

Forget the Dog, Beware the Owner

As resilient as black rats and common pigeons, monuments have long made their lives by our side. Gods riding dolphins, generals on horseback, and revolutionary leaders with fists raised skyward populate our cities. Historians attempt to fix meaning, narrating how rulers ordered monuments erected to mark victories and to memorialize dead friends. We are told that the forms are often symbolic: that *woman* is not a woman but wisdom; that *eagle* is not an eagle but vision, and that *lion* is to the educated mind, not a carved creature with fur and paws, but a frozen allegory for strength.

But intended meanings blur along with sculpted lines. Objects live day in, day out, often for centuries. Always in fair weather, people like to sit on the steps of monuments and talk, about how good the crops were one year, how bad the next. People analyze what money changed hands and how gold bracelets are popular again. Sometimes grit blows from the west and smoke from the east and the sitters regard the streets from behind—hoods and scarves pulled across their faces. Other times a drunk youth climbs a bronze horse on a lark. After a military victory or a soccer win, they might festoon the creature with a flag or garland. People forget some stories and make up new ones. Armies come sometimes to sack and loot while other times they just march past in their leather shoes. All the while, time meets material with slow strength. Zephyrs and kamikazes how. Hail falls as does acid rain. Droughts and blizzards cause stone and concrete to expand and contract. Basalt becomes pockmarked. Limestone dissolves. Steel rusts and bronze greens.

The contemporary has made possible a much greater degree of control. Death has come to be seen as avoidable, at least when it comes to objects. City people like to gaze at stolen fragments in big marble museums after drinking coffee out of throwaway cups. The myth of precious objects is that they should exist for as long as possible, aging only particle by particle. Restorers use lab-made glues and undetectable brush strokes to fix what's falling. Museums are, we're told, homes for geriatric art. Artworks, like former world leaders, are meant to die in their sleep behind closed doors.

What differentiates monuments from other artworks though, is that they live outdoors; they cannot hide. They have no privacy and in this way they are much more like the poor than the rich. When a treasure is public it



Abbas Akhavan *Beacon* (2012)

is by extension a target. Intellectually we may know this, yet the temptation is still to protect and preserve all things we admire. The Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan, for example, survived fourteen hundred years slowly degrading in the weather while simultaneously withstanding human touch and gaze. Their persistence and grandeur made them treasure and that designation was meant somehow to grant eternal life, or at least a nonviolent death, far in the future. UNESCO made a statement. The world watched. However, as soon as a monument goes up, it is already falling in some dream, some possible reality. Though collapse may be imminent or distant, an end is contained always already within a thing. This is especially true for public things.

Because modernity favours the quick and visible, the iconoclasm of sudden death has become common. If a force wants to destroy a monument

it can, completely, and in so doing, undo centuries of survival. Dynamite, artillery shells, and bombs may reduce a whole into an absence in an instant: object assassination. Like a magic trick something becomes near nothing in a cloud of dust, a puff of smoke, a leap of flame. The photographs of the 2001 destruction of the Buddhas show only dune-colored clouds exploding out from the icons' stone niches.

Monuments are put up only to be yanked down centuries or even mere decades later. The photographs are as iconic as they are repetitive. A crowd of children jeers at the decapitated body of a once powerful man. Directors of destruction strive to create strong images that appear as heartfelt as they are spontaneous. Maybe people no longer feel they have the luxury of ages. Decay takes forever and in this era of permanent loss everybody is busy; nobody has time. We, the living, arrive after so many afters.

Many disappearances though, are not as photogenic as the Buddhas. For every spectacular state execution there are many more ignored deaths, embarrassing complications. The broken bodies of forgotten or disgraced figures litter urban spaces



the world over. These monuments of shame hang around public squares like drunks or feral dogs, but maybe even worse. It's as if the town drunk were our father, or the dirty pigeons were hand-raised by our mad grandmother in the time she took between beating our parents. It's as if those dogs once chased us down an alley before stealing our wallets. Broken and hated material hangs around, weak but persistent, getting older and taking too long to disappear.

In the mid 300s BCE Alexander the Great was the emperor of a vast swath of Afro-Eurasia. In life, Alexander's close confidant—some say lover—was a man named Hephaestion. They considered themselves one another's double. Alexander's tutor Aristotle described them as two bodies sharing a single soul. In 324, Hephaestion died. His sudden death devastated Alexander, who, across the empire ordered citizens to show public signs of mourning, to cut the manes and tails of all the horses and to refrain from playing music. To honour Hephaestion further the emperor planned to have a pyramid

Marina Roy *Reagan from Presidential Suites* (2006)



Marina Roy *Two Dogs from Presidential Suites* (2006)



Joni Murphy, 'Forget the Dog, Beware the Owner: Abbas Akhavan and Marina Roy', *Fire Fire*, Malaspina Printmakers, Vancouver, BC, 2014

constructed in the Persian city of Hamadan. Though the project was never realized, two stone lions were carved as memorial and placed at the city gates. Sometime later, between then and now, one of the lions was knocked off its plinth and smashed to pieces. The slow process of decay short-circuited into an instant of destruction. Thus, like the two men separated by death, the two lions became one, presences twining absence.

To survive means to continue to be vulnerable. The remaining lion submits daily to time's violence, a change that has affected not only its surface but also its intended meaning. For centuries, people have poured potions of honey and oil over its body and burned candles on its head to illuminate their prayers for healthy children. The lion sat still as people snapped photos of their fidgety sons and daughters astride its back. With broken front legs and a scarred surface, this weak and mutilated survivor has come to resemble something other than *lion*, a seal or a meteor perhaps. The monument that was meant once to eternalize masculine love and warrior strength has become an inverted object, a fertility symbol for locals. Its exterior has been slowly polished like a stone on a beach without water, stroked by tides of human touch.

Three large pieces made up the interior aspect of Abbas Akhavan's 2012 solo show at the Darling Foundry: *Envelope*, a full sized bright yellow hot air balloon resting on its side; a copy of the lion of Hamadan titled, *Mortar*; and *Like a Bat Afraid of its Shadow*, a mimetic pile of sandbags that resembled the lion's shape.

For Akhavan, going to Hamadan to have a first-hand experience of the objects would be both difficult and fraught. Through his hands though, he called into being both the distant and mythically important lion in its worn state and its phantom twin. The sculpted lions title itself enacts a linguistic doubling. Mortar is a workable paste used to hold together buildings and repairs crumbling surfaces. This mixture of sand, lime, and sandbags binds and fixes. But mortar is also a weapon, an explosive projectile that arcs through space, reduces buildings to rubble, and the living to dead. These metal bombs shortcut the slow work of breaking stones into grit. Sand itself is transitory and soft when free, but becomes encased in bags it absorbs the heavy shock of warfare. *Like a Bat Afraid of its Shadow*, the sand bag twin, rather than merely taking the same form, has become, through the artist's labour, an echo that doubles language, material and use.

Every time the air compressor inflating the third piece in the room, switched on there was an accompanying hiss. When the blower turned off, *Envelope* slowly deflated and a recording of birds filled the silence. Though easy to

mistake as something *natural*, these disembodied songs were as much a part of the piece as the billows of fabric. Birds sing the most at daybreak and sunset, so the repeated song in the gallery accompanying the expansion and collapse of the sun-like balloon called to mind the cycle of a day, miniaturized. The yellow balloon became not just an image of a failed takeoff but also a container of invisible material. Like the two lions, *Envelope* miniaturized and physicalized both a slippage between words and concepts. In a sculptural sense it was both an envelope of air and a stand-in for the sun. Its measured expansion and collapse brought our cyclical world down to a more graspable scale.

For almost a century prior to its reincarnation as a gallery, the Darling Foundry was a practical site of industrial revolution. In the rooms of what is now an exhibition space and artist studios, generations of Montreal workers once poured molten metal in sand molds, making machine parts, industrial pipes and, during war time, munitions. This space absorbed industrial vibrations. In the Foundry, Akhavan layered evocations of the sun and birds, desert lions, and war detritus over the memories and marks of industrial metalwork.

Though the art world sometimes seems only a dark mirror reflecting otherwise established power structures, I continue to look to it because artists are not bound exclusively to reproducing or retelling reality *as it is*. In this possibility I find hope. In this time when it feels as though all folds and lines of the imagination have been ironed into the needs of capital, art at least potentially offers the opportunity to think otherwise. Artists, slightly more than other workers, are allowed to imagine and model alternatives to what is.

In a 2012 interview about her novel *Summer of Hate*, Chris Kraus made an argument for art that examines the freshest traumas of our collective experience:

People who I respect say that you can only really deal with politics and situations after a passage of time, but I don't agree. I think that if we don't try and process, both for ourselves and publicly, what's happening in the present, it's a very great loss because that is the archival material of the future. I think there's a way of understanding things in the present that is impossible to ever understand in retrospect. So much gets lost. Usually it's the ordinariness, and the pettiness, and the banality that gets lost.¹

All around, there is evidence of the willed forgetting that Kraus and others work so passionately against. Politicians erase evidence, renaming government departments after themselves. Critical documents disappear



Marina Roy *Victoria from Presidential Suites* (2006)

down memory holes. Citizens embarrassed by their country's past, herald the freshest leader, hoping against hope that he will undo whatever mistakes their predecessors made. Calls to *never forget* are meant to drown out the unspoken imperative to *forget what you know*. We're moving on, not dwelling. It's a defense mechanism. *Natural*, people say. However, there are a million ways of arguing that what we deny will only return in another form. As Marina Roy has written,

Whatever is repressed, oppressed, or forcibly excluded from a given situation or milieu, finds its way back in through other routes.

Wildness eventually comes back to proliferate, through lapses linguae, ticks and stutters, through the decay of architecture, through steam released, through revolutionary eruptions.²

Matter does not disappear; it only changes form, or to put it another way by quoting Charles Fourier, "Nature driven out through the door comes back through the window."³

Between 2005 and 2006 Roy created *Presidential Suites*. The style of this

series of paintings is at once stiff and gentle, cute and jarring. In each, a former world leader—Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Saud bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud—are presented in a plush, over-decorated room. The architectural references are rococo and neoclassical with drape-muffled windows and furniture of turned wood and brocade. Sconces abound. In each, an animal or group of animals accompanies the human. King Faisal holds a leopard on a leash. A fox and a bear watch Reagan chop wood. In the only painting in the series without a human presence, two black dogs rut in a bedroom suite. With the exception of *Two Dogs*, each painting bears the name of the politician, rendering the animals the visible but unnamed interlopers in these very human spaces.

In her review of these paintings critic Robin Laurence expressed discomfort, not because they depict former world leaders surrounded by “a surreal assortments of pigs in cages, bloody cattle carcasses, and half a marble figure shitting diarrhea from a table top,” but because, “Roy’s drafting skills are so deplorable that it’s difficult to identify the leaders she’s depicting.”⁴ Laurence concludes with a backhanded compliment, that the real “upside” of these works is that, “paint is not necessarily the best medium to convey certain ideas.”⁵

Though I did not read this criticism when it was published in 2006, I did see the show. What has struck me about Roy’s works is how deeply they remain lodged in my memory. Like dream images from childhood I have recalled Queen Victoria and her pigs at the most unexpected times. Contrary to Laurence, I feel strongly that these pieces work because of their deplorable qualities. Through their modest Sunday painter size, the “clever in concept, clumsy in execution” visual quality, they perhaps bring us, strangely, closer to a representation of power as it is than a *stronger* painting could.⁶ Indeed Roy made these paintings during the same period in which Kraus set her novel, during the lead up to the deadliest phase of the Iraq War. It was a particularly sick period of image and narrative making embedded within a generally grotesque decade. Both Kraus and Roy fixate on the toxic relationships between power, wealth, repression, violence, and the uncontrolled dreams that push out against the state’s *tasteful* smothering. Roy’s paintings enter specific art conversations precisely to address and question conventions of taste, representability, and politics. These paintings, as with much of Roy’s work, have to be ‘deplorable’ in order to get at what ‘good’ aesthetics would repress. I would go so far as to argue that politicians, with their flabby yet manicured faces are the world’s true bad paintings. They—with their tight foreheads, spray tans, and spit-combed hair—are

the actual bad paintings made flesh. If Roy is guilty of anything, it's the crime of holding up a dream mirror to the unreal real of politicians hiding in presidential suites.

Like the work of many artists, Roy's makes more sense with time. Reality is catching up to what she already noticed. Her connections are becoming more visible to the casual eye. In the time I was working on this essay a hacker leaked photos of George W. Bush's paintings.⁷ So far, I have not been able to make sense of the pop critical responses to these works. Are critics like Jerry Saltz charmed because the former President paints at all or because his "unself-conscious" works show some spark of empathy where it was widely assumed none existed?⁸ The unlikelihood that an unpopular leader who, after his presidency, disappeared almost completely from the public sphere, should reappear suddenly through intimate bathroom self-portraits and loose, affectionate dog painting is incongruous to say the least. Out of the basic shock that these works were even possible, let alone realized, critics have rather outrageously taken to comparing them to both Hitler's callow sketches and Frida Kahlo's incisive visions.⁹ Realistically, these works merit neither comparison. To my mind Bush's paintings are interesting mostly because they appear as the imaginatively impoverished corollary of Roy's works. They prove the radical mimetic accuracy of Roy's vision. Roy's paintings are the images that belong to world leaders but which these powerful figures cannot—or cannot bear—to see. Hers are the unknown known nightmare visions of power; the surreal black holes in the blackout dreams of drunken tyrants made all the more disturbing for their pastel details, fancy wallpaper and storybook animal witnesses.

"Popular art is made for a population consisting of spectators," writes Boris Groys. "Avant-garde art," on the other hand, "is made for a population consisting of artists."¹⁰ However, "to be an artist" now, Groys argues, is no longer "an exclusive fate," but rather "a weak practice, a weak gesture."¹¹ This is partially because our age does not allow people the time and space, "needed to produce and to contemplate strong, rich signs" for themselves.¹² The strong images of today are made *for* us and they conceal or distain the human scale: think warfare and Hollywood, aerial shots of tar sands and Beyoncé in the halftime spotlight. The "strong signs" in our image world are manifestly or subtly undemocratic because they consistently place their viewer in the position of shocked spectator.¹³ The producers of strong images work ever harder to strike our emotions, to get into our sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. Powerful image makers say subtly that without

them we are pathetic. But these modes of relation are draining us. Our nerves are shot to hell and we can't just blame it on all the coffee.

Understanding oneself as an artist has become confused with understanding oneself as powerful. Some artists strive to generate strong signs that can compete on the global picture trading floor. While they pickle sharks, perfect huge photos of factory interiors, and cast celebrity bodies in bronze, art producers ultimately cannot truly compete with the captains of the image industry. Artists are neither our shamans nor entrepreneurs, or if they are, they are the most mediocre examples. Artists, when aligned with common people, are not popular, and this is not a bad thing.

With their drips and smears, their obtuse comments and inelegant actions, "[t]he avant-garde opens a way for an average person to understand himself or herself as an artist" because most of us are socially weak, and utterly mortal.¹⁴ However, we're constantly being told to strive for power, to compete rather than cooperate, to believe in the myth of scarcity.

"[T]he avant-garde is rejected—or, rather, overlooked—by wider, democratic audiences precisely for being a democratic art."¹⁵ Signs of mess, touch, or amateurism that give the viewer the feeling that they might create and imagine just as well, have become signs of weakness. Never mind the content, spectacles are demonstrations of virtuosity and extreme specialization. When somebody says, "my kid could do that," it is neither a compliment for the potential genius of the child nor of the artist for being free enough create without imposed limitations. It's just another way of saying that the work bears the mark of weakness. The mark of weakness is one shared by the animal, the mad, the child, and the woman. Good work is supposed to be strong.

What Groys describes has been the dominant narrative split between popular and avant-garde art for some time. However, what Akhavan's and Roy's work touches on and what we need to attend to more generally is the turn towards strength in the guise of weakness. Though weak gestures have long been objects of derision, people are growing more and more tired of 'strong signs'. In the constantly shifting game of seduction, power has recently taken to cannibalizing weakness in order to wear its skin. It's difficult not to be tricked by a new manifestation of the blood feast. The state and its leaders have learned lessons from the past. No contemporary leader in a western democracy will risk appearing authoritarian. There will be no more motionless pompadours or military garb. Erecting a monument in your image is only giving people something to destroy later. Historic shows of

power are now so distrusted that leaders strive, to grotesque ends, to ape weak signs. These men and women will shoot hoops, forget their ties, and cuddle pandas while simultaneously overseeing the destruction of both the environment and our relations therein. This is not comedy. An old woman in a sleeveless shirt sorting a puzzle; a smiling cowboy chopping wood; a retired oil man painting dog portraits in his home gym. This is what state violence looks like. We have to see through this game, but it is difficult.

The plants and animals that consistently appear in Roy's and Akhavan's work are, on the one hand, mute witnesses and vulnerable prisoners within the network of the human. But, from another perspective, houseplants and creatures are patient survivors. "ALL eyes," writes Rainer Maria Rilke in his eighth Duino Elegy, "the creatures of the World look out/ into the open."¹⁶ It is only our "human eyes" that are turned in against the open and all its looking creatures.¹⁷ Our inward glare encircles, "prohibiting their passing."¹⁸ Not only do we block these others, we also weave perception into a veil that obstructs our own view of the open.

It is my hope, in these dire times, that we can learn from the life we block: learn to shoot tendrils at concrete until it crumbles and prepare ourselves to gnaw off our own trapped legs if necessary. We should turn our eyes and minds away from emperors hiding behind symbolic lions and glossy brushed lapdogs, and focus instead on all those who stroke broken objects and feed strays from their own plates. Here, at the end of this essay, I have the impulse to valorize these artists and say they offer us some model or lesson, but I do not think this is the case nor is this what artists should be expected to offer. At best they push a little against the subsuming view of all of life as a matter of exchange in order to reassert the rights of material and mystery. For me, Roy and Akhavan, through their work, have always lovingly and respectfully asked us to shift perspective, however slightly, away from strength and towards weakness. That feat alone impresses, leaves an impression. These artists say, cunningly, that perhaps the mad, the alienated, the silenced, and the touched are worth listening to because in the end we may actually be listening to the wider reality of which we are a part.

Joni Murphy

Endnotes

¹ Giampaolo Bianconi, "Exploring Bludgeoned Subjectivity," *Rhizome* (August 2012): n. pag., Web.

² Marina Roy, "What's Pushed Out the Door Comes Back Through the Window," Weblog post. *Window*. n.p., January 2013. Web., 11 March 2013.

³ Charles Fourier, in Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, (1979; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 662.

⁴ Robin Laurence, "The King and I: Works by Phillip McCrum and Marina Roy," *The Georgia Straight* (21 September 2006): n. pag., Web.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Oliver Burkeman, "Hacked George W Bush paintings help us inch (slightly) towards empathy," *The Guardian* (February 8 2013): n. pag., Web.

⁸ Jerry Saltz, "George W. Bush is a Good Painter!" *Vulture*. (February 8, 2013): n. pag., Web.

⁹ See for example: Paddy Johnson and Corinna Kirsch, "Painter and President George W. Bush: Better at Dogs Than Humans," *ARTFCITY* (February 8 2013): n. pag., Web; Samer Kalaf, "Look at George W. Bush's Paintings," *Animal New York* (February 8 2013): n. pag., Web; Luke Johnson, "George Bush Self-Portraits Perplex Art World," *HuffPost Arts & Culture* (February 8 2013): n. pag., Web.

¹⁰ Boris Groys, "The Weak Universalism," *e-flux* (April 15 2010): n. pag., Web.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies: A Bilingual Edition*, Trans. Stephen Cohn, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 65.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.