

C Arts

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Ashley Bickerton's Sad Anthropologists

Alexander Boldizar

"The purpose of poetry is to remind us how difficult it is to remain just one person."
(Czeslaw Milosz)

Ashley Bickerton's paintings are a form of combat between attachment and its opposite, a fusion of subject matter with distance between the parts. His mastery of tone-tone as defined by writers, not painters; that elusive internal, fluid ambient quality in art that is shaped by the attitude of the artist towards his subject, or towards his audience, or towards himself and his way of painting, that nearly impossible-to-define tug of war-through a dialectic, sometimes dialogic, angular use of tone he holds things together but also apart, and that is refreshing. Total integration is a terrible thing. In any work of art, and probably in life as well.

Chekov once said that if a playwright hangs a gun on the wall in the first act, there had better be a murder by the third. And that is the reason I don't watch plays, except when they're written by a friend and I can't find an excuse fast enough. They feel claustrophobic, an elevator, a closed box taking you in a simple line, opening up into the deracinated self-consciousness (If the artist's private aesthetic salon or, at the very least, onto a grotesque scene of the artist clutching his subject like a monkey.

It's exhilarating to find an artist who can sip a slurpie while watching an atrocity without losing his capacity for care.

I stood in Ashley's Bali studio looking at Preparation with Green Sky, a vaguely Polynesian bacchanal taken to bounteous limits, and a part of my mind kept drifting towards the callipygian shape in the background. "I like something about the unselfconscious glee in which the fecund young women proffer their piglets and their buttocks to no one in particular while the blue man offers his bounty directly to the viewer," Ashley says.

And the critic answers, "I can't stop looking at that butt."

"Why do you keep talking about the butt?" Ashley asks, a fair enough question since the model is his wife, but I think he's lying. He knows exactly why I can't help half-looking past the blue man. His work makes the viewer fight for perspective, but not indifference or total separation-the butt is ironized but not discredited, I could neither focus on it nor ignore it. That fight for perspective requires distances, alienation, and as the viewer I can almost physically feel my brain pulling different directions. Because the mind doesn't have a single self, there is no master "me" determining my actions. Instead, there are a thousand little drivers fighting for the driver's scat, each shaped by the situations that evolved him, with analogous situations triggering the driver-selection in transitions that arc so smooth we have all spent a lifetime learning how not to notice them. And what makes Ashley's paintings violent and playful is

their remarkable ability to hand the steering wheel to multiple drivers.

The critic Dominique Nahas wrote in *Art In America* that "A willing, if facetious, complicity in the bankrupt values of ersatz culture and kitschy bad taste was the hallmark of (Bickerton's) recent show." When I read this, I thought, WOW, Nahas doesn't know what kitsch is."

Realism, sexuality, cartooned female bodies do not make something kitsch. Not even purloined kitsch. Kitsch, cliché, claustrophobia are all created by a lack of space, a lack of relativity, with a co-dependency between artist and subject. Under that definition, Ashley's work is the Anti-Kitsch

Imagine Escher's loops applied to tone rather than to material things like stairs, a circus of sharp-edged tonal fractions squeezed into a pressurized dramatic container, the way an infinite number of waves can exist on one point, and you start to get an idea of the quiet things going on behind the surreally loud colors of Ashley's Bali work- a Mobius strip of endless checks and balances; realism, cynicism, empathy, distance, and participation by both the artist and the viewer, held in tension by kinetic degrees of separation between parts, between notes.

During a conversation with Ashley and me last year, Damien Hirst talked about creating a trigger in a supermarket simply by placing a cucumber and a jar of Vaseline in a stranger's shopping cart. But what makes Ashley's work extraordinary is that the fractions in his story aren't vegetables but sensibilities, angles of attraction and repulsion, like the opening lines of Wallace Stevens' poem *Motive for Metaphor*: "You like it here under the trees in autumn, because everything is half-dead."

Or the first line of Grace Paley's story. *The Story Hearer*: "I am trying to curb my cultivated individualism, which seemed for years so sweet."

Tone is difficult to talk about, not something that can be interpreted through assiduous application of some conceptual methodology. It's a series of partial hints gathering together hordes of previously unimaginable experiences-Stevens' tone might be described within a full range from menacing to sensuous. By the time you get to Paley's opening line you have an entire history of the speaker's consciousness something beyond a page full of adjectives to describe.

Ashley's paintings have this same dense and terrifically sophisticated self-consciousness-self-consciousness in art is tricky, it's like radiation, and Ashley has the dosage just right-but they also have subtle social, anthropological and ontological passages layered in, rooted to the human trace in the work, infinite waves on a single point.

Different pieces zoom in and out, of course, A simple face, say *Hula Girl* or *Kid*, is too close in to carry all these other hints unless it's through the eyes and by virtue of Ashley's complete body of work. And the landscape and green-head pieces seem painted on the scale of our species and planet. But the expat paintings, the *Blue Man* series, and paintings like *Blue Bar*, *Untitled* and *Red Scooter* render these various layers of coherence in the middle range that reaches to both extremes. In the context of *The ExpatS*, Ashley tries to explain it himself with "They are all self-interested and capricious victims, and they are all captured in a lurid moment of struggle to

equilibrate themselves in an unfriendly natural macrocosm. The viewer in turn is also implicated in the dynamic being caught in the bored stare of the two bar trollops. If the viewer is of a certain bent, they see the two drunks as fools unable to hold their prize, the women ripe for predation, if the viewer is of an evangelical or moral bent, they see an entirely other scenario, as would most any woman and even more particularly, my Asian women friends see an albeit funny image, but nevertheless an Image of immitigable sadness

And if the viewer is sophisticated, he sees all of these, sees the sexism and racism and degradation and exploitation while feeling humor and sadness, empathy and cynicism and Care- for all the characters, including the painter and the viewer. Ashley is a post-Barrett anthropologist who nevertheless insists on doing his own fieldwork (fattening and sunburning himself a-la Charleze Theron when necessary), a post-Derrida linguist who doesn't attempt to make the other monolingualistic, a post-historicism historian, a phenomenologist balancing aporias on Carlsberg bottles.

There's a portentous pretension among people who consider themselves thinkers to say things like "we only see the hammer when it is broken." That may be true, and perhaps if you just want to think about what is a hammer, you'd better wait until it's broken and you need a hammer. But if you want thinking that's a little less flat, if you want to see people's real relationships with hammers, then you have to also see that a hammer is not a hammer; nobody cares, it's simply there in order to do something.

The complexity of Ashley's work is that it simultaneously shows people cracked open and hammering away at each other. These are two separate, opposed, ways of seeing, and there's no distinct line between them. Ashley lets his characters be, all mixed up and ambiguous-see e.g., *The Bed*- in whatever may be their uncertainty and mystery. Most artists see the world in terms of either floatable relations (postmodernism, surprise and chance, "it's not necessary to be one person") or critical reconciliation (romantic, pressurized dramas of the self, let's put it all back in the bottle), but Ashley both dislodges perspectives and stacks polyphonic, contradictory, heteroglossiac encounters so that in bouncing off each other they shift the viewer sideways towards something ineffable

The pieces tend to be frozen in movement, reminding of Caravaggio's *Sacrifice of Isaac*, a painting that at first glance looks full of action but is actually stopped at the infinitesimal moment just after Abraham has internally committed to slitting his son's throat but before he's done it. Ashley's *Blue Man* paintings all have this same quality, but with God diffused back into the characters. There's no angel to freeze the action, just an ontological skip in the record that slices the moment open, peels back its fascia, and exposes both musculature and the crack-in-everything. The skip seems to come from inside the characters even as they're all looking off canvas-to use *Blue Bar* as an example-at some ontic event.

Only on an island could he be the *Blue Man* among *Green People*-in the *Master and Margherita*, the devil is referred to throughout simply as "the foreigner" and "the stranger," and the poet is named *Homeless*-and although the paintings aren't about Bali, they would not have been possible elsewhere-what would have been artificial in cynical, cacophonous New York City became so natural as to be misinterpreted as kitsch when he changed the setting. On an island, Ashley could be the devil, fragmented, and vibrant, and in the end caring far more than any flat-earth,

absentee-landlord God ever could. The Blue Man has horns, but they are coconut trees.

Maybe it's simply easier to see the thrownness of individual existence on an island—e.g. the TV show *Lost*—the way all of us are thrown into the world and find redemption through care and concern, with the 'con' of concern meaning together and the blue/green line always apart. On an island of bright colors, even with its sad seed of longing, Ashley's tone or slightly nauseous self-knowledge is exuberant rather than exhausted. I don't think that would be possible in New York, where concrete crushes grass and the wise tend to be weary.

Open spaces provide a longer runway for the tonal vectors to gather some velocity before they're smashed together. And an Island creates ventriloquial—and thus theatrical—possibilities to raise individual scenarios to a perennial, human, universal level. For all cleverness of Ashley's New York "culturescapes," for all their tonal sensitivity (even his earliest pieces like *Susie*, *bob* and *Cod* conveyed information primarily by the tension between the word and the plastic characters conveying that meaning), they lacked the ventriloquism of his Bali work. His head-on confrontations with culture were unambiguously his, and as a result seemed to bristle equally against their own circular binds—selling off portions of the face of a painting to various clients whose logos then made up the content of the painting, for example, or painting tormented self-portraits that were both landscape and personal logo: "And what exactly constitutes our notions of individual identity? We wake up in the morning and select our individuality from a finite catalogue of ready-made possibilities."

Three of these possibilities are made explicit in *Triple Self-Portrait -All That I Can Be!*—three alternate-universe lifepaths that could have been Ashley Bickerton. It also happens to be the beginning of his Bali oeuvre, where everything seems to open up into work that is a characteristic so rare in visual art that I've had to compare his paintings mostly to poetry—ontologically sophisticated.

Anne Carson has a poem titled *Do You Ever Dream Poor Court Bankrupt Outwitted and Lost of Terrible little Holes All Over Everything What Do Those Dreams Mean?* By changing one word, it becomes a perfect kicker for a review of Ashley Bickerton's work: "Little holes that show where the rain hits. He was not wrong that sad anthropologist who told us the primary function of painting is to enslave human beings