Tofts, D.

La merde s 'execute dans votre jambe, meme

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La merde s'exécute dans votre jambe, même

Darren Tofts

Once upon a time

A cut. It queers into a perverse compression: a cloud slices an eye, a razor blade cuts through the moon.

A chimp paints in French. With awkward prehensile nous it scratches a brush across a canvas: Il etait une fois.

The residue of these images doesn’t cling to mindfulness upon waking.

There is no mordant horror, no delight, nothing to sift over.

No tumescence.

Only horror vacui. And not even in Latin.

In spring

Luis Buñuel casts a long shadow. It stretches in time and place from the élan of the banquet years of Paris to the banality of hospital food in Brisbane. Ants crawling around the palm of a hand morph into the blunt stasis of inscrutable and unwanted words on a page. When Peter Milne awoke in fright from the tough love of an operation to remove
bowel cancer, he craved the soothing buffer of dream memories. Memories of a weird, incalculable and time-consuming rebus to be sifted over as a means of distraction. In *Personal Hygiene* (2013) brutal reality and the escapism of longed-for dreams twist and squirm in an uncomfortable tourniquet of fancy and horror: a fantastical version of himself in the fierce mania of concupiscence, dragging out of nowhere an impossible assemblage of grand pianos draped with a dead calf, bleeding from the eyes, and the tethered cargo of prim and uncertain priests. In the stubborn absence of a grand guignol was a blunt and nasty text: *Improving Bowel Function After Bowel Surgery*. This drably utilitarian recovery manual is a Dada readymade straight out of some forgotten flea market. This was a text not of “practical advice” but of the paralysing dread of a brutal past tense, the horrible realisation of *what has been*. Not the cloud and the moon. A scalpel cutting out a tumour.

So in photomedia as in other forms of art, when reality fails, invention prevails. With hindsight the artist’s tone is more measured, considered, resigned: “*Personal Hygiene* is the series of visual revelations that should have come to me to provide comfort at this time of need. It didn’t happen that way, so I had to invent these memories for myself”.
Whether hyperreality or, after Jorge Luis Borges, memory traces of an illusory past, Milne’s deliciously sardonic response to this miserable impasse condenses the absurdity of what has been into the pie in the face slapstick of the Personal Hygiene images.

The delirious hyperlogic of dreams blurs not only time but also the sequential order that shapes their memory traces in the waking mind.

In the exhibition of Personal Hygiene in April this year in Melbourne, the first mural in the series, “Human Relations”, suggested itself as a kind of user-friendly didactic panel. But the garish day-glow of this image defluoresces into the twilight of an artificial night of oneiric horror. Grotesque imagery of vivisection and the propulsion of primates into space are prefaced by the benevolent “initiative” of the Australian government for all citizens, like Milne, who find themselves reflecting on what has been. But for whom is this self-help pamphlet intended? The hijinks of the chimp on the toilet seat, festooned with toilet paper and pants around its knees while sitting on the throne, suggests the substitution of cancer patient and lab experiment. From the “scientific” torture of primates to public health warnings about inebriation or smoking, absolute control in the name of science is a preposterous
hubris courting failure. Putting toilet paper in your mouth is the visual pratfall that suggests as much.

With such vaudevillian images as this, Personal Hygiene may seem a work of pathos, sarcasm or melancholy. But it is more angry than that. In a more sinister move it shadows Milne’s dark footfall into the theatres of menace and cruelty. Harold Pinter fails to step on to Milne’s stage, nor does Antonin Artaud (eerily, though, the macabre Australian clown duo Zig and Zag do). Nor do infamous practitioners of vivisection, such as William Harvey and Josef Mengele. However their avatars are present in the anonymous space-race jockeys who blithely prepare pacified chimps for zero gravity. Milne is also sensitive to the vocabulary of revenge tragedy as Jacobean viciousness. A baby Rhesus macaque screams in terror as it is injected with who knows what by a perfunctory technician. But the punctum here is a steely defiance in the gaze of its adult neighbour, whose “fuck you” countenance promises the appalling facial violence seen in the accompanying “Apocalypse” image. Here, in a nightmarish return of the repressed, the abhorrent facial disfigurement of survivors of chimpanzee attacks is vividly and lovingly captured. These images of lacerated facial wounds scream out, in a
Marlin Perkins or Gordon Grice sort of way, that nature will always be wild, whether it's a lab rat, a grizzly bear or a colonic neoplasm.

Milne understands the workings of the unconscious as well as the journey of excrement. Both, with reference to Jacques Lacan, are obliquely structured like a language. In this case the abject stoma that replaces the bowel is the crude metonymy of corrective surgery. And here too we find the condensation of images of illness and death (Rowland S. Howard and Tracy Pew of the Boys Next Door, a stilt walker with a mutant, ossified baby), of shocking misery (children with colostomy bags), parts of the body we never want to see or know about (inside the bowel), and the appalling exercise of power out of control (former Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett, the Ku Klux Klan, the Brotherhood of Freemasons and the preposterously camp Frank Thring as the terrifyingly camp Herod from King of Kings). But more weirdly, and this is the vivid poetry of Milne’s work, although there is humiliation and pain there is also pleasure. A tortured Oncomouse watches lugubriously throughout each image, a perverse chimera of the genus mus and the performance artist Stelarc and his ear on arm. A sexually ambiguous Mick Jagger pouts and poses in silver hots pants
with heavy metal, while a truant, adolescent school-girl watches him voyeuristically from a distance, perched in her Luna Park eyrie. In the figurative spectacle of ecstasy and dread such as this we see the 

displacement of the facts of his experience into the repetition of anally associated paired figures: the ambivalent Don Dunstan and an unidentified girl, Gilbert and George, Will Robinson and Doctor Smith. And the celebrity cameos of cruelty and hedonism, consumption and intoxication, violence and pain of Melbourne in the 1970s in which Milne grew up.

*Monkey puzzle*

The dream as rebus in Freud is a kind of over-determination generated by the principle of condensation. It allows for multiplicity, polysemy and excess. Freud’s use of the term in *The Interpretation of Dreams* characterizes it as a “picture puzzle”. The “monkey frolics” in *Personal Hygiene* is certainly textbook transference in psychoanalytic theory. As Milne states in the didactic notes for the series, the grotesque venality of human behaviour is filtered through “the prism of our relationship to other Primates”. In the sonic semantics of *rebus* and *rhesus* is the astute or unwitting clue to the dream-poetics of the torture, laceration or
dissection of monkeys. Rhesus macaques are the lab rat of choice for vivisection. In a quirk of fate that seems more apposite an occasion for this conceit than the joining of man and monkey in the great circle of life, humans and Rhesus monkeys share nearly all their DNA. The rhesus antigen that gives the primate its name indicates its literal blood kinship to human beings. Freud would have loved the association, which was first discussed in scientific literature in the same year he died. Presumably he missed it as he succumbed to lung cancer.

Like Milne, I have also had to invent an image of displacement more apposite than this faintly veiled association of artist and primate. It is an image that speaks of Freud’s notion of a dream wearing a disguise. Imagine that television’s most verbose secret chimp, Lancelot Link, had cancer of the testicles. You can hear him carping on and on to Mata for an entire episode about a lump in his lunch that she won’t believe. Mata shrugs, takes a slug from a bottle of gin, says “meh” to the camera and falls down dead drunk. The laugh track takes us uproariously to the ad break.
*Sign here*

*Personal Hygiene* is far from being an autobiographical work. It is rather Milne’s autograph of a specific time and place of an unreal vulnerability, having suffered the ignominy of rough penetrative invasiveness. But it is in an unassuming meta-text that we see the most chilling autographical insight into the artist’s experience, a loaded image that passes itself of as a launch invite for the *Personal Hygiene* exhibition. In a work about this work, a vamping Marilyn Monroe, all tits and 1950s couture, seductively escorts an agro chimp who knows where. Beating its fist defiantly, it resembles a primate Marquis of Queensbury. But in the dream-worked fakery of these recovered memories, this invitational image is another variation of those abject, paired figures. This apparently playful and innocuous piece of ephemera that advertises the main event is perhaps the most literal and urgent iconography of *Personal Hygiene*. This is not Marilyn as the gold-digger Pola Debevoise from *How to Marry A Millionaire* (1953), but the mutant avatar of a drowsy nurse, cajoling her agitated patient into the colonic-maw of Luna Park to pass their first, uncomfortable stomatic bowel movement in days. Pissed of, the chimp knows that this is an impossible shit since,
Dalí-like, the colostomy bag has morphed into a neck-kerchief. The sadness of this displacement may be scatological whimsy, or cathartic phantasmagoria in a dream. But the shocking realisation of this horror in waking life is an outrage to dignity.

This pissed off chimp could be a surreal image of Milne’s memories of Moomba, Tarax lemonade, a Skyhooks concert at Bananas Disco in St Kilda, threatened by disreputable thugs, the sharpies that made a habit of hanging around Luna Park looking for trouble. But the gaiety of its party hat can’t distract Nurse Marilyn from knowing who and what she is really looking at. This ephemeral image is a symbol of the pity and terror associated with having had a life-threatening illness: catharsis as an inflection of tense. But catharsis, too, as the belly-laugh that just won’t quit at the absurdity of it all. From the perspective of both an artist as well as a clock-ticking carbon-based life-form, it represents the vanitas of quaint subject matter disguising the fucking mess. Samuel Beckett best expressed this artifice, with his signature derision and despair, as a bowtie on a throat cancer.
La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même

Things often sound better in French. Sexier, like if Brigitte Bardot said it, cooler if it was Alain Delon. More enticing if it was Marilyn as she stripped her patient bare, readying him for anal violation in the name of compassion. But merde stinks every bit as much as shit. The same goes for semantic perplexity. Retard en Verre. Marcel Duchamp cryptically sub-titled his most famous work “Delay in Glass”. This droll aphorism is unashamedly intellectual, as well as a Gallic, Poindexter pun that captures the idea of suspended animation and locomotive atrophy in the work, as the impotent bachelors keep pumping out frustrated lubricant that never reaches the haughty bride above. However there is no element of delay in Milne’s images of pain, humiliation and frustration. In the cruelty of dream-worked misprision, animal vivisection and human surgery are as fucked up as each other. And when it comes to the fundament, of bowel movements or vomiting, one orifice is as good as any other. Among many others to have made the analogy, Simone Purcel-Broutschert’s La Machine Humaine (1966) likens the work of the mechanic to that of the surgeon (“Pour réparer le moteur de la machine humaine, le chirurgien n’aura pas, comme le mécanicien d’automobile, la
possibilité de soulever le capot"). Like an automobile, the human body's parts sometimes stand in for others or fail to work in ways they should. The likening of the flow of oil to that of blood and the entropic vectors of energy requiring constant topping up amounts to a humorous, quasi-scientific post-humanism. Very French, very cybernetic, but also a Manichean response to André Malraux’s *Human Condition* of 1933.

Whether man or man-machine, there will be a malodorous issue from the fallout of combustion and digestion. When you’ve got to go you gotta go. And it’s always the same when you do. Shit stinks. If you’ve got a hole in your side and you can’t put the cap on, it will always run down your leg.

*Even.*