ANSEL KRUT

Resting on a number of found, weathered tabletops are twenty or so small, irregularly cut glass plates, each with an image drawn on its reverse and with masking tape around its borders. They are propped at an angle, with one edge resting against the wall, the other hinging out into the room. The near side of the glass is clean and shiny; the far side is daubed with a layer of black oil paint. Using a range of different tissue papers and other improvised tools, Krut has drawn into this layer by removing paint from the surface. Light is then allowed through the glass, producing a faint image projected onto the wall behind. An unlikely cast of characters has been scratched, dabbed and rubbed out of a greasy black field; together, they constitute the absurd, debased fallout from a kind of Cambrian Explosion of the imagination. Crude and fabulous, fragile and gauche, sullied and luminous: the series involves an array of reversals and inversions.

Sullyings and Inversions

The depicted figures seem the result of strange amalgamations, deformations and recombinations. With the human face as primary referential anchor, some anarchic fun is had with the possibilities of doubling and distorting that fundamental empathetic touchstone. Deranged facial features are built from a banana, orange and two oyster shells; an eyeball wears a beard and a turban; bugs and plugs constitute themselves as loony humans; a moon face appears on the backside of a cat. By turns (and sometimes all at once), they are comical, mythical, scatological and ludic, and appear to have arisen from a ferment of intermingled sources: from the enchanted collective narratives of folklore, to the differently dark ruins of history,[1] to the most trivial of everyday observations, and the flights of imagination that constantly punctuate conscious life. And so they arrive, given body in the messy brisk directness of the drawing process. We are put in mind of Goya's famous 'Sleep of Reason,' and the monsters bred therein. But the disturbance is not only a question of imagery; it also arises at the level of material practice.

The clear sheen of the glass plate sets into relief the greasy darkness of the paint on its reverse side. And these opposed material qualities have their affective and imaginative correlates. In 1943, Jean-Paul Sartre famously elaborated on such correlates in relation to the *visqueux* (slimy). He described the movement of the slimy as being 'like a liquid seen in a nightmare.'[2] Something might be said of the clinging muckiness of the black paint as it has been goaded and rubbed around the surface: a kind of dark, shape-shifting morass opposed to the even, limpid clarity of its obverse. These are not like the dazzling products of CGI, with its weightless, unfettered transformative potential, but rather constitute possibilities of form that have been digested by the fleshy explorations of the hand and the thickness of the material world. They owe their existence to the sticky contingency of process.

Krut talks of his attraction to the possibility of an 'inversion of the natural order of things.' This aspiration chimes with Mikhail Bakhtin's famous characterisation of the carnivalesque as a collective eruption of transgression in which the dominant codes and hierarchies could be satirized and inverted, a 'temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men … and of the prohibitions of usual life.'[3] And in enacting such suspensions, carnival was pervaded by excess, violence, carnality and laughter (understood as a force that both degrades and materializes). Martin Herbert described one of Krut's paintings as an 'avatar of wrongness,'[4] and these drawings, too, display a dedicated, unapologetic will to insubordination.

Contained in Krut's 'wrongness' is a refusal not only of a host of safeguards and prohibitions pertaining to good manners and representational decorum, but also of the

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[1] For example, Krut depicts a snail with an Iron Cross medal; and in another piece, a skull, found at the Hunterian Museum, onto which the word 'Negress' had been written.
[2] Sartre Being and Nothingness, 609.
[3] Mikhail Bakhtin: Rabelais and his World (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), p.15.
[4] Martin Herbert: 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,' in Ansel Krut: Hotel Vinegar (London, Domobaal Editions, 2006), p. 23.

pitfalls of cliché and tired symbolism. The results are not framed as the products of a private imaginative interior, with all its connotations of refinement and retreat, but rather as truant potentials plugged into the everyday world and its objects. In a 1930 essay entitled 'The Challenge to Painting,' French Surrealist writer Louis Aragon presented his conception of the Marvellous as fully embedded in our day to day experience:

> 'The marvellous is born of the refusal of a reality, but also from the emergence of a new rapport, of a new reality that this refusal has liberated… [The marvellous] will no longer be the attribute of a distant, enchanted world; it enlivens our surroundings, it sits beside us in a café, it asks us politely to pass the sugar.'[5]

Some of Krut's imagery might seem fantastical, but it is made from the stuff of the everyday: simple foodstuffs, animals, the human body, domestic objects. All are warped by a playful and sometimes unsettling creative momentum, but they nevertheless retain their relation to the quotidian. Equally important to this pull against transcendence is the material form in which the images are embodied. Aragon's essay was primarily concerned with the status of collage, which he regarded to have superseded the possibilities of painting. The latter, for him, had become mired in a narcissistic agenda of self-expression, and compromised by its smooth integration into the market. Collage seemed to offer a new way to enliven the everyday, to make the world strange again, without the rhetoric of catharsis or transcendence.

Graphic Impurity

Of course, the possibilities for contemporary practice in 2007 are very different from those imaginable in 1930. Yet there are important ways in which Krut's drawings, despite their strong relationship to the painterly, escape from the rhetoric of the painted *picture*, understood as a discrete entity attached to a wall. These are altogether more provisional, less securely delimited objects, organised in series, which enjoy a kind of hybrid or intermediary status. Arranged apparently quite casually on their makeshift tables, the glass plates carry a number of associations: with photographic plates, X-Rays, and pre-cinematic technologies such as the magic lantern. Indeed, some of the photographs that illustrate this book, made by shining a powerful light on the plates, explore this latter relationship. Whereas under normal lighting conditions, the spectral image on the wall is slight and understated, these photographs reveal some more dramatic possibilities. What had been apprehended as an insistently material object makes way for a dematerialized apparition: a shimmering, gleaming vision, difficult to square with the oily marks on the surface before it. A very simple technology has produced a thing to wonder at. The drama of light piercing the fabric of darkness (with all its philosophical and imaginative resonances) is vividly staged. Did *this* apparition come from *that* painted object? We are in the realm of what William Kentridge, in a suggestive discussion of shadows, has described as the *unwilling* suspension of disbelief.[6]

Krut's objects set up relationships with a number of artistic modes, resonating with the conventions of drawing, printmaking, painting, photography and cinema. Finally, however, they slip between all of these conventional categories. Drawing is perhaps the most elastic of such conceptual nets, and has in fact never been decisively distinguished from other inscriptive practices; the Greek root to the word *graphic*, for example, is *graphein*, which means to write or scratch as well as to draw. Like Tacita Dean's cinematic blackboard drawings (which she describes as 'dysfunctional storyboards'[7]), or Kentridge's 'drawings for projection,' Krut's oil drawings on glass gather together a host of unfamiliar modes to generate new technical possibilities. We might say that Krut's works bring painting to the condition of drawing, while also opening it onto the operations of photography and film. After all, photo-graphy means

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[5] Louis Aragon: 'The Challenge to Painting' (1930), in Pontus Hulten (ed.): *The Surrealists Look at Art* (Venice: Lapis Press, 1990), pp. 48 + 50.
[6] William Kentridge: 'Black Box: Between the Lens and the Eyepiece,' in M-C Villaseñor (ed.): *William Kentridge — Black Box / Chambre Noire (*New York: Guggenheim, 2005), pp. 43-51.
[7] Tacita Dean in conversation with Ronald Goenenboom, in Groenenboom (ed.), *Tacita Dean*, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2001), p. 93.

drawing (or writing) with light, and it is light that is added, so to speak, in Krut's subtractive drawing process.

In his 1931 essay, 'Little History of Photography,' Walter Benjamin referred to 'technologies' as 'unpretentious makeshifts meant for internal use.'[8] Embodying a principle of technical experimentation, and an open curiosity towards the possibilities of manual and imaginative exploration, in Krut's hands drawing aligns very nicely with this formulation. The resulting objects, propped up or shone through, propose the playful yet worrying possibility of all kinds of inversions: the reliability of both human features and of artistic categories is skewed by the barbed fun of Krut's debased world.

ED KRCMA

LONDON, AUGUST 2007

WRITTEN FOR *GHOST OF A FLEA*

AT THE CENTRE FOR DRAWING, WIMBLEDON SCHOOL OF ART, 07.09.07 — 13.09.07

[8] Walter Benjamin: 'Little History of Photography,' 1931, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, edited by M. Jennings et.al. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p.510.