

### **Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking**

Ansel Krut very rarely finishes a painting in one sitting. *Toot!* (2006) was an exception, as it would be for anyone. It is a strange, gut-punching image, appearing less as the product of thoughtful intentionality and more that of an animal consciousness, marshalling sedimented stratagems while moving too fast for second thoughts. The kind of gift that has to be trained towards (and so is far from free), it appears to have flashed forth and annexed the canvas, leaving in its wake only the question of whether the painter will respect its irreducible density and let it be. Krut did that, whatever the broader truth of its genesis. And now it is our pleasurable problem.

*Toot!* depicts a figure, seemingly female, tipped back at a 45° angle on an ambiguous yellow ground. For all the cartoonishness its thick black outlines and blocky infilling suggest, the lower half is comparatively representational. Only when one reaches the green cone protruding crudely from the figure's crotch do things turn outlandish. The upper half is utterly unreal: a brown cylinder torso, as if escaped from some schoolroom drawing exercise, culminates in three more cones for arms and head. Cued by the onomatopoeic title, the figure comes across like some compound horn or klaxon. Its pose is ambiguous, prospectively assaulting or assaulted, suggesting both a Christian deposition and some kind of clownishly triumphal backwards lean in the midst of the figure's horn-blowing. Neither reading, in Krut's hands, is allowed to take precedence: echoes of R Crumb's brutal sketches and Hans Bellmer's debased dolls jostle, in the painting's ancestral background, with resonances that are comparatively old-masterly and awestruck. And this unyielding inconclusiveness is not only a fount of the painting's energy but also, one might adduce, its point. Here is a sort of purposefully incoherent apparatus, pinned on the potential multifariousness of images, endlessly churning to no avail. As such, if there is a bodily dimension to painting, as has often been argued, then arguably Krut's art is an analogue of humanity at its least redeemed and most mechanical, pushed along by selfish genes.

The paradox being that it advertises the higher functions of humanity in the process.

For it takes something more than baseness, something more flexible than everyday thought, to counterpoise such a range of oppositions. Look closer at *Toot!*, and you see that amid the raw lines and the primary colours there is often a hushed delicacy and nuancing of paint application: glossy tones enriched by placement against scratchy dry-brushing; quietly emphatic tonal modulations. Amongst fearful iconographic contingencies, such a quietly composed technique quietly nudges the viewer towards the deeper pleasures of the engaged gaze: the compound act of looking, thinking, and translating from painterly matter that reminds us how we differ from animals, and how we might potentially differ more.

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It wouldn't be typical for Krut to offer a singular reading, however, when he can work up an abyssal indeterminacy. There is plenty in his work that infers humans to be merely clockwork meat, squawking self-advertisers ruled by insatiable appetites. The repeated motif of food, for example: in *Big Fry-up* (2006), a great British breakfast converts itself into a gruesomely cheerful insectoid figure: chips for legs, a sausage smile, baked-bean eyes, some unidentified brown gloop for a head. Its torso, a fried egg, appears in the midst of being stabbed by a knife blade that could also be a phallus. Again, Krut uses bright colours as a counterpoint: here, though, they also propose an analogy between the pleasures of paint and those of food. The chips are tipped with colour; they could be crayons, paintbrushes. The fried egg, already an abdomen, is transforming now into a palette. A diagonal rainbow flourishes cheerily behind the insect-breakfast's head. For an artist, painting and eating might be equally essential, and equally sensual. Yet that potential sensuality is something Krut has increasingly appeared to guard against. While his works of a couple of years ago enacted an effective tussle between iconographic grotesquery and sumptuously glazed paint, increasingly the joys of ostentatious application are being downplayed, as if they were as tempting, superficially tasty, but unhealthy as a fried breakfast. The brushwork that has increasingly come to characterise Krut's paintings has other functions. Its seemingly unaffected speediness and more subdued bravura passages help his works, for example, to function as direct portraits of the conflicted mind that birthed them. This increased roughness is also, it would appear, emblematic of the artist's desire not to make things too easy for himself or for the viewer. These new paintings offer fewer hiding places in ripe materiality.

Instead, one is confronted fully with images like *Man Eating His Own Intestines* (2006). There is virtually nothing left of the eponymous character. He has consumed his own flesh (his arms and skull are bones) and is about to start on the sausage-like remainder of his innards – in which, one presumes, is all he has already eaten. It is a double cannibalism, then. And there is a Möbius-strip recursion to this image, too. The intestine is the only thing connecting the figure's limbs and head. In the painting's world, he is literally being held together by it. One wants to release oneself from this world by considering it as a joke, an inference which Krut's slashing black outlines, on loan from a 1930s comic strip, will carry a certain distance. One wants to call it an allegory of painting (an atavistic occupation if ever there was one). But, while both readings are partly acceptable, one is also left with a submerged dread: that this image is on one level simply transparent, and concerned with the desperate margins of the human's programmed desire to keep consuming. And then it flips back over into a crude skit. Such are the limits of the human mind's ability to face its potential baseness.

Somewhere near the heart of this, one feels, is a generalised horror of instability – the possibility that anything is possible, any shift at any moment, even unto self-consumption – and an attempt to use painting, in all its remarkable mutability, as a method of both diagnosing and acclimating to that horror. *Testicles with Moustache* is

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a dense simultaneity of displacements: the apparent subject of a pinwheel-eyed, behatted head rising over a wall – or an ocean – of scuffed paint, is soon made unsteady. Cheeks and lips, you realise, do double-duty as thighs and booted calves; the nose is a pendulous pair of testicles, and so on. But this physical doubling, extending onto gender, subtends an emotional one. The pictured subject's beleaguered mental state won't hold, so indecorously extreme is it. Again, it wants to flip over into some sort of joke. The pervasive instability won't let that reading dominate either; nor will the content settle. A painterly recasting, like so many of Krut's works, of the famous duck/rabbit image, it's a portrait of selfhood constantly collapsing into its other, enabled by the fluid permissions of paint. The spiralling eyes echo the form of *Toot!'s* genital megaphone. Nothing stays fixed here, even across the canvases.

Most of the figures in Krut's paintings have differently coloured eyes, as if they were being pressured into divisiveness on every level. One stage beyond the divisive tensions of *Testicles with Moustache* might be the figure in *Eyes Out Of Ears* (2006), whose eyeballs (one green, one yellow) are hanging out on stalks launched violently from the huge floppy ears of a half-dead face punctured by black eye sockets: sucked in, then fired out. A stage further might be *Box Head* (2006), whose features are no more than linear scrabbles surrounding a colourful box floating, in reverse perspective, in chromatic painterly space. (Actually, *Box Head* seems – for a Krut subject – almost happy. It has escaped the bonds of the physical, and is now only subject to the laws of recession.)

*Baby with a Beard* (2006) similarly has droopy grandparent ears; and one green eye, one blue. But this, as you might imagine, is the least of its problems. It is hard to be sure whether the various richly illustrated websites claiming to represent organisations supporting bearded babies are serious or hoaxes; in the realm of painting, however, veracity matters less than conviction. Part of the long-running strand of art devoted to researching what the world might look like rather than redacting its present state, *Baby with a Beard* is a possibility, an avatar of wrongness orbiting around an idea of bodily excess. It is innocence and post-pubertal hirsuteness wrapped up in one, and, worse, allied to the idea of something flawed at birth.

Again it is bodiless, limbs emerging this time not from intestines but from another rank substitution: a carpet of hair. This curls upwards like a bib, the curve inaugurating a centrifugal motion that is picked up by the scuffed dry-brush of the black background. And the painting starts to do its work. Read formally, it appears to be spinning dizzily, the loop that its iconography makes bringing us endlessly back to the baby's unlucky cranium. At first, this set of tactics and techniques to bring an image to life only makes its subject more desperate. But, perhaps because we can look no longer at the main event, the restrainedly delicate colour harmonies start to emerge, offering distraction. The contrast of textures, variously liquid and raw, luminous and blunt, make themselves felt. We get lost, temporarily, in the paint. It

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ceases; macro supplants micro; and, as quickly, we're back in the room with a bearded baby. A fragile thing that steals energy from our nervous attention, and will never be rocked to sleep.

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written for the pocket-book *Hotel Vinegar*, published to accompany Ansel Krut's solo exhibition, September 2006.

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