

THE BADLANDS OF PARADISE

Close to the fear of war and the stars which have disappeared.

—Frank O'Hara

It's helpful to view *Pungent Dystopia* as an exploded diagram of current socio-political dramas. All the works on exhibit converge like a spatialized montage. Taken as a whole, or in the integrity of each element, the exhibition showcases a spectrum of responses artists have had to the pressure imposed by these all-too-dysphoric times.

Yet it's not all hardship and distress. In fact, the prevailing attitude is often quite the opposite. The very term *Pungent Dystopia* has a carnivalesque connotation that deliberately blunts the anxiety associated with the topics these 25 artists touch on. Sex, communism, mass incarceration, identity, the occult—these are just a few of the themes that they playfully take to task. Through all the laughter and the smoke, there emerges something like a contemporary Bosch landscape, populated with avatars, surrogate IDs and dramatis personae that navigate the troubled and treacherous environments of a moribund culture.

In some cases, the works on view feature characters that have undergone a sudden or gradual metamorphosis. These altered identities affect their skin tone, body shape, and their awareness of social roles—sometimes for the worse and sometimes for the better. In other areas of the exhibition, the patient work of formalism supplies the requisite escape hatch to translate the chaotic particulars of experience into an understandable abstraction. At bottom, however, aesthetic considerations like form, pattern, and even meaning, all seem to have fallen to the wayside. Confronted with the dire question of human survival, these artists focus more on the increasing disconnect between what we see in newspapers and TV, and the more intimate truths we encounter in our daily lives.

Sam Bornstein looks to the past to show us the future. His vision of community is a proletarian celebration of humanity set on a stage of humanity's own crafting. No gods, no masters, no bosses.

Dan Schein seems to portray a world of idyllic excess. Somewhere between Bohemian Grove and the obnoxious picnicking of Seurat's 19th century bourgeoisie, Schein uses gorgeous swathes of paint to highlight the complexity of sexual relationships before and after the apocalypse swallows everything in night.

Rebecca Goyette satirizes the endless pissing contest of the new conservative party. They have endless access to all the resources, like credit card libertines; but because they have the dick of state in their mouths they mumble incoherently whenever they defend free speech.

The carnal works of Bradley Biancardi are possessed by a numinous mystery. Peter Gallo shows how philosophizing the world can be a welcome analgesic, even if our thoughts have no corresponding reality. Emilie Stark-Menneg tackles societal dysphoria in *Lick* (2019), which accentuates the pungent distaste of eating asphalt for breakfast.

Dylan Hurwitz's ghostly sensuality seems glimpsed through a smokey glass jar. The subtle divisions of space that cut through the paintings of Tony Bluestone, zoning them into discrete but related sections, also inhabit the works of Nick Cueva, which aspire to make the weirdities of the inhuman world all the more rational.

Karen Finley offers uplifting words of protest straight from the sanctuary of a dream. Becky Brown's work speaks less to the reality of symbols than the need humans have for them.

The cartoon realism of Chris Toepfer creates political effigies from the listlessness of consumerist passivity. The devilish hieroglyphics of Nicholas DiLeo mock blanket statements about tuning in, turning on, and dropping out.

Anthony Haden-Guest demonstrates that the ostensive meaning of a picture is not always found on its surface. Sometimes, despite itself, the meaning of a work lies in its denial of meaning. This tragic-comic insight is far more interesting than anything theoretical definitions can provide. Emilia Olsen shows how today's ordinary pleasures can be swallowed by the void tomorrow.

The sensuality of Bel Fullana's work is undeniable, and speaks to a hedonistic delight in the face of looming adversity. On the other hand, Marcel Hüppauff depicts more miasmic delights that seem to revel in social decay.

Michael Scoggins's wistful adolescent scrawl is a "kick me" sign taped to the back of a stockbroker. Alex Gingrow's surreal signage amplifies the strangeness of human communication.

JJ Manford paints domestic interiors whose architecture invariably seems to reference the presence of the demonic. Nora Griffin uses colors almost synesthetically, like a

cache of phonemes tethered to sense by a radiant optimism.

The engineered appearance of David Baskin's work recalls the single-minded severity of the Terminator. The pieces included by the poet-painter Samuel Jablon show the ambiguous value language has in relation to power. In Jablon's case, words are less signifiers than landscapes: gooey tree-limbs that can be molded or reshaped without any reference to history or convention.

Alex Sewell's paintings never overtly politicize anything, although they can generally be deciphered that way. Eric Wiley's bugged out characters are comically distorted vehicles for quasi-religious insights.

Pungent Dystopia refuses anything that feels too strict. Adaptability is key. How people deal with fantasy (and escapism) as a means of coping with the insanity, dysfunction, anxiety, and hysteria of today's volatile political climate is their choice. Meanwhile, the medium is the mess. Since we live in a digital age—as opposed to a mechanical or electrical one—even machine elves can be carriers of vital insights, angels of reason who provide the plugged-in mind with something like humane compassion. It's practically impossible to be a "woke" spokesperson for humanity's future and not be completely full of shit. But a little bit of absurdity, and a little bit of unreasoning hope, might yet kill cancerous cells in the body politic.

At the same time, does political analysis have any value when confronted by a dynamic and chaotic whole? It's probably best to view *Pungent Dystopia* in such a way that you can emphatically re-imagine the sense of discovery that came with making each work. As the sheer diversity of artists in the exhibition makes clear, hashtags of inclusivity need to be reconsidered. Just because something might not exist yet, doesn't mean it isn't already influencing the course of events. And, what is equally true, just because something does exist, doesn't make it right. This goes doubly for those forms of "order" directly responsible for the pandemic we're currently facing.

—Jeffrey Grunthner

Jeffrey Grunthner is an artist-writer-musician-curator currently based in Berlin. Articles, reviews, poems, and essays have appeared via Drag City Books, American Art Catalogues, Heavy Feather Review, The Brooklyn Rail, artnet News, Hyperallergic, BOMB, Folder, and other venues. Recent curatorial projects include the reading and discussion series Conversations in Contemporary Poetics at Hauser & Wirth Publishers (NY).