

Taking Liberties

Years ago in my elementary school classroom there stood a plinth ceremonially stationed between two windows that flooded the cultpore seated upon it with light. The bronze was a life-sized head of Abraham Lincoln. This was in Illinois. License plates there used to celebrate the state as "The Land of Lincoln," and Carl Sandberg's multivolume life of the raw-boned, log-splitting man-of-the-people who became the people's martyr was on the shelves of every public library and of many private homes as well.

Now if there has ever been a President I revere, it is him and to this day a pair of Lincoln bookends sandwiches a row of history and theory books on my shelves, the eloquence of my patron saint/politician being an implicit commentary on the turgidness of those volumes. The arrangement is an adult homage, however. What I remember from adolescence is that the Lincoln in my school had a curious distinguishing feature resulting from the fervent but unequivocally irreverent attentions of the young: his already prominent nose was a shiny gold. At every pass we would give it a good rub, a get a good scolding from the teacher. But nothing could stop us. And so a figure of unsurpassed dignity was made into the class clown by class clowns.

Naturally, it is easy to play with things you don't care much about, but interest tends to flag when caprice outstrips the psychological conflict of burlesquing a true icon. That's why Warhol picked Marilyn Monroe. She wasn't just any bombshell. Always second in the sweep stakes of busty celebrity, even when it came to a "tragic" death by car, Jayne Mansfield just couldn't go gold. Ambivalence is the essence of travesty and she inspired none, while Marilyn proved to be not only the perfect screen on which to project male desire, but likewise a muse for beauty's parodists.

Why James Esber chose Lincoln for a series of grotesque drawings I can only guess, but I have no trouble at all situating myself at the pictorial and emotional flash point where spontaneous respect and sympathy for Lincoln's handsome, melancholic face meets shameless pleasure in the artist's wild exaggeration of its cragginess. Yet Esber's particular way with line tends to Rococo filigree, which is the opposite of what we would expect from the rustic president, though recent research suggesting that during his early manhood Lincoln had Brokeback Mountain moments at least opens the door - intriguing to enter in the imagination but forever closed to us in fact - to the idea that underneath all his famous gravity ran a seam of atavistic camp. Will Willie Nelson be next to experience such graphic metamorphosis. Side by side with Esber's Lincoln he would be in excellent, all-American company.

The grotesque, as any child of post-modern theory now knows, is next of kin to the carnivalesque, which entails the ceremonial inversion of hierarchies in which high is brought low, low is raised up in the trappings of its betters, and for a brief, mind-bending interval possibilities run riot over propriety. The basic mechanics of both depend on excess and polemical exaggeration. What makes something grotesque in our eyes is not merely the addition of extraneous embellishment and comic detail but the sense of being shown too much of what a thing or person essentially is such that those essentials are made overpoweringly, ludicrously manifest. Caricature to that extent is not so much a matter of defacing - defiling one image with another hostile to it - as refacing: uncovering the absurd face concealed by the mask of the normal one. That such a face may strike the viewer as unnatural yet totally recognizable merely proves that what defines character is not an inherent and positive balance of qualities but the readily legible yet always unstable mix of whatever qualities nature arbitrarily stamped on a chunk of reality, qualities that, no matter how they may be remolded by the willful imagination, never entirely lose their telltale traits.

Esber tests the limits of such remolding in many styles and several mediums. The styles range from full blown Pillsbury Dough-Boy Pop to the kind of calligraphic tracery that in the artist's hands turned our 16th President into hallucinogenic doily. The mediums have ranged from graphite to acrylic paint or jigsaw cut pieces of board and stretched and tented pieces of fabric to one that he has pretty much made his own, synthetic, multicolored modeling clays applied directly to a flat white surface like chewing gum to a school wall, though in quantities, densities and expanses that rival the most territorial of graffiti.

Since the mid-1980s graffiti has thrived on bubble forms that make language wobble and balloon in ways at once comic and alarming. Among the grotesque's main attributes, of course, is the inextricable binding together of delight and disorientation, which is why it is a mode so conducive to subverting the rigid verities of aesthetic order whether classic or modern. Materially speaking, however, graffiti is a crisp, hard manner, its seemingly pliable shapes being an illusion created by fluid but fast drying enamels. True softness belongs sculpture, notably the surrealist tradition which links Dorothea Tanning to Louise Bourgeois to Claes Oldenburg and on down. Never before Esber has "flat work" enjoyed the woolly benefits of surrealist malleability. Neither has drawing or painting ever had access to such explicit fleshiness. When Esber kneads the contours and substance of a baby's face, or the pneumatic torso of a bodybuilder, or the streamlined bodywork of an automobile he not only toys with our formal expectations but with our physical ones too, going Salvador Dali one step further to make images that don't just melt optically but tangibly squish.

The understanding that the viewer is not invited to explore the Id-driven satisfaction of actually poking or prodding the flushed pads of goo that compose his images does nothing to remove the temptation or quell the tactile fantasies they inspire. Shall I speak to you of Georges Bataille and the “informe”? No, the assumption that only apostate French Catholics embedded in the Academy appreciate the semiotics of paying with shit is the delusion of ambitious graduate students and their mentors. For those in whom it was never repressed or else has been effectively desublimated by adult encounters with the sensuous - and I count most genuine art lovers in this category - it is unnecessary to footnote primal experience.

What does matter is the particular imprint a given artist may put on these memories of regressive plasticity. Esber's are for the most part infectiously playful - as was the business of rubbing old Abe's nose - but he carries play to ornate extremes that render it ever so slightly disturbing, like the clunky elegance of the scrolling filigree favored by Neo-Romantic interior designers and filmmakers of the 1930s and 1940s whose pastel palette he has also taken up on occasion. “Clunky elegance”? That doesn't sound much like a compliment but it is since both the clunkiness and the elegance are the product of an imagination keyed to contradiction, and of a talent capable of calibrating the artifice required to produce both effects with apparently natural unnaturalness. Esber's work may be an acquired taste - or for those who begin with “taste” in its conventional sense - an acquired tastelessness, but it is unapologetically rich in its own flavors and full of the surprise that attend not the marriage of reason and squalor but the well-plotted misalliance of fancy and funk.

Robert Storr - 2006