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Reptile Expo, February 2, 2022

Reptile Expo is my contribution to the discourse on vice in Las Vegas. The exhibition indexes and interrogates cultural fabrications around substance use and abuse, nightlife and notions of freedom. It turns a skeptic's eye to "sin" in the city while gamely indulging clichés and visual cues from the Vegas built environment and associated media landscape. It alights on the pervasive role of alcohol within canonical art history and constructions in its wake. It audits the Christian concept of vice from my vantage as academic party animal, ex-Catholic punk, feminist, artist and addict, acknowledging that all identity constructions are unstable.

The title alludes to the "Lizard Brain," the pop neurological term for the limbic system and its creeping inclinations to ellide emotional intelligence in favor of baser instincts: to fuck and fight and otherwise engage in "unexplainable behaviors." It's also the name of an energetically advertised event whose ubiquitous banners faced off with my studio building during the last several semesters. As the grinding predictability and rigor of graduate school dug their hooks into my daily life, my lizard brain drove me in unexpected directions, seeking risk and adventure: secret blackouts, sleazy dates, the illicit thrill of lying to the therapist. The psychic impact of the banners—obviously urging me toward dissolution—couldn't be denied.

The exhibition features a suite of drawings visualizing the figure as a cartoon. These images find the figure by turns silhouetted, half-concealed or a dried-out like a husk. She is abstracted and flattened like Ziggy, pissed on by Calvin, inflated into Robert Crumb-ish proportions. A googly-eyed Lulu, she demonstrates bad boundaries, assumes the form of affable brand ambassador or alternately screws the pooch à la Dori Seda. These depictions follow Maggie Nelson's sentiments in "On Freedom" regarding the tension of self-conceptualization through the prism of substance use; that "to enjoy a drug one must enjoy being a subject," placed in "passive voice" (Nelson, 134). These figurative pieces—all distorted self portraits, aestheticize the complications of relinquishing agency to a substance and the broader notion of being under the influence.

The use of the cartoon betrays my sense of humor, developed in tandem with depression—with coordinates occasionally tilted toward nihilism. Amy Sillman asserts that comics "blurt out vulgar secrets that paintings try to keep." In her essay on Amelie von Wulffen she writes "the comic strip is a slice of life—a form generally more cinematic or literary than painting...Comic strips come in the newspaper...and [when deployed in art] bring us news of a painter's life, and that this is the prerogative of fiction, that it can be built upon the detailed descriptions of an individual's life" (204). It seizes on an art historical current Sillman sees inherent in "all the funny painters...that they're drawers at heart: Francis Picabia, Philip Guston, Sigmar Polke, Nicole Eisenmann. Part of what makes them funny is that they factor themselves as personae in a painterly dream. Guston, the tragi-comic hero of painting, always lying in bed balefully, smoking and doubting, with a plate of French fries on his belly." The drawings are fast and sometimes messy, associative and spontaneous, batting at what's beyond language; "hobbling linearity with collage, overlay, interruption, fragmentation, glitch and omission" (Sillman, 207).

Significantly, Reptile Expo is anchored by a series of quilts, hand sewn in a traditional motif called Drunkard's Walk. The pattern has its roots in the Women's Temperance Movement of the

early twentieth century and is meant to mock the drunk's meandering path back home from the bar. Alternatively, it has been said to offer a perambulatory strategy: "to move in a zig-zag and...double back...to evade anyone who might try to follow" (Stockman). In *Reptile Expo*, I pursue this meandering path through notions of derangement and lucidity, adventure and domesticity, control and abandon. I place my evasive urges on display, wreath them in steel and circle them in lights. What follows is a consideration of the most significant individual artworks.

Um Manifesto

"Um Manifesto," or "Self Portrait as a Twentysomething Beer Witch" reimagines the girl with the pitched hat seated on a crescent moon who adorns the label of Miller High Life beer as a drunk young artist, steeped in culture high and low. She pairs insurrectionary feminist literature with a domestic pilsner. She wants to be the life of the party as much as she wants to be left alone. Like the counterculture luminaries she consumes, she commends her spirit to derangement. Her thoughts are often overwhelmingly dark, but nightlife turns these thoughts kaleidoscopic. She can't quite decide if she wants to die by 27, or if there's any other option.

The ground for this image is scumbled graphite, applied in gestural strokes, both tight and loose. This dark surface nods to bar lighting or the night sky but also creates an expressive non-space. The figure is slightly smaller than my body, and covering the page was a sweaty process, evoking the Abstract Expressionist heroes who slur boozy polemics in films like "Painters Painting." The dark scrawls harken back to the moody assertions of psychological insight ascribed to Ab Ex images. The cut paper elements advertise fake beers, appealing to youthful instincts. Cub is young and fierce. Skink speaks to the aforementioned Lizard Brain. These hard edge embellishments, which mimic neon signage, cut through the murky surface.

The figure echoes the style of the Miller High Life girl: flat and graphic, clad in red boots and an American flag color scheme. The Miller High Life girl is of an unspecified era but charmingly dated, demurely perched in a fitted red dress on a slim moon. She extends her arm to toast the champagne of beers. She is an icon of the Midwest bars where I spent my twenties. My Beer Witch slumps over her angry little book, double fistfing. Her striped shirt folds around a crumpled chest. She is both flat and rendered, emerging and dissolving along with the rhythm of her brain chemistry.

The text in the bottom right corner, "Take my Life," echoes the look of Miller High Life signage, but the argon blue outline that borders the neon sign is reformatted into a light blue scribble. At undergrad parties, my friends would pass around bottles of High Life, wet with condensation, and ritually scratch off the face of the crescent moon girl. We'd laugh at this act of satirical misogyny, an antisocial joke: "Scratch the bitch's face off!" Now the toast to oblivion, a dark crack on Henny Youngman's "Take my wife," "Take my Life," gets a strikethrough. An ambiguous resolution. A thought I'm too scared to commit to. Um...

Hungover in "Bed"

Party time begets the hangover: The young artist pulls the covers up to her nose and groans. She wakes up in a slanted "Bed," Robert Rauschenberg's paint-splattered combine. This greasy substrate is an anti-hero's hand me down, and it makes for cold comfort. Dribbles of pigment

mirror queasy inclinations. Her head is staked on a pillow of static and metallic stars. Her buzzing skull is topped with an effortlessly messy bun. Memories of the night before—tippling wine and talking shit at an art opening—blend with New York School nightmares: whiskey on the rocks and splashed gasoline, trash thrown off a balcony and the sound of men's self-congratulatory laughing.

Dumb Grad Student Dies of Thirst

Eventually the young artist succumbs to her self-isolating instincts. She decides to make a body of work in the desert. She'll don Georgia O'Keeffe's shawl, shape her thumbs and forefinger into exaggerated L's and frame austere vistas thru her viewfinder. She might even take an easel out to the playa, make some gestural scrawls across a canvas, aping desert bramble. She'll borrow Agnes Martin's palette—bruise tones and a rainbow of taupe, beige and bone. She'll erect subtle shapes in overspray on a faint grid. She'll collage dissipating ghost town foundations in cream.

She'll show her haters that cities are stupid, the art scene's a punchline. Speaking of punch, she's thirsty, and not just for authenticity. She's dunked her brush in the last of the drinking water and the sun is high in the sky. She remembers taking shelter under the mocking visage of the giant fiberglass skull at work: Treasure Island. No man is an island after all. Now all she hopes is that someone scatters her remains with plastic gas station poppies, staples a stuffed bear to a fence post to commemorate her strident attempts at escapism.

Naked on a Motorcycle

In "Naked on a Motorcycle," Drunkard's Walk, a traditional quilt pattern with roots in the Temperance Movement, is rendered in plastic. In this take, loud colors mimic neon nightlife: addled electric pink and argon blue assure you'll be up all night. Kitschy psychedelic swirls—stylized lizard skin—sidle up to yellow gloss. The curved patches of fabric alternate and pulse, suggesting a fractured narrative, a disoriented ramble.

Red and black dance in the devilish center, aping hues of Kenneth Anger—Satan as a sixties swinger, frugging with starlets. Black vinyl hints at motorcycle garb, and metal eyelets pick up this industrial thread. Slivers of patterned fabric imply the subject has discarded her garments. Time fractures under the influence. A tiled digital textile becomes a dissociative radio buzz, an alarm clock in the dark, attempting to beckon the party animal back to routine. Wheels spin at the bottom, with black and yellow patches evoking crash test dummies. The crash, after all, is inevitable.

Quilts are shorthand for Americana, like Coca Cola--and Coke makes a great mixer. It's also good fuel for deranged enlightenment, the hallucinatory logic of substance use, "experience without truth" per Derrida (quoted in Kopelson). The title, "Naked on a Motorcycle," alludes to the mythic "sojourn away from domestic sociality," as Maggie Nelson puts it, "fueled by an irresistible need to 'ramble on'" (136). Flashes of Easy Rider: Karen Black clammers across the grass on LSD. Peter Fonda sobs. The drug fugue is internal and inherently solipsistic. Accordingly, its size harkens to the body--a solo form.

Reptile Expo (Log Cabin + Lizards)

What does a log cabin look like in Las Vegas? Substitute buzzing lights for lumber. A traditional Log Cabin Quilt is tinted red at its center, in reference to the hearth. In this textile the center squares offer cold comfort in black and pink: a glowing void. Cartoon “fleshtone” shines against onyx, argon blue and red. Silhouettes of lizards insinuate the reptile drive, the creeping instincts that eclipse the day time brain. Their shiny brown forms disrupt the steady rhythm of the squares.

Stretched in a steel frame, “Reptile Expo” protrudes into the gallery space, an imperfect banner with industrial embellishments. With pieces sourced from Autozone and Amazon, it picks up the spirit of assemblage, per Rauschenberg. Its orientation alludes to the signs displayed on the ground in the Neon Boneyard, where deaccessioned neon letters rest directly in the desert dust, but its delicate handmade aspects sow object confusion.

Bound

“Bound,” the third in the series of quilts, ends the meandering narrative arc in Hell. My cartoon stand-in is bound by the chains she forged in life, tidily vignettted on an easy to clean textile: Pissed upon, tread on, tethered by books, Bound 2 interminable masculine tomes. Inundated by infinite footnotes, bent by received wisdom. Wrecked by cleverness. There’s a rebus: whizz and a key, because of course she’s her own jailer. The quilt could build endlessly, like Borges’ library of Babel.

Book Bar

I used to like to read books at bars. After a decade of attempts, I’ve decided this is not a particularly effective way to consume a text—though maybe that wasn’t exactly what I sought.

Skink’s Book Bar, an installation and performance to be staged at the Reptile Expo reception, reconfigures this delivery system while keeping its stylish and social trappings. Patrons order literature from a booktender who reads to them one-on-one across the counter, offering a mediumistic exchange that amplifies the boundary blurring experiences of reading and drinking—and reading while drinking. Taking a page from Adrian Piper’s “Food for the Spirit,” the Book Bar enhances awareness of reading as an embodied experience, a form of consumption, and a metabolization of information and influence. Book Bar offerings include literature of drug use, madness, decadence and transgression. Daily specials are available, and tips are accepted.

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