

Porno for Pirates: Treats for the People

I am going to be very honest with you: Stefan Dunlop's paintings are totally inappropriate. But they are also enduring, challenging and beautiful.

In the interest of getting a painting right, Dunlop - who greatly functions as an omnivore privileging desire over taste - will seem to indiscriminately consume the image of any animal, vegetable or mineral under the sun. He says:

I have no grand intellectual plan when I start - the painting has to work visually and I build up inconsistencies. I'm interested in the history of painting - not in history as such. My paintings are not kitsch and they're not ironic.

They are completely pretty, ridiculously nice - real visual stuff. I want to take the piss out of painting but then also to respect it... I want the viewer to think - 'Is there anything else going on here or not'? (1)

Okay. So here are some of *my* questions: What drives this democratic leveling of the imagery playing field? Why does Dunlop begin a work from historic precedent, and make that image his own by concocting startling compositions both hectic and formally astute? Why does his colour palette set up a candy-toned reality, completely at odds with the off-kilter discomfort of his subjects? And why does he choose imagery that's confrontational and, well, sometimes silly, when viewed within the history of traditional painting? I mean, really, the anguished, tortured martyrdom of St. Sebastian compositionally bound to a plush, purple, expressionless chimpanzee and a 70s mustard yellow telephone? Tasteless!

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In his book of essays, *The Happy Life: The Search for Contentment in the Modern World*, David Malouf has written about Rembrandt's painting *The Prodigal Son and the Whore* (c. 1635), that

[W]hat the artist is... sharing with us is the ordinary richness of the world, its press of objects, some of them useful in an ordinary way, some of them... props to be taken up and given a new use and significance... all of them - fringed cushion, oriental rug, gold chain, silk skirt, glass, brocaded curtain, feather, sword-hilt, glowing flesh... [because of] the utter joy... he finds in all this as artist and technician". (2)

Dunlop also revels in that love of form and materiality -- of using the paint to carve it all out of two-dimensional space. The difference between Rembrandt and Dunlop is: Rembrandt celebrated the physical within 17th century Dutch Realism, an outgrowth of his audience's immersion in empire, mercantilism and capitalism and a result of the ascendancy of oil paint as the foremost technology for mirroring his era. Fast forward to today, and Dunlop's joy in creating a visually rigorous picture depicted on a flat surface rests not only on drawing and painting. He also bears the history of photographic and cinematic traditions, as well as the ubiquitous commoditization of all of life -- including digital imagery as it is disseminated on the Internet. Where Rembrandt and Dunlop overlap is in their rueful, witty acceptance of painting as a dependable physical manifestation of life's slippery absurdities.

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Let's start here: a term that's gotten a lot of traction lately is *Post-Internet Art*:

... [I]n previous times it was legitimate to conceive of culture as a greater system with impassible barriers to entry and a finitude of possibilities. Culture after the Internet offers a radically different paradigm claim... [based upon] free access to the same image-creation tools... and [to] the infinite reproducibility and mutability of digital materials”. (3)

While custom has always encouraged painters to work ‘after’ earlier, classic works done by a hero artist, Dunlop’s *The Bridge* 2014 (after a work by Piranesi) quotes the Italian Renaissance artist’s etching *Veduta del Ponte Salario* via vandalism. In *The Bridge*, Dunlop takes the longstanding tradition of aestheticization of ruins and further destabilizes the image through a compositional shifting and dismantling, and subsequent restabilizing. Adding random imagery like a stretched tarp on sticks (a makeshift architecture to be sure), a grazing lamb and an outsized cherry on an umbrella toothpick is not without cunning design. St. Sebastian’s historic skewering by arrows from *Man Candy* 2014 has been transformed into a cocktail lounge deflowering, and transferred to *The Bridge*.

In a painting like *Leda* 2014, Dunlop has sorted through, painted in, painted out, repainted, shifted and tweaked print and digitally sourced images over time. Using his extreme facility and drive to “get a buzz out of seeing the paint come off the brush in a magical mix of control and randomness that creates a trompe-l’œil effect” (4) he translates Leda’s mythological tryst with Zeus into a visual agglomeration of baked goods, musical instruments, animals, fruit, flowers and dollops of whipped cream. He uses this plinth of wonderment to support the apotheosis of Leda herself, dissected by V-shaped banners of striped, contrasting colour and opposing directional vectors of movement implied by deer, lambs and violins... not to mention cake. Bravura slices of French Rococo hues build structures of paint, reminiscent of Cezanne’s revolutionary re-thinking of volume and space through contingent, separate,

distinctly daubed brushwork.

Perhaps the lack of an iconic Australian nude painting tradition (discounting Norman Lindsay's bacchanalia) has led Dunlop to up the ante and throw in huge references to Gil Evgren pin-up girls and Bunny Yeager's photographs. His lack of hierarchical judgment between popular and high culture underlies an adolescent search for the utopian fueled by a need to believe. But in the end, it's the act of painting and outing hypocrisy that motivates him. Just like Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Dunlop super-sensitizes his stream of consciousness to allow all things equal value in a visual landscape torn between beauty and its pleasures, and an unstoppable need to tell the honest truth as he sees it. While good taste seeks to elevate and comfort, desire stops at eff-all to head in its own direction. Dunlop might offer a cherry with whipped cream, but he also destroys expectations for a happy ending, or a reasonable outcome with a soft landing. As I've said before, his pictures insidiously mess with stereotypes, mores and political correctness. They make me angry. But I like that.

In his latest collection of essays, *Pirates and Farmers*, the American art critic Dave Hickey divides people into two camps - Pirates, who break the rules, and Farmers who maintain boundaries. *Porno for Pirates* is Stefan Dunlop's homage to those who dare. *Aye, me hearties!!*

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(1) Studio Visit with the artist 8 August 2014.

(2) David Malouf, *The Happy Life: The Search for Contentment in the Modern World* (Collingwood 2011), pp. 60-61.

(3) Artie Vierkant, *The Image Object Post-Internet*, p.6
<http://jstchillin.org/artie/vierkant.html>

(4) Email from the artist dated 16 August 2014.