

## LAWRENCE RINDER *Divining Gerry Snyder's Moving Images*

Gerry Snyder's art is that of a paradoxical outsider. Obviously he's not an outsider in the sense of being untrained or mentally unwell. What I mean is simply that he has chosen to live outside of the main art centers and, in part because of this, has not developed a reputation thus far that places him in the midst of contemporary art discourse. I call his situation paradoxical because, from this marginal position, Snyder aims at the heart of both art history and the contemporary scene. His art is more sophisticated, cosmopolitan, and relevant to contemporary issues than that of most of his urbane peers. Like a Chinese literati painter retired to the countryside to wait out a despotic regime, Snyder patiently hones his talents while delivering messages of urgency and alarm to those who are alert enough to receive them. From his position of measured distance, Snyder perceives the patterns of social and cultural forces that threaten to overwhelm our hard-won civilization. His art tells bitter truths in a comic guise.

1. *Lot et al: Main Feature*, 2001  
oil on panels, 32" x 108"  
Private Collection



One of the outsider aspects of Snyder's art is the degree to which it appears *sui generis*. While some obvious connections can be drawn—for example to the chromatically rich figurative paintings of Lisa Yuskavage or to Cindy Sherman's film-based representations—Snyder's art exudes a feeling of utter idiosyncrasy. I have no doubt that their sheer oddity has kept Snyder's paintings and drawings from achieving greater renown. Yet this very peculiarity is essential to their effect: the best of satires (one thinks of Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pecuchet*) assume a form that mirrors the familiar while remaining obdurate in its difference, in its refusal to play along.

The subjects of Snyder's withering gaze are the leading culprits of our current worrisome condition: fundamentalist religion, white supremacist nationalism, and hetero-normative patriarchy. His paintings delicately unmask the hypocrisy underlying extremist dogma while offering, on



2. *That'll be the Day*, 2002-2003  
oil on panels, 24" x 72"  
Private Collection

occasion, opportunities for what the philosopher Jonathan Lear called "radical hope." "What makes hope radical," Lear writes, "is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it." It is this unknowableness that marks Snyder's figures physically, that distorts their forms into something approaching the grotesque. The fact that Snyder's villains as well as his heroes are similarly *informe*, is testimony to the artist's underlying equanimity. Like any good author, he loves his characters equally and hopes, for them, for the best.

In *Lot et al* (2000-2003) *fig. 1*, a series that was to set the tone and format for many works to come, Snyder recounts the Old Testament story of Sodom and Gomorrah, including a number of plot twists usually left out of the standard version of the tale. In advance of the well-known episode in which Lot tells his wife and daughters not to turn around to look at the city of the Sodom as they flee, is a passage in which two angels are sent by God to escort the righteous Lot and his family to safety. As they are preparing to leave, the wicked (that is, homosexual) Sodomites approach Lot's home and shout, "Bring out

those men (the angels) to us so we can rape them." Lot's bizarre response is "Look here, I have two virgin daughters; let me bring them out to you, and you do with them as you like." The angels intercede with their magic powers and the family is spirited away, with the exception of Lot's wife of course who is transformed into a pillar of salt when she turns to see the doomed town burn. Snyder represents not only Lot's offering of his daughters to the randy Sodomites but a subsequent, equally obscure scene which takes place in the hills above the town: Lot's daughters, left without men to give them children, devise a scheme to intoxicate their own father and have sex with him. Usually trotted out as a morality tale about the sin of homosexuality, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is rife with unintended moral contradictions.

The filmic format of Snyder's *Lot et al* (the panels of oil paintings and watercolors are arranged like storyboards for a film or TV show) provides a segue to his next series, *The History of America*, in which a number of classic Western films are represented with a gravitas and spiritual allure equivalent to the artist's rendering of the Biblical story. This series, which comprises four paintings thus far, is intended to reprise an arc of American history from the discovery of the New



3. *New World*, 2002–2003  
oil on panels, 80" x 48"  
Collection of Marlene Nathan Meyerson

World to Vietnam, using films starring John Wayne as a source of imagery and themes. The first work in the series, *That'll Be the Day* (2002-2003) *fig. 2*, is based on the 1956 John Ford film, *The Searchers*. Like the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, this film takes a firm stance on sexual morality while tolerating—and even encouraging—murderous retribution and genocide. Wayne, who plays an unreconstructed Confederate soldier returned to his family's Texas homestead, must go

in search of his young niece who has been abducted by a Comanche warrior. When he finally finds her and learns that she would prefer to remain with her new family he deems that it is better to shoot the young woman than to condone such miscegenation. The painting has seventeen panels of which three 16-inch square panels refer to the three-part structure of traditional film narrative. The fourteen smaller panels that surround the main action were conceived as film stills. A quality of atmosphere that critics of the Old Masters called "Italian light" suffuses the images, creating a remarkable bridge between the idealism of the Neo-Classical landscape (Poussin, Claude) and the Hollywood Western. This subtle link to the tradition of painted mythology casts this popular culture imagery with a timeless aura, suggesting the degree to which its narrative is embedded in the very marrow of our culture.

Another painting in this series, *New World* (2002-2003) *fig. 3*, combines imagery drawn from the 1948 Howard Hawks film *Red River* with allusions to Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* (1508) *fig. 4*. In the upper left panel, the two women from da Vinci's picture are recognizable as a pair of Snyder's typically androgynous floating blobs. Da Vinci's background of craggy, mist-shrouded peaks has been replaced in Snyder's painting by a placid, horizontal vista, though the peculiar, mannered tree on the right hand side is recognizable from the Renaissance picture. In an act of Biblical free-association, Snyder has transformed the figures of Christ and his pet sheep into Cain and Abel (played by an angel/devil-like figure and Snyder's own pet pug) seen in their final, deadly struggle at mid-distance. Just to the right, the pug appears again in the top panel, in his more typical role as silent witness, while, below, the devil/angel hovers above a figure meant to represent Hernan Cortés, the Spanish adventurer whose apocalyptic, and nominally Christian raid on the New World was just beginning as da Vinci painted his *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. Beneath a small panel depicting a winding river (it is both the river of Hawks' film's title as well as, allegorically, the meandering path of history itself), is a panel with two figures that echo the Virgin and St. Anne above. Juxtaposed with the three cowboys from Hawks' film—played by John Wayne, Montgomery Clift and Walter Brennan—these women suggest a female presence notably absent in the film. *Red River* begins with a Cortés-like

appropriation of land—again from the Mexicans—for the sake of progress and "civilization." In both of these episodes of conquest, male figures act out dramas of domination partly in the name of women who remain comfortably distant, more mythic than real.

Snyder made several paintings and drawings that touch on more recent expressions of American extremism. *Intelligent Design: Kansas* (2005) *fig. 10* was inspired by several articles in The New York Times concerning a surge of fundamentalist activities in the state of Kansas. Ironically resembling an 18th century *fetes champetre*, the diverse figures in *Intelligent Design: Kansas* present an initial impression of sybaritic relaxation. Yet the snake twining around the central plant—a corn stalk of course—is a signal that all is not well in this bucolic world.

Indeed, Snyder's painting is populated with a host of figures based on notorious contemporary Kansans including the homophobic preacher Fred Phelps and the congregation of the Westboro Baptist Church who are the red, blue, and yellow creatures at the center of the painting; the State School Board, hovering above Phelps and company, which voted to remove evolution from the curriculum; The Bind, Torture, Kill (BTK) serial killer—who hovers in the clouds to the right beneath an arabesque array of his victims; and, to the left, the State Senator, Kay O'Connor who was quoted during a campaign as saying, "Men should take care of women, and if men were taking care of women (today) we wouldn't have to vote." Like a modern-day Susannah, she is ogled by a clutch of elders while below her in the mist, attached to half-submerged balloons, are Mathew Koso and his fourteen-year old girlfriend who fled from Nebraska to Kansas in order to avoid charges of statutory rape (Kansans can marry at the age of twelve). Finally, Snyder's idyll includes two animals: a reptilian creature that emerges



4. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)  
*The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*  
oil on wood, 66 1/8" x 51 1/8"  
Louvre, Paris, France  
Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY

from the water as if undergoing its own Darwinian evolution only to discover to its chagrin the kinds of creatures that are the end result of his cosmic journey; and Snyder's now familiar pug. On one side, the Kansas landscape extends into the blue-green distance. But on the other side, it drops off abruptly as if the little gathering were taking place dangerously close to the very edge of a flat world.

If *Intelligent Design: Kansas* (2005) *fig. 10*, Snyder's dystopian allegory of ignorance, presents characters whose wide exposure outweighs their social contributions, his *Obituaries* series celebrates the under-appreciated and soon-to-be forgotten. Read from left to right, the six panel *Pepper LaBeija Story* (2003) *detail, fig. 5* is a distilled life narrative (inspired by The New York Times obit of Herman Williams), beginning with a distant apparition and arriving by the fourth panel at a figure that is more statuesque and grounded than any other subject Snyder has painted. This might seem ironic given that Williams, or Pepper LaBeija as he came to be known, was the last of the Harlem diva drag queens and one of the most outrageously theatrical personalities presented in the renowned 1991 documentary, *Paris is Burning*. Yet, Snyder seems to be saying, LaBeija's struggle for self-definition left her stronger than the rest of us and, when she departed the world, as the Rococo abundance of the final panel suggests, she left it a more fabulous place than when she arrived. *King of Cartoons* (2003) *fig. 6* is Snyder's homage to William H. Marshall, the classically trained actor who starred in *Blacula* and *Scream*, *Blacula*, *Scream* and found continued success late in life as the King of Cartoons on Pee Wee's Playhouse. Marshall's pose derives from Balthus' rather imperious self-portrait, *The King of Cats* (1935), with the Swiss aristocrat's feline replaced with Snyder's omnipresent pug.



5. *Pepper La Beija Story: Episode 4 (Detail)*, 2003  
oil on panels, 16" x 96"  
Collection of Jill and Russell Platt



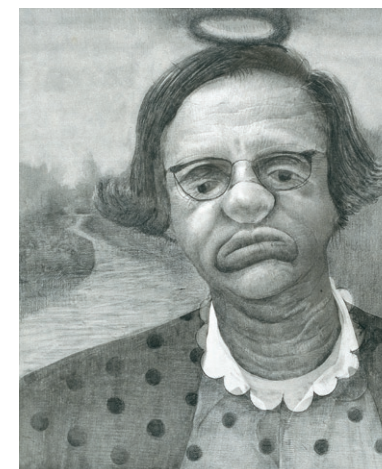
6. *King of Cartoons*, 2003  
oil on panel, 40" x 40"  
Collection of Jill and Russell Platt

Pepper LaBeija and the William H. Marshall are represented as carnivalesque figures who nonetheless imparted dignity to themselves and others. This dual aspect of comedy and gravitas is embodied in one of Snyder's favorite paintings, Watteau's *Pierrot*, also known as *Gilles*, (1718-1719) *fig. 7* which he studied on several trips to the Louvre. *Pierrot*, a familiar character from the commedia dell'arte, is usually portrayed as a hapless, moronic clown. Yet, in Watteau's picture, *Pierrot* has a monumental scale and air of melancholy resignation that has led some to suspect that the image is an allegory of Christ. Snyder's *Clown Calendar* (2004) *fig. 8*, is a series of twelve drawings that similarly complicates a simple reading of this character by over-laying the clown's image onto a newspaper photo of the art curator Rob Storr. Storr, who organized the Santa Fe Biennial in 2003 on the theme of the grotesque, is himself subjected here to a grotesque—even brutal—caricature. Yet it is not just the halo in "August" that conveys an other-than-comic attitude. Snyder's rendering throughout the series—exhibiting a remarkable range of graphic effects—attests to the artist's fascination with, and empathy for, his subject. Watteau's clown finds a less sympathetic echo in Snyder's *Heaven on Earth* series (2005) *fig. 9* in which the homophobic minister Fred Phelps (at the age of seven) is unflatteringly portrayed in cursorily described settings.

A number of recent works adopt the technique of drawing or painting over a photo to represent key players in the dismal contemporary American political scene. In two studies for paintings (now lost) made for the Serbian Biennial in 2004, Snyder overlays images of his signature hermaphroditic blobs onto photographs of George W. Bush. In one, Bush is endowed with a Richard Nixon-like nose and in another he holds a globe at his side, recalling the conquistador Hernan Cortés in Snyder's painting *New World*. A related group of works began with photos clipped from *The New York Times*. The abstracted settings and titles give the works a Biblical cast, such as *The Annunciation* (2006-2007) *fig. 17*, featuring George W. Bush suspended in the air above Karl Rove, *The Last Judgment* *fig. 22*, depicting Vice President Dick Cheney, and *Joshua* (2006-2007) *fig. 26*, named after Snyder's bloodthirsty Old Testament analog to former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.



7. Watteau, Jean Antoine (1684-1721)  
*Pierrot, formerly called Gilles*  
oil on canvas, 72 7/16" x 58 5/8"  
Louvre, Paris, France  
Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY



8. *Clown Calendar: August*, 2004  
graphite over photograph on newsprint, 13" x 10"  
Collection of Jill and Russell Platt



9. *Heaven on Earth # 1 (FP)*, 2005  
mixed media, 11.75" x 9"  
Collection of Elaine Pirone and Jason Aufrichtig

If Snyder's earlier work called upon Renaissance and Neo-Classical influences, his most recent paintings evoke the mysterious, inner world of Symbolism. Four paintings done in 2006-2007, for example, reference stages of belief and thinking that arise out of a fear of mortality. Each state of mind is symbolized by a different skull-like head, floating in space like an Odilon Redon apparition. The first painting in the series, *Pre-Axial* (*fig. 18*), signifies the very origins of consciousness. The second, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (*fig. 19*), represents the height of Catholic monotheism in Rome, while the third, *Fade Out* (*fig. 20*), stands for religion's decline in the Age of Reason. *The Rupture of Language* (*fig. 21*) is the final state in which the conditions of experience exceed people's ability to understand.

In contrast to the political commentary and weighty allegory of much of his recent work, Snyder has also been making a number of extraordinary, small ink drawings (c. 2006) *figs. 14-16* that express the simple beauty of arabesque lines and rich, contrasting tonalities. In these works, the specificity of subject matter seems to take a back seat

to the artist's sheer pleasure in mark making. On closer inspection, though, what we see does give some cause for alarm: these delightful concatenations of animal and plant look like nothing so much as genetic experiments gone awry, disturbing assemblages of bodies and branches, limbs and leaves.

Gerry Snyder, it seems, is not an outsider at all, but rather an artist who has the capacity to see into the heart of our collective psyche. His works deserve to be widely seen, for their surreal beauty as well as their frightening realism.