

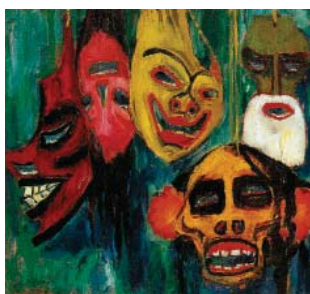
A GROTESQUE SEDUCTION

Christopher Eamon

Brian Kokoska's paintings and works on paper from 2008 to present are populated by ghoulish boy-men, masked creatures, and characters both male and female grimacing from ear to ear. Rainbow-colored substances, and others not so colorful, enter and exit orifices. Hands enter mouths. Young men seem to consume each other. The "primitivism" long associated with early Modernism in painting seems to have reasserted itself in the form of a grotesque seduction.



FLOWER EATER, 2011
OIL ON CANVAS
26 X 22 INCHES
COLLECTION OF BRUCE BAILEY



EMIL NOLDE
MASK STILL LIFE III, 1911
OIL ON CANVAS
30 X 30 INCHES

And yet this is not all there is to them. While it is not necessarily *de rigueur* today to analyze the developmental progress of the work of a painter, it is of course noticeable when it takes place. Kokoska's work has changed dramatically during the four years represented in this exhibition. It's become looser and more syncretic. The artist's name has the fortuitous connotation of another earlier artist, a firstwave Expressionist—the Austrian Kokoschka—Oskar. And while the latter's coloration was not as vibrant as Kirchner's or Nolde's, the density and form of his compositions arguably represent the Ur-text for the Expressionist representation of bodies. Which is something that, at times, can be applied to Brian Kokoska's early works. They share an expressionistic impulse. And surely the mask-like faces painted in 2010 and 2011 such as in *Striped Couple* (2010), *Flower Eater* (2011), and of course *Healing Hands* (2010), among others, make reference to Nolde's mask paintings or in some cases perhaps to those of the earlier James Ensor. Later works, by contrast, seem to share the freedom of the post-war Picasso in their use of bold and loose gestures.

Kokoska's earlier works such as *Friends Forever* and *Sleepover* (both 2008) are denser in composition and shockingly electric in color. Young men appear in them and, as



FRIENDS FOREVER, 2008
 OIL ON CANVAS
 53 X 59 INCHES
 PRIVATE COLLECTION, LOS ANGELES

in *Sleepover* and *Boyfriend* (2008), the aforementioned flood of rainbows flows out of the figures' mouths like rivers. References to childhood appear here, too. A mother figure overshadows younger figures. One small child holds two sock dolls; the mother's hands are about to dig into his head. The title *Fixing You* says it all. Something needs to be put right, but the cat is out of the bag. These works are suffocating at the same time that the carnivalesque masks that inhabit them and the clownish colors *should* convey circus fun and laughter. This is, in fact, the central tension in these paintings. As Kokoska's paintings become looser and less densely populated, the abject is held in tandem with an aggressive, and yet tender, sensuality.

While the abject in American art may have had its apotheosis in the early 1990s in the work of Mike Kelley, and in Cindy Sherman's prosthetics and body fluid photographs, the relationship of the sexual drives (and their perversions) in relation to the abject have long history in the Modern age, especially among philosophers of excess de Sade and Georges Bataille. For in their work, the excesses so embraced all have to do with the body and its unmistakable sexuality. In elevating the profane



PABLO PICASSO
LA FEMME-FLEUR (FRANÇOISE GILOT), 1946
OIL ON CANVAS
68 1/2 X 26 INCHES

to the level of sacred, both de Sade and Bataille sought to invert Christian and Platonic influences in Western European society. These, they argue, amount to a suppression of sensuality in favor of a rationality raised, in some cases, to the Universal.

The political aspects of their theses (and practices, in the case of de Sade) should not go unnoticed. As the libidinal aspects of the human being were celebrated in their work, the very same libidinous aspects of our culture of suppression were exposed. This is especially true of the writings of Bataille, who in comparing the beauty of flowers to the beauty of girls, needs necessarily to uncover the ugliness of what the flower hides within it—sticky stamens and the inelegantly hairy pistol.

Again and again, Bataille will compare the elements of nature to the human body. Interesting that in some of the later paintings by Kokoska from 2012, lyrical gestures draw out his understanding of the innovations of the wartime and post-war Picasso, who vastly expanded his repertoire during his ten-year relationship with the 21-year-old Françoise Gilot.¹ During this period it is true that artistic freedom surmounts any of the “-isms” he had previously announced: Cubism, Synthetic Cubism, and the like. His brushwork became loose and gestural. Stretches of canvas were often left unpainted. The symbolism of objects and color play a more central role in developing the meaning of the works, and innovative form continued to expand acceptable bourgeois notions of painting, especially in portraiture.

It is within this context that the body-as-plant is used more and more by Picasso, especially in his many depictions of Gilot, starting in 1943, as a kind of flower. In them, her head becomes the center; her hair the corona; her body as slender as a stem. This kind of freedom in painting in the post-postmodern era, or whatever one wants to call it, is not lost on Kokoska, who has obviously studied this work. *Neck Brace* (2011), *Flower Bag* (2012), and *Petal Probe* (2011) all take something from this mid-century experimentalism if even in the most perverse ways. Swirls of brush strokes can make up the hair; simple swishes of color a flower.

Kokoska's more abstracted works from 2011 and later, now darker and more somber than his electrically colored works, relate to the affect of the post-synthetic-Cubist Picasso. His symbols survive, for instance, in *Bombay* (2011) in mashed up form: flowers, face, proboscis, or similar probing form.

Back to the ugliness of sex and nature. Bataille is not the latest writer to rethink



BOMBAY, 2011
OIL ON CANVAS
36 X 36 INCHES

the relationship between human beings and nature. Philosopher and ethnologist, Alphonso Lingis writes extensively in the '90s to present on the sensuality of the voice and animalistic aspects of human nature. Coming as he does from classical phenomenology—Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Heidegger—Lingis soon began to criticize the notion that all things are uniformly connected to each other, as is the wont of most phenomenological positions. He also came to critique the role of Gestalt psychology in the work of Merleau-Ponty, which regards figure versus ground as the main paradigm for human perception and understanding. Instead, after years of travelling to remote locations, meeting non-Western peoples, Lingis writes of the most sensual aspects of the human body as though it were a medium in itself, a medium through which perception occurs. Worlds, for instance, do not appear simply in visual terms. The heightened tensions and sensations during erotic encounters exemplify this idea above all. Furthermore, the erotic encounter is something that can be found in all cultures including, according to Lingis, those of other mammals, reptiles, and even insects. He recites to this effect, during one of his unorthodox

performance-lectures:

Our sense of ourselves, our self-respect shaped in fulfilling a function in the mechanic and social environment, our dignity maintained in multiple confrontations, collaborations, and demands dissolve; the ego loses its focus as center of evaluations, decisions, and initiatives. Our impulses, our passions, are returned to animal irresponsibility. The sighs and moans of another that pulse through our nervous excitability, the spasms of pleasure and torment in contact with the non-prehensile surfaces of our bodies, our cheeks, our bellies, our thighs, irradiate across the substance of our sensitivity and vulnerable nakedness.... Our muscular and vertebrate bodies transubstantiate into ooze, slime, mammalian sweat, and reptilian secretions, into minute tadpoles and releases of hot moist breath nourishing the floating microorganisms of the night air.²



BLACK WATERBED, 2011
OIL ON CANVAS
50 X 42 INCHES



PEACH, 2011
ACRYLIC ON PAPER
24 X 18 INCHES

Lingis' description suggests an essential link between surfaces, those "non-prehensile" ones, and the depths of the erotic encounter. Isn't it possible to look at Kokoska's more recent paintings, such as *Peach* (2011), as beseeching just such an encounter where skin is no longer just that, an organ in relation to other organs, but rather part of the "all over-ness" of excitability? And also a painting where one organ, the prehensile one, is colored to attract, like the way the corolla of the flower attracts bees to its stamen. The commingling of bodies in the erotic is evident again and again in Kokoska's paintings. Perhaps one of the strongest examples for the intimation of primitivism, the

grotesque, and the idea of the sensual melting of bodies of which Lingis speaks is *Black Waterbed* (2011). In it, two boys' bodies are ambiguously placed in a black-and-white environment. They seem to melt at their wastes into the black, watery foreground referred to in the title. At the same time their masked or mask-like faces show not necessarily pleasure in the happy-go-lucky sense, but rather something more austere, darker. The grimace of the mask suggests pain. This pain in the complex interplay of seductions resonates through most of Kokoska's work. Even the lovely may end up with a penis nose. Dark humor or stark revenge? Through his world of ghoulish sexual encounters Kokoska takes seduction to darker places, and they appear no less erotic for having taken the trip.

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1. John Richardson, in notes to the exhibition *Picasso and Françoise Gilot: Paris-Vallauris 1943-1953*, Gagosian Gallery, New York, May 2 - June 30, 2012
2. Alphonso Lingis, "Animal Bodies," *Discourse* 20.3 (Fall 1998): 201



INSTALLATION VIEW, *PAINTING BITTEN BY A MAN*

Christopher Eamon is an independent curator and writer. He has curated exhibitions at museums and galleries throughout the world including the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; MoMA PS1; the Institute of Contemporary Art, London; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Aspen Art Museum; and other major institutions. His publications include Anthony McCall: the Solid Light Films and Related Works (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL and Steidl, Germany, 2005), writings on film and video art from 1950 to 1980 in Film and Video Art (Tate Publishing, 2009), and is the co-editor, with Stan Douglas, of Art of Projection (Hatje Cantz, 2009), an anthology on the history and significance of projected images from the 18th century to the present. He is the former director of the distinguished Pamela and Richard Kramlich Collection, San Francisco; and the New Art Trust; and former assistant curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art.