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The Republic of Lithuania
18 September – 31 December, 2015

Matthew Blackwell and Greg Eltringham In Dumbo

“It is a process-a lot of it is uphill, through thickets of unnecessary bullshit, but the view can be surprising and revelatory.”



Matthew Blackwell, *Almost*, 40"x78", acrylic, oil, collage, charcoal, and spray paint, on paper, 2011-12

Matthew Blackwell and Greg Eltringham In Dumbo

A Triangle Arts Association Exhibition

By Stephen Knudsen

In a conversation with NY Arts, Matthew Blackwell and Greg Eltringham spoke about their exhibition 'Nord/Sud' (Front Street Galleries, Brooklyn, June 7-28, 2012).

Stephen Knudsen: Your separate bodies of work, at times, dovetail so explicitly into one another: for example the rainbow paintings. Are you work-shopping a shared narrative in producing some of these paintings?

Matthew Blackwell: I don't think consciously that Greg and I are work-shopping ideas. We may share some iconography and protagonists: bears, donkeys, and female goddesses, but there are changes in how we view these. Greg's bears are sort of honey bears seen through a sort of perverse Hanna Barbara lens. Mine are sort of un-trainable, a symbol of independence and wildness; they're not housebroken. His bears like to wear pantyhose. Both of us use horses-usually fools-who hide inside their disguises. They're more like donkeys. It might reflect our feelings about teaching at times: the hopelessness of teaching students who lean on technique too hard or are lazy in their ideas. To answer the question, we did not talk about rainbows at all; they just showed up. Greg's may be being a symbol of empty promise, though it does penetrate or emanate from his oh so soft cloud. My rainbow may be just as elusive. The idea that we can enter a state of eternal conscious, grace either through religious practice, or altered

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consciousness. Greg's is more venal perhaps on the subject of narcissistic self-pleasure. Both paintings point to a state that is unsustainable and must be won on a daily basis through discipline and pragmatism. It's about the empty and delusional thought in our culture of instant gratification. We both think about the casting of characters that will best carry off the role and character audition, but don't always make the cut.

SK: Ah yes, the perverse Hanna Barbara lens. You both relish some buffoonery and yet the in-jokes have something deeper 'in' them. It seems that you are part of a lineage of artists satirizing to inventory, yet chuckle us through twisted times.

Greg – would you tell us more about the two self-pleasuring characters and the inspiration in *Dreams Come True*?

Greg Eltringham: Matt has been an influence in the way I formally approach my work and in giving myself permission to expand the content. Look at his painting of a pumpkin wearing a thong: talk about an expanded field. Getting older has brought me to the point where I'm not putting limits on what I make. *Dreams Come True* is a good example of that. In many ways Matt's characters are the collateral damage, and mine are those causing much of that damage, or are oblivious to it. In *Dreams Come True* they are all veneer, pompous, and self absorbed, the center of their universe. The painting itself has veneer that is familiar, inviting, and then it all unravels. That particular image was motivated by a person I know, a great pretender who uses deception and self-entitlement to take what he wants. I see that painting as his ultimate desire; holding hands with himself in a sugar coated environment, adding value to their experience through self-gratification. We are living in twisted times and the images I make can't even match the absurdity of our daily existence.

Concerning artistic legacy, I think of artists that openly mocked the power structure of their day like Hogarth and Daumier, and more recently Guston. It feels like we're at one of those moments again where something has to give, but no one wants to give up the stuff because we have so much invested in it, and instead of pulling back it seems like we're stepping on the accelerator. It's disturbing and I can't make work that ignores it. I know in the end it will not make a difference but I have to live with myself.



Greg Eltringham, *Dreams Come True*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 56 x72 in.

SK: Greg's comment about collateral damage makes me think of the novelist Denis Johnson that you, Matt, mentioned before the interview. In *Almost* your poor figure with the divining rod reminds me of *Jesus' Son* (Johnson's 5th Novel). I see a plodder bent on Almighty advocacy-divine or human-and yet he is completely inept to tap into that. Even with the angel pointing the way the rod goes to an inconsequential clump of paint rather than the gusher. Does a resonance with Johnson factor in like that?

MB: I'm not sure it is so dire for the figure in *Almost*. He is in the wind for sure, a lot like Denis Johnson's characters, but he is reaching for something. Maybe it's about the lumps you have to take constantly as humans. It seems more like spirituality. That's why those collaged figures are down at the bottom. They took their lumps: Markus Garvey was



Danny Lyon, *New Year's Eve, 1966*



Tara Donovan, *untitled, 2014, acrylic and adhesive*

exiled to Jamaica for his 'back to Africa' politics, James Baldwin-for being a gay, black author in the 50's. All the collaged figures in that painting I'm sure had struggles. Persistence is the key and they had the courage and vision to try. Even the incredibly drugged out characters in *Jesus' Son* tell their f'd up stories with redeeming humility and clarity. Events are so mundane and strange in that book that Johnson knocks you out with his twists; you are either shaking your head in disbelief or laughing out loud at weird juxtapositions. The real tragic figure in *Almost* is the ghost on the left. He has stopped trying and is clueless. There are lots of ghosts in this world. I think of I-man, a Rasta man in Russell Banks' novel *Rule Of The Bone*, telling his young Ward Bone "to be a spirit not a ghost."

SK: Like your protagonists your paint gets pretty beat up as well.

MB: I want to paint like how Neil Young plays with Crazy Horse. It might annoy some people but I like ragged glory. It's around if you want to hunt it down. That dowsing rod might be a painting implement! Thirty years ago I had a critique with the late great artist Joan Brown and her advice was "make it more funky" and I still am working towards that. How does paint reflect our perception of our own realities? Everything might look like it happened all at once in my paintings, but in truth it inches along after quick starts. It's kind of like consciousness or spirituality. It is a process-a lot of it is uphill, through thickets of unnecessary bullshit, but the view can be surprising and revelatory.

SK: Greg, perhaps we could conclude with *Grouping*. There is power from the disparity of what appears to be little zoomorphic, fetish narratives and more innocent portraits of loved ones-all painted with similar exquisitely ordered brushwork. What other thoughts brought you to assemble this heterogeneous mix?

GE: I like the idea of mixing the personal portraits with the invented narratives. The way they are painted, coupled with the prominence of the portraits is intentional and deceptive, and at first viewing most people don't realize the nature of the narratives until they move in and start looking at the pieces individually. The whole thing operates as a veneer that falls apart as you look more closely. The work looks serious, but it is a farce. By grouping them there is an implicit connection between the images, in many cases this can be disturbing, and I want there to be multiple readings. The organization into a group allowed me to paint anything really and there are no outliers as there would be if they were operating individually. The family and friends that show up in the portraits are playing roles. Some may be complicit, some may be victims, and some may be oblivious. For this show I did a larger portrait of my son that is separate from the group and is turned in profile to view the entire exhibition. He is fifteen and has his initial mustache, with a suit jacket and tie in that no man's land between childhood and adulthood. He's being introduced to the realities that await him, a witness to a demented carnival. The narratives are about impulses that drive someone to do something disturbing, and they often represent things not discussed or repressed, the hidden side of life. It's funny; it's tragic. The work is personal, especially the portraits, but also talks about broader issues like inauthenticity and irrational desires, fetishes and impulses. The masks allow the action to take place. They mediate, act as a substitute, and provide anonymity. It's about the disingenuous person trying to rationalize their actions. Things are never as we think. People are capable of anything. These are a joke. The characters are focused on the wrong thing, like we are. I think back to the opening scene in *Blue Velvet*, when I sat in a theater decades ago, and the veneer that falls apart.

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