

I WAS AN ARTIST FOR THE 20TH CENTURY

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Big dick tries to make the Muses' mount.
The Muses jerk him off, ass over backwards.
Catullus

The portfolio

I went to the Holiday Inn ready with slides of my art work. I had lost my job at the Strand and in the eleven months I had worked there my face and hair and body language had taken on a characteristic I could not name that made me unemployable. One look and the temporary agencies that were once glad to see me because of my typing skills told me I looked like I needed a vacation. Having typing skills had save my ass more than once. It was 1980 and I answered an ad in the Village Voice for "Artist". I was to come to the Holiday Inn in Manhattan with a portfolio. I had slides of my small black and white paintings of photographs of people walking around the city. I had already tried a few galleries in Soho but had never gotten past some polite rejections by the receptionists. In the lobby of the Holiday Inn the furniture the rug and the walls were red and gray. There were about twelve nervous people trying not to show it casually carrying their portfolios. We were told by a very serious blond middle-aged woman wearing a business suit to write our full names on a list and we would be called. All the artists sat apart from each other and did not look at one another except

for a pretty overly made up woman in her early thirties. She was the oldest person there and actually showed her portfolio to us that consisted of wallpaper samples. She had made forty thousand dollars the previous year freelancing. Hotels. Shopping centers. Banks. Everyone uses wallpaper. We all agreed that this was good wallpaper. Some of the other artists opened up their portfolios and showed their work. One man did realist paintings of rocks with graffiti painted on them. One girl did self-portraits always sitting on a small stool next to an ape or a lion or a snake. One man only painted the ocean with great attention to detail at different times of the day using glazing techniques that had been used – as he claimed - by “the masters”. I showed my work and the woman who made the self portraits asked me why I didn't use any color. I told her there was no reason and she seemed to hate me on the spot for that answer. We were all talking loudly mostly complaining about galleries and advertising agencies until the first name was called. That brought instant silence and everyone as if on cue returned to their original seats apart from each other. When my name was called I took the elevator to the room number the blond woman had given me. In the room were two business men in expensive suits who told me to relax and have a seat. I showed them my slides and one of the businessmen asked me:

- Why don't you use color? Are you afraid of color?

I explained that I liked black and white and for the moment that's just how it was.

-But can you handle color? We're not here to judge you. We aren't critics! We just need to know.

-I can handle it!

I said it more loudly that I had intended.

-We believe you! Color is not the issue here. You can render that's for sure. You like people don't you? All your paintings have people in them - which is a good thing! But what we're looking for is landscapes.

-The man can do landscapes - if he can do the city he can do the country - it only makes sense...

-I'm not saying he can't do landscapes I'm saying he's an artist who likes to do people. That's different. What you're saying and what I'm saying are not the same thing at all...

I was to be paid forty dollars for every "couch size" painting I could deliver.

The cost of materials would be mine but I could set my own hours and deliver only what I could manage to produce. The four people owned a furniture store and they were beginning to "get into art". I made one painting for them from an old photograph I had of Agua Dulce a beach in Lima. I lost money because the painting took me four days to make. The beach in the photograph had small changing rooms made of canvas and bright green and purple water. I removed the people in the photograph as I

had been instructed to and everyone at the furniture factory, a sweat shop in Jersey City, seemed to like it. In any case I never went back and I never saw any of those people ever again.

Rodin in L. A.

I first met Jorge Pardo in 1984 – during our first year in art school when I noticed him falling asleep during a class on art theory. It turned out he was working at U.P.S. at night loading trucks and attending the Art Center during the day. Here I am, thirty-three years old and listening to some guy talk seriously about Marxism and watching a guy sliding off a plastic chair.

Where had I gone wrong? The coins were beginning to fall out of Jorge's pockets but people didn't even notice as they had all entered into that zone of silence between waking and sleeping that happens when a room full of people are day-dreaming. The successful teachers who had regular gallery exhibits and museum shows had the bearing of well to do businessmen. They were up and comers. The women noticed and maneuvered for territory despite the fashionable feminist rhetoric that was espoused publicly. No one dared say anything. The unsuccessful teachers were just sorry and tired. They couldn't talk about art without getting that puckered hound dog look in their eyes; they reminded me of those poor slobs you see on the trains in the east coast who look like the world has done them a horrible injustice that they have decided to keep to themselves because "people would just be too stupid to understand". The older ones looked

even sadder, as if they had not been laid in decades and they knew it was too late. Every animal knows that look as it makes the person slow easy prey. Those guys always got taken but you learned not to laugh just as you never laugh at street people. Teachers of avant-garde art taught it from the perspective that there was actually something here to be understood rationally. They had learned in the sixties from the French that art was a language that could be understood in terms of philosophy and cultural theory from Saussure through Levi-Strauss to Derrida. Systems of any sort, even aesthetic ones, perhaps especially aesthetic ones, by their very nature tend to denigrate visual pleasure, the amoral world of the senses and of the imagination, and of the "understanding" that happens there. What Descartes called the "necessary management of the senses" can happen only under the strict guidelines of reason, where they are brought under control. Or at least one can dream that they are under control. Ironically this meant that for artists who subscribed to cultural theories experience and the imagination were now something to be doubted if not reputed. Presumably the only thing one could make art about that could be trusted not to be contaminated by the imagination – by kitschy feeling - was concepts. Yet even in conceptual art there were often elements that were contradictory or ambiguous. Only the greatest rigorousness and critical distancing could - one could only pray - make certain that every element, even chance or the erotic, had been thought through and brought under

control . As in Hesse's *Glass Bead Game* there was not much left for students to do but to learn the rules of the game. A professor of Cultural Theory at the Art Center once told me he was writing a novel without a single original sentence or without a single original idea. The ironic pride, the contempt, the self-hatred on his face is something I remember when I see myself becoming a museum piece embalmed and ready to be dusted. You've got to see yourself sometimes if you want a good laugh! What the avant-garde professors and their students really wanted was the moral high ground. To accomplish this they would have to see everything, see through all the fakes and the facades. Like the madman that narrates Borge's *The Aleph*, they went looking for a more advantageous position from which to regard the world. And they were all so serious it seemed they were trying out for Pope (as we would say when we were boys in Catholic School). They all reminded me most of their opposite counterparts in the Art Center: The graybeards teaching "figure drawing", "perspective" "anatomy" – and my favorite: "head painting". I once saw one of these fossils in the cafeteria sitting in a room surrounded by steel glass and concrete. Barking students played games and teased each other all around him. In the middle of this chaos was this respected teacher of "anatomy" drawing on a napkin. I was curious to see what it was so I stepped up behind him and looked over his shoulder. Summer was still strong in September and most of the girls were wearing shorts and so I thought of course the man is senile but he still has

some juice left in him, he must be drawing those beautiful brown legs or those incredible haunches. But his drawing was of neo-classical nudes in an Arcadian space gesturing in those ridiculously exaggerated ways that you only see in neo-classical art. This person was oblivious to the light coming through these windows, to the parking lot outside, to these females, to these institutional orange trays everyone is carrying, to this clatter. In short he had levitated himself beyond “mere reality” to the world of philosophy and concepts. The same place occupied by those that took the cardboard cut-out realities of Freud and Marx seriously enough to believe them. If the teachers at the Art Center had a patron saint it would have been *The Thinker* by Rodin. This pathetically anachronistic sculpture was in front of a museum on a busy intersection of Pasadena. *The Thinker* was –and is as it’s still there - oblivious to the bright California sun on his old European bronze skin, oblivious to the sports cars and the tourist buses and the construction crews laying in pipe and cable. The Rose Parade passes in front of him every January first and *The Thinker's* choice spot on that corner is taken by television cameras and video equipment placed on scaffolding far above him. *The Thinker* doesn't even bother to look up when there is a car accident, or when a bus full of cheerleaders and football players go screaming past him to the Rose Bowl leaving a trail of smoke. The point is that *The Thinker* is somewhere else, he is never where he is. Even in the Paris of 1881 where he was made to sit above the *Gates of*

Hell, Rodin's decorative door representing Dante's *Divine Comedy*, he was present and absent. People then recognized this paradox and asked Rodin to clarify it. Was *The Thinker* meant to be Dante gazing at his work or Rodin himself guarding it? The fossils who taught the Foundation Classes and the younger artists who taught avant-garde art had a friendly almost conspiratorial contempt for each other, so when passing each other in hallways they would say their greetings with a smile that says "I don't believe the kind of crap you get away with, what a world we live in!" In a sense you couldn't blame the professors. Everyone uses what they have and makes a go of it. Muscle men privilege physical strength, rich people show off what money can buy, and professors do the same with what they know. Very few individuals are fortunate enough to learn a defense mechanism against their own strengths. That should have been the prayer of Saint Nicholas, patron saint of scholars and children.

This Is Not a Woman

Mr. Bartel was in his forties and still wore suits to class. He wore thick glasses and had a long thin pointer made of wood with a black rubber tip that he used to point to slides projected on a screen in front of the blackboard. He taught photography showing us how to print negatives, how use a camera, how to measure time in fractions of seconds, how to arrange a still life so it conformed to something called "the golden mean" that all great artists from the past used. He emphasized that it was

available to everyone “democratically”, that this “golden mean is within your means”. We were all bored to tears by it but we didn’t hold it against all those artists as it must have meant something to them a million years ago or they wouldn’t have bothered. Mr. Bartel pointed with his pointer to the various ways that photographers used the golden mean to create their work. He showed us the photographs of the Work Progress Administration and I saw the portraits of Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee and Walker Evans for the first time. It was the Fall of 1968 but the photographs already looked like they belonged to another century. For us in that baking bungalow – our first year of High School - the portraits and the landscapes were excruciatingly boring but nudes were always met with applause and whistles.

-Holy shit!

-This is not a woman! What you are seeing is not a woman! It’s a photograph!

-Well sure damn looks like a woman to me!

-Take that and double it! Wowowowo!

-It’s an Edward Weston! A great photograph! You see how Weston used the golden mean to create his composition?

-That is not just a woman but a F I N E looking woman you understand?

-I wouldn’t kick her out of bed.

After Tasaka let out a wolf whistle that bounced around the room Mr.

Bartel hammered his pointer on the table. He instructed Tasaka to get into a broom closet in the back of the classroom and shut the door as punishment. He did as he was told with slow sarcastic deliberateness because for years he had routinely spent whole classes inside the broom closet. It must have been over 100 degrees in that box. This was a bad teaching strategy because it was impossible after that to think of anything but Tasaka in that closet. What was he doing? Is he dead?

-Enough! Can't you people see the art here? Look! It's right in front of you! Open your eyes!

-Was this Edward Weston's girlfriend?

We wanted to know more about this girl. How old was she? Did she live in the desert all the time? She's too pale to be living in the desert – could it be she's just passing through and Edward got lucky? Poor Mr. Bartel just became very red and held on to his pointer very tightly.

“This the Place”

-You are going to put this school on the map! We need someone to become as famous as Mark Rothko and donate some money, give a shot in the arm to the program.

My first thoughts were that I was indifferent to Rothko's work and that he had killed himself. My "advisor" at the art academy smiled efficiently.

-This...

said the advisor, with a sweeping gesture that did not fail to embrace the Mexican sweepers wearing surgical masks and backpacks blowing dead leaves into bright green plastic bags.

-This is the place where you can make it happen.

I did not ask what "it" was since it seemed as if "it" referred to an unspoken essence that was familiar and real to us both. We both just stared out at the manicured lawn and nodded. There was a class that met on Saturdays to visit the studios of the successful. We car pooled to Malibu and parked in front of a successful artist's studio which was a Ranch style house between highway one and the Pacific ocean. Liana painted chunks of the California desert with pigment. She wore a permanent smile on her face reminding me of the wives of television evangelists. She explained that she had spent years trying to discover the best place on earth to meditate, to absorb the energy that came from God, to discover that "sweet spot" where psychic manifestations were most ripe. She had visited various third world strongholds of the supernatural such as India, China and even Peru.

-George is from Peru!

-Then you know.

I remained a blank, which I can do quite well. There was a pause that eventually became awkward. Liana looked at me suspiciously but still smiling she continued.

-The Dalai Lama had been someone she could have stayed with but something had been missing. Voodoo? Brazilian pigmies? Australian Dream-Time? No. The best place she had discovered after all this time and effort had been so close. It was Malibu!

-There is something here that just can't be expressed in mere words. We stared speechless our mouths open as she pronounced "Malibu" just the way one imagines a society lady saying it. She had a studio in Venice where assistants, carefully chosen on the basis of their spiritual capacity (most of them were junkies) made beautiful color prints that sold very well.

We went to east L.A. to visit another successful artist in a Spanish style apartment building near McArthur Park - one of the most run down sections of the city. Mike Green had thrift store furniture, a broken record player and stacks of thrashed albums piled on the floor. There was a sheet of seamless on which he was drawing intestines receding mechanically into infinite space in an illustration style reminiscent of American underground comics from the sixties and seventies. He explained that what characterized Avant-Garde art was its ugliness and its total absence of good taste. In fact avant-garde art did not look like art at all – even the term avant-garde itself was dated.

-Only conservative morons use that term - don't you people know anything?

He was a very ugly man who was intent on making ugliness a virtue superior to beauty. The operative attitude was transgression against conventions and outrages against conventions of "beauty", which he always put in quotes when he spoke to stress the pathetic triteness that he perceived was inherent in all things beautiful. He associated the beautiful for us with commercial images in advertising linked inexorably with deception and greed. I wanted to say something about the tail not wagging the dog but I hesitated because his integrity, which was in evidence everywhere, would have made any retort seem petty. He felt he had won us over (and most in our group were convinced), and so felt more at ease, overplaying his hand once by adding sarcasm at the end of the word "beauty" with a little laugh. That laugh spoke volumes with regard to his doubts and fears; things not at all present in his work.

The sarcasm and rebelliousness struck me as adolescent posing but I admired his sense of loathing. As with so many artists I would visit over the years the most interesting thing in their studio for me was the collage on the refrigerator door, which seemed to be the one place in which there was no pressure to make art or to critique or to display intelligence. Just a lot of funny interesting pictures and reproductions held up with magnets that told me something about this person's life. In their art there seemed to be no connection with how artists functioned in the world and their work. When

Lautremont said "nothing is incomprehensible" he had earned the right to say that because he had lived it – when Alfred Jarry had the first line in his fantastic play *Ubu Roi* be “shit” he had earned that “shit” by paying dearly for it. When contemporary artists deal with “shit” or just shit it has no weight to it – it’s just a convention that is meant to create titters among the respectable classes. Nothing is earned and nothing is given because it has not been lived. What have artists lived? What have I lived?

Pluto

Are you happy? The young gallery assistants asked as they introduced me to various members of the ruling class in the New York art world. They explained to me that the turnout for my opening should be a good one as "everyone" would be out here tonight for the Jeff Koons show. This consisted of life size ceramic sculpture depicting popular American icons in the form of tourist memorabilia. I was having a one man show at the Laurie Rubin Gallery in Soho of my photo collages. It was the winter of 1988 and I hadn't been back in five years. Within a year the gallery would be out of business but we didn't know that then and the party moved from the gallery to a French restaurant nearby. A few years later there was another art opening and another party for Jorge and we were both invited to a dinner for four at the home of Ken, a wealthy collector and patron of the arts, and his boyfriend Orlando. Ken financed a gallery called Pluto that showed conceptual art in San Francisco. The grounds of his estate were so large

that he had a wall built around the pool in order to create a more intimate space. It was evening when we arrived and Jorge quickly got drunk on various aperitifs. Ken collected English horse and hound paintings that were everywhere. The 18th century furniture made the place look like a museum trying to create a European manor in mid-19th century splendor. Why would someone who collects such things own an Avant-Garde gallery? What am I doing here? Ostensibly I was helping Jorge install his show at Pluto but I was really here to see Penny, who had moved to San Francisco after graduating from the Art Center. That bitch had canceled our dinner engagement. Some blond crypto-Nazi is probably spanking that beautiful ass right now while I look at an 18th century Age of Reason piece of shit painting of a man playing a bugle to some dogs. I hate this kind of art. At least the wine is amazing. Their talk of exhibits and shows and museums already seemed to belong to another century, to some past that was just as well finished. Avant-Garde art seemed as much of an oxymoron as alternative television. It was as if we were unable to bury the past and what is dead in us. As I looked across the room to the three men laughing in front of a painting depicting the profile of a horse I saw Orlando was looking at me the way I look at Penny. Do I look this ridiculous? Yes. No wonder she's always laughing. Ken clicked his glass with a knife to make an announcement.

-When I ring the bell once I want you to come up Orlando. When I ring the bell twice I want you two gentlemen to come up.

Jorge and I looked at each other in complete disbelief as moments later the bell rang once and Orlando ran up the stairs. We started to laugh. I suggested we get out without saying a word before we end up stuffed next to the medieval armor. The bell rung twice. We laughed again but with less conviction. The staircase was probably from an old Douglas Sirk film. The walls were lined with green velvet. Upstairs there was a long table for twelve with a silver duck in the middle. The dinner was bland fish and chips. The room was too big even for a table for twelve. I thought of the apostles - all men. After dinner we moved to the patio for coffee and brandy. The pool was immaculate. The trees were manicured into spheres and the bushes into cubes.

-So is everyone here gay?

-No.

I drove a drunken Pardo home through the dark pretty streets of a forest. We were in a wealthy suburb outside San Francisco where there were no street signs no lights and no visible homes, just trees and the broken white line barely visible with our headlights. One decent thing about money is that your life can belong to you in a way that is not possible without it. I wasn't being morally superior to these people. Sooner or later we are all "Orlando's" in this world. But most of us never get much in return for it. At

most a job we can tolerate. Riding home in the dark I could see myself in a nice house with a pool Penny and a couple of high maintenance bitches.

What would I do to get such things? How far would I go? I'm a lazy Tupac Amaru. And as for Penny – not a chance – and high maintenance bitches?

I don't think so. Jorge explained his idea by drawing on a napkin and speaking with total seriousness:

-Taking steel cable you could pull the front of the ready teller with you car.

-YOUR car maybe I'm not pulling anything. Anyway with this fucking car you wouldn't even be able to pull a trash can much less a cash machine.

Anyway the idea is crazy.

-But why?

-Because we'd be shot!

Jorge's idea of "hitting" a ready teller machine reminded me of Ronnie a drifter I met on a warehouse job in L.A. in the early seventies. His retirement plan was to hold up a liquor store and to keep doing it until he was killed or got caught and sent to prison. He reminded us that prison wasn't so bad because you get fed regularly, and the bad stuff you just get used to, like anything else. I believed him but being a young man I figured on doing better. To his credit he didn't hold that against me. Jorge and I laughed at Ronnie down Market St. but my laughter was considerably less certain than Jorge's. Downtown San Francisco is over illuminated with yellow street lights and the Victorians seemed theatrical and sinister;

Market looked like a street where people were supposed to motorvate but there was no one there except for us. It was so quiet you could hear the sound of electricity running along the sheltering ceiling of wires over the street. After a few blocks in front of a concrete and glass Burger King we saw three prostitutes who looked right through us as if we were invisible. They could see we were broke. When a cab drove by they would get all sexy and start to walk like they were models in some dream fashion show. We were staying in separate places so we said good-bye and I go out and turned towards the Haigh – I got very popular passing out quarters to all the bums. Some of these people were hippies that time had forgotten. They had become middle aged and had lost their luck. A white man with dreadlocks leaning against a bus stop advertising said:

-God bless you son.

-What "son"? We're both the same age old timer!

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