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Levity and Lace

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NOW, ASK YOURSELF, honestly, what kind of art would you imagine you would find when you read that an exhibition involving Waters and Flood was opening at the Arthur Roger Gallery this month? As the second year of post-Katrina consciousness is now underway, I imagined that I would find a gallery filled with personal reminiscences constructed from the debris that littered the streets or photographs of people and places that had survived or not, or perhaps some before and after scenes. As a matter of course I visited the gallery website in preparation for my visit and, oh, was I surprised to see that the exhibition has nothing to do with Katrina or disaster or recovery or other such themes.

Much to my surprise, and, I confess, and with a sense of dismay, the art on display was two bodies of work by two separate artists whose names are John Waters and Mark Flood. Coincidence? Irony? Dark humor? Bad joke? No! Art as catharsis serves a most important role as a means to relieve the internal distress of the individual artists involved but equally important is the necessity of living that must go on if one is to survive and to thrive. This is the lesson we learn from the art of the children who lived in the death camps of World War II and the story of *Life is Beautiful* too. And if any artist has proved an adept master of tongue-in-cheek "bad taste", it is to John Waters that we can turn.

The at-first-glance irony of Waters' works in his "unwatchable" show shares the stage with a philosophical critique of the film media within which, or perhaps outside of which, the artist has traditionally worked. The seven eight by ten inch prints arranged in a row that make up *Bad Trip* begin with an awkwardly lettered phrase asking "Have you ever been on a trip?" followed by three prints of a woman wearing a light blue cowl that covers her blond hair, her face distorted by expressions of repugnance and horror. The next frame is a large skull, with areas blackened or blown away by decay or an explosive impact, grinning hideously and then two more prints of the blue-cowled woman seen before. The impression is that we are looking at scenes from a movie of grade b or more likely much less.

Standing back from the work, the seven prints in a row measuring eight inches by seventy, we see them all as if we were looking at an old-fashioned strip of film or, more archaically, a filmstrip. This arrangement transforms the watching of film as a passive response to the filmmaker's art into the looking at an object of art in a gallery context where it is we that move and meaning is constructed in our minds instead of being thrust upon it. From up close we view each print one by one as persistence of memory of individual prints replaces persistence of vision to determine how we respond to each image in its turn as our motion replaces the apparent motion on the video or movie screen.

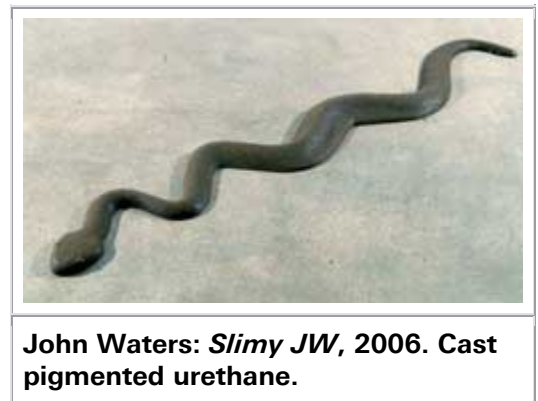
What we see is a situation so grotesque that its ability to inspire horror in anyone would seem absurd! The women's expression is one of horror and surprise as she presumably responds to seeing the skull, one of trite features of grade b horror films. A sense of irony comes into play when we realize the double entendre of the word "trip" for in popular usage "trip" also refers to experiences induced by psychotropic drugs. Bad "trips" of this kind can involve horrific visions of skulls. But then we have to ask ourselves whether we are watching the woman as she is experiencing such a bad "trip" with the skull representing what she is imaging inside her own brain. Or are we the ones who are having a bad "trip" as the woman transmutes into the skull and back again?

Eight prints of people with pimples make up the five by fifty-six inch *Pimples*. What more universal theme than the inflamed impacted pores that are a natural phenomenon in an already traumatic adolescence and

an embarrassing, and the unsightly bane in adults! With painfully remembered empathy we find ourselves shuddering at the sight of these unsightly spots that mar our public personae and wincing as we watch, even though we do not so wish, several of the characters pressing their pores in the hopes of popping the impacted pus. We may be fascinated and repulsed by these cutaneous dots that would seem more at home in a documentary photograph in some dermatologists' journal but to give Pimple the starring role? What possible story could be in the process of being told here? This is the type of subject one usually avoids taking a picture of, a phenomenon however natural we wish to cover up and get rid of like a social disease. But here in the starring role Pimple overwhelms the script and upstages all the actors when he appears with his gang of spots. And all that we can do is laugh at the absurdity of it all.

It has been reported that nineteenth century French Realist painter Gustave Courbet was once asked why he did not paint angels and he responded saying "Show me an angel and I will paint it." In the six prints of *Dream Lover Waters* has juxtaposed five images of a man who appears to be experiencing an altered state of consciousness as if following the same reasoning as Courbet. Like the physiognomic portraits of Duchenne de Boulogne or the photographs documenting experiments with hypnotism by Jean-Martin Charcot, we can see the changing expression of the face of the man as his eyes look to his left and up and out and up and are then closed and never appears to be conscious of what is around him. We can only know that he is responding to what is happening inside his head but as per Courbet's dicta we cannot know what is happening within. We are limited to knowing the lover of dreams as an object observed but not the nature of the dreams themselves whatever they might be. Or perhaps another reading of the name is allowed to wit that this man is someone's ideal, i.e., dream, lover?

The means by which Waters selects his subjects, using a camera to capture an image from a film playing on a video monitor, translates the apparently moving images of time-based media into the still context of gallery artifact. These recontextualized-in-the-gallery images, a phenomenon which earlier artists like Duchamp with his Ready-Mades and Lichtenstein with his comic strips explored, become "pinned down" like butterflies in a case where we can study them at our leisure as art objects. In an similar way the artist has displaced and redefined a stereotypical director's chair as *Bad Director's Chair* with *Hack* written across the canvas splat and presented us with a delightful fake snake known as *Slim JW* slithering harmlessly across the floor. *Faux Video Room* acknowledges the significance of the new modification of gallery space needed to show time-based media art by making the black-curtained opening with disembodied sounds floating out into an iconic form in its own right. The entrance to the viewing space is presented as an object and subject on its own like paying attention to the frame of traditional painting. And, speaking of frames. *Badly Framed* is literally what its title says it to be with its chromogenic print, mat, and frame misaligned.



John Waters: *Slimy JW*, 2006. Cast pigmented urethane.

The paintings of Mark Flood are the lyrical, poetic counterpoint to the intellectual, satirical parodies of Waters discussed above although, curiously, both artists have relied on an indirect means in the process of making their works. Where Waters captured images from the video monitor screen, Flood has used tattered and torn old lace with its special textures and patterns to as the means to apply paint to primed and pigmented canvas ground. It would even be reasonable to consider Flood's works as examples of monoprints using paint in lieu of ink with the threads of the lace applying paint in the manner of a relief print and the pattern of interstices functioning in the manner of a screen as paint is pushed through.

The result is a group of paintings ranging in size from six and one half feet by six feet to eighteen by eight inches in size with delightfully suggestive titles like *Gila Monster*, *Kelp Forest*, and *Madonna of the Sparrows*. When works have titles like these I find it more fun to imagine what elements a painting must have in order for it to earn a name like that before I look at the individual pieces and then to enjoy the surprise of having

to reconcile what I expected to find and discovering the details of the work that may have the suggested the title the artist finally decided upon.



Mark Flood:
***Peacock*, 2005.**
Acrylic on canvas.

When I think of peacocks, I visualize an elegant bird with long, graceful tail that alternately trails along the ground and rises into the air as the bird struts across the yard displaying long vanes with feathery tips of iridescent blues and greens glistening in the light. The actual painting named *Peacock* captures that grace with delicately tatted lace laying on the paint and the feathery tips simulated with the threads of pulled apart lace in a delicate size of eighteen by eight. Certainly the artist has captured the elegant grace of the peacock's feathery tail but would have been even more interesting if he had been able to include in some way the beautiful, natural iridescence of the feathers of this bird, a quality that Aubrey Beardsley was able to capture in his beautiful *Peacock Skirt* even when executed solely in black and white.

In *Mermaid* we discover a pretty little mermaid at the bottom of a forty-seven by seven inch chromatic sea. The graceful arabesques of the mermaid and her aquatic environment express quite well the sense of the sea in a way that evokes memories of the fresco paintings in the Palace of Knossos on Crete and the scenes at Thera too. As our eyes rise from the floor of the sea the darker regions near the bottom give way to amorphous masses of delicate pastels that bring to mind the pastel by Redon of a similar scene.

Created on a wholly different scale of six and one half by six feet is the enigmatic painting called *Soldiers* as I for one have difficulty seeing soldiers anywhere and the delicate patterns of flowers and leaves left by the lace seem quite out of keeping with such a theme. Perhaps it is the tension among the forms, the pierced wholes and pointed ends such like we find in the surrealist work of Matta Echaurren, the expressionist *Agony* of Arshile Gorky? Yet there is also a sensuous quality of a hitherto unknown polyp or medusae form. More peaceful I find is *Glade* with its cool blues and blue greens, teeming with life and fantastical *Castle Ludwig* work.

Flood's work is playful in a Rorschach blot, gestalt associational way, and it has been interesting to realize after looking at and thinking about individual pieces that the apparently more appropriate analogies are those of Symbolist and Surrealist art. In addition to the evocations of Beardsley and Redon, Flood's idea of printing with lace has affinities with Max Ernst's frottage and other automatic and aleatory methods of Surrealist and expressionist art used to tap into the subconscious mind. More special are the personal mythologies rather than universal archetypes evoked through associations with colors and lines and shapes.

The imaginative and playful art of Flood complements the witty parody of John Waters' works to provide entertainment for a variety of tastes or a satisfying experience for one who enjoys exercising both imagination and intellect. Either body of work would be interesting on its own but placing them together in the same gallery space enhances our appreciation of the special qualities of each. After having to think about these two different kinds of art one leaves the joint exhibition with a heightened awareness not only of the ways of art but also the world of experience as a whole.