled according to the name of each star's band: Every Mother's Nightmare, Trixter, Anthrax, etc.

While recently putting together a survey of my work and wanting to include these early pieces I was forced to face their current condition. Rubber and latex tend to dry out and lose their pliancy as well as their structural integrity within a few years. Add to this that the masks had already been compromised with a pair of scissors and then been exposed to extra distress by being suspended from a solitary nail and you can imagine that they are currently little more than crumbling piles of rubber rubble and collage elements.

I actually don't mind their current condition and merely consider it to be the nature of these particular materials. They'll never hang on the wall again but, to me, that's merely they're second state. But I did want viewers to be able to appreciate the original appearance of these pieces in something other than a photograph - their "presence", if you will - as intentionally slight and wilting as it might've been.

It occurred to me, though I'm as averse as most other artists to going back and remaking old or destroyed work, that there might be a new series with a whole set of new meanings that would also serve the purpose of recreating the appearance and presence of the original masks. Though Every Mother's Nightmare and Anthrax etc had initially been interpreted as, primarily, a young gay man's revenge on a culture (heavy metal and its less threatening incarnation, hair bands) that excluded him, I had thought I'd been working toward (being a fan of Kristeva) ideas of the pathetic, the abject, the corrosive and the grotesque. A major reference for me, at least, in fastening what I thought to be the cutest of the hair banders to their spindly rubber displays were voodoo dolls. But ineffective ones – as if some desperate little conjurer had gone to the trouble of swiping the locks of hair and nail-clippings of his desired (and consequently worthy of being cursed) love object but that his attempts at wizardry were far from successful.

(Another memory: after shooting a coyote my grandfather would hang its carcass dangling from a fence post. The other coyotes were supposed to sniff it and go away. But they always seemed so puny and insubstantial hanging there, hardly worthy of the name "wolf" which, for some reason, we called them instead of coyotes). (It never worked, by the way. The coyotes would just sniff the dead one, shrug their spindly little coyote shoulders and march right ahead toward snatching my grandfather's chickens).

Failed ambition and withered, exhausted pseudo-magical impulses – particularly when it came to desperate love and obsessive adoration - were incredibly fascinating to me in the early 90s. With this second incarnation, then, there's the very simple and practical attempt to duplicate the physical slightness and shriveled-upness of the original masks, but also an attempt to re-direct the dialogue around them (now that the hair bands would be seen as nostalgic instead of trendy and, consequently, as a subculture instead of dominant culture).

Among the many ideas that were beginning to be very important to me when I was making the original masks were the kinds of post-structuralism and feminism that align all discourse with male prerogative and proposes desire, erotics and the body as alternatives out of a dialectic. Most importantly was the Kristevan idea that the pathetic and the abject had the corrosive power to serve as alternatives to critique, e.g. if one wants to circumvent the dialectical position that criticality entails, one always has the more ambivalent attitudes of bodily function and presence: one can smother by nurturing, deflate with adoration, inflate with revulsion or simply and ecstatically lick something entirely out of existence.

Recreating the masks, then, seemed much more interesting and worthwhile if, instead of being enslaved to the lack of concern for conservatorship I might have had in the early 90s, I could effectively (hopefully) redirect the public's then-perception of an artist in love with the culture that rejected him and produce similar works (here, 20 years later) that attempted to re-direct that discourse. New works, based on old ones but with a greater insistence on how they are to be perceived.

I'm also well aware of the heady (and perhaps, unfortunately, very very dated) ideas that the titles conjure (and, if it's not evident, the list of sources includes not only Kristeva but Cixous, Irigaray, Derrida's "Glas", Lyotard's "Libidinal Economy", a smattering of Barthes and, though she doesn't fit so nicely with the focus or field of the others above, Melanie Klein's "splitting"). But, halfway through making the new masks I realized that I'd illustrated at least one definition of the grotesque: a large unwieldy mass (the titles) suspended precariously on slender insubstantial supports (the masks).

The titles, I'd hasten to point out, are far from ironic. Many of the ideas expressed in them are quite crucial to the ways I think about art, politics, culture, life and love.

The pictures of cute heavy metal guys in these new versions of the masks have been replaced with pretty fragments and samples from my painting practice. Scraps of paper laying around often get slathered with whatever paint I have left on a brush. (Which makes me think of my grandfather again, you'd often see him stumbling around in the yard with a bare modicum of paint left in the bottom of a paint can looking for the nearest birdhouse or flowerpot to dab it onto). Nothing, particularly pretty things that can brighten, embellish or decorate, ever goes to waste.

But there was always a correlation or contrast between two different kinds of bodies or faces in the old masks: the abstracted and grotesque shredded face/body and the relative cuteness of Sebastian Bach, Pete Loran, etc. I always considered it open and ambivalent whether the masks were intended to represent the aftermath of either my vengeful slasher fantasies or my loving yet failed attempts at being voodoo Frankenstein. The painted cards on the new masks are more – what? – absorptive than their more representational predecessors and rather than pointing to a culture outside of themselves, they point back to the studio.

Or you could also think of my *post-it collages* from 1993 here. I'd always thought of the *post-its* themselves as alien interruptions within a cohesive field, hesitations, blockages – like a rock in a stream, the obstruction makes for more pleasing ripples. Very simply, the painted cards create harmony through dissonance.

The Shoeboxes

To avoid the conservatorship problems outlined above (though I'm sure new ones are bound to arise), the new masks are shown only once on the wall. At the end of the show they're placed in the provided shoebox. This second state is their eventuality and its inevitability has already been provided for (which sounds, given that I have a mortician for a nephew, exactly like the terms he'd use when making a sales pitch for cemetery plots and caskets).

Shoeboxes also carry with them the reference of being what your grandmother would keep her old photos and love-letters in or what you would use to bury a pet canary or parakeet in the backyard.

I also lucked out on finding the perfect shoeboxes. They come from a shoe store for Mexican and Mexican-American office ladies on Van Nuys Blvd, deep deep inside the Valley. The pinks, purples and oranges of the boxes have a kind of harmony with the Salome paintings. But the names of the shoes themselves – Olive, Forever, L.A. Beauty, Mona Mia Collezione, Top Mode – have a flair of exoticism about them since they're named in Italian and English for a predominately Spanish-speaking clientele.

The fact that the boxes have names on them seems to have some resonance with the fact that the original masks from '91 were named after the hair bands their clippings pictured.

Combined Masks on Tables

Further to the scalps having a relationship not only to the masks from '91 but also to the *caboose paintings* and the *post-it collages*, I've been involving myself more and more with the idea of forcing continuity into the practice by producing new works that have a correspondence with older ones, the reoccurrence of themes, colors, materials or motifs as a kind of self-legitimizing factor.

The matte surface of construction paper in a collage, the use of a yellow and pink combination in another, all "makes sense" above and beyond their intended meaning simply because they occur again somewhere else.

This is perhaps what I mean by "forcing continuity". By pushing elements from past works – *severed heads*, arch-like forms from my *Roman collages*, stripes from my *Thai paintings*, card tables, etc etc – I intend to work toward a practice that consumes itself.

With that in mind, the scalps on tables have a relationship to "tomb", a sculpture of mine from 2006 in which ephemera from my painting practice are locked inside a vanity case, unavailable for public viewing. I see a correspondence here with the limitations of showing artist's books – there will never be a time which would allow a "full viewing". I'm not sure why that idea is appealing.

Also, since the titles of the masks are a version, as I said, of my politics, the table is a kind of presentation mode but the boxes indicate that something has had to be shelved and hidden. Or at least treated as a memento.

"Dungeon Doors"

For somebody who's worked a lot in collage for so many years I often regret the insurmountable obstacle of always being limited to the scale of a magazine page. And though collage is a medium which calls for "additions onto" rather than "insertions within" I find a similarity between these paintings and my collages. If only in the sense that they are two otherwise autonomous images which have been forced to operate together. With the "Dungeon Doors" it finally occurred to me to make the dynamic work on a much larger scale (and thus break out of at least one limitation of collage).

Insertions-within or additions-alongside are things I've been doing for quite a while. The pendant aspect of the *caboose paintings* worked this way. There have been a lot of diptychs over the past few years, but the "Dungeon Doors" are probably closest to "Bad Medicine" and "Little Pinkfeather" from the "Celestial Telegraph" series shown in 2008.

Why dungeon doors? Other than a lingering fascination with Hollywood horror movie props and a lot of research I'd done on Venice (where you tend to see a lot of mysterious Pit and Pendulum doorways), I'm not sure.

Rivets: You might think of Guston. I think of Bullwinkle.

A Venetian connection: a few months back I got sidetracked by the idea of, in 1488, the porch of Santa Maria Mater Domini being sealed off by the authorities to stop it from being used by sodomites as a gathering place. Apparently apothecary shops and pastry shops were also under surveillance for the same reasons. Because of the stripes in my paintings I changed it to barbershops (stripes, barber poles, etc – but also because barbers and hairdressers snip things, like a collagist).

"Salome Paintings"

With retrospectives on my brain, the new works in this show, more than other shows, was compelled to a great extent by cross-referencing to things of my own that have come before them. But looking backwards to go forward has always – pretty much – been a part of the practice. The *caboose paintings* of 2003 are one example. "Stairwell Down" was, to me, a reoccurrence of "city underground".

The initial idea was relatively simple: combine the boys and colorful nightclubs from my sex tourist paintings with my *disembodied zombies*. What I didn't expect was a connection to a sculpture of mine from 2009 called "Entropy Place" – which was a kind of re-imagining of LA's Chinatown after having watched it go through periods where it had been a relatively abandoned tourist location (which I used to visit a lot to enjoy its hybridized self-orientalized decay – it's where I bought the lanterns for my "crepuscule" sculptures) to art market boom to its recent art gallery mass exodus. This wax and wane of popularity and character was what I was calling entropy but I was fantasizing a further future change in which its amazingly odd movie set architecture falls into the hands of commercializing riffraff who would open it back up as a kind of gay hustler low-budget theme park.

It's hard for me to parse out the appeal of the following but cheaply converted architecture and hastily applied ornament has been a recurring interest of mine (further, again, to "King of Hearts" above, obviously). There was a Texas pit barbecue restaurant in Austin that had changed hands and become a Chinese take-out place. To do so, they'd brought in a dirty aquarium, hung a couple of cheap paper lanterns and coated all the rustic pit bricks and hillbilly back fence motifs in the brightest gloss yellow and Chinese red. There's also a couple of nightclubs on the outskirts of my home town that only a few years ago had been auto repair shops (it would be an amazing demographic to chart the probably coextensive decline of retail and consumer operations with the rise in issuance of liquor licenses in my hometown). Both locations feature the mainstay of what I'm talking about: corrugated tin inexpertly painted in kindergarten colors with, as always, the staple prop of all things repurposed on a budget, the candy-colored oil drum.

There's a further demographic here having to do with a history of gay men colonizing sketchy and oftentimes ethnic parts of town for their own uses (followed, of course, by a more populist revitalization, e.g. NY's Meatpacking District). At the start of these paintings I'd been reading Patrick Moore's "Beyond Shame" and became fascinated by the descriptions of the Anvil, the Catacombs and the Mineshaft but particularly the SF leather bar "Black and Blue" and the fact that it was a converted cafeteria from the 20s, replete with silver spray-painted coffered ceilings and black/white floor tiles. The queenly grandmotherliness of even the most butchest of environments is a book that is yet to be written.

So the Salome paintings are a kind of fantasy along these lines, of a grimy netherworld featuring vain attempts at an upscale re-do and where loose boys saunter or loiter around listlessly. I'm not sure why the boys' old customers are decapitated zombies. I've recently tacked a reproduction of Guido Reni's "David, Vanquisher of Goliath", 1603-4 to my studio wall.