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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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JIM NUTT

by David St.-Lascaux

Jim Nutt is back in New York, sans straightjacket. Once a wildman, he was part of Chicago's Imagist/Hairy Who movement, back in '66 when Hairy meant huge, when Ed "Big Daddy" Roth was customizing petroleum-powered hot rods with giant ratfinks, chrome pipes, metalflake paint jobs and two-tone flames, shortly after which S. Clay Wilson introduced the maniacal Checkered Demon and the ravishing Star-Eyed Stella. Meanwhile, in New York, the influential, serious works created by Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, Rosenquist, and Warhol—also influenced by commercial imagery—were being digested. And what a contrast, using the same cultural raw materials: the Midwest output infantile, maybe; the East Coast *oeuvre* just possibly uptight.

The Hairy Who included graduates of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago: James Falconer; Art Green; Gladys Nilsson, now Nutt's wife; Suellen Rocca and Karl Wirsum, an Adolf Wölfli doppelgänger. Members of the Imagist movement included Roger Brown, Leon Golub, Ed Paschke (Jeff Koons, then a student, his assistant), Nancy Spero, and H.C. Westermann. The movement's work was of its time: cartoon garish, rude, clever, heavy on wordplay and sexual innuendo. Hell, it was *entirely* explicit, and, as demonstrated in Nutt's "There are Reasons"

(1974), in which a Sadie Hawkins Day predacious Jane chases a ragged Dick across a stage, equal opportunity misandristic *and* misogynistic—although the *snood* in “Hold Still!! (Please)” (1980-1) is just a wee bit much. The work was also “representational” in the sense that Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* is representational: you can decipher it. In this microverse of eccentricity, Nutt’s and Westermann’s works were the most far out, the most graphic: Nutt’s hacked contortions mostly realized in two dimensions, and Westermann’s *tours de force* in exotic woods and antique parts executed mainly in three.

Nutt’s show at the David Nolan Gallery includes works dating back to the ’60s as well as current drawings—specifically head-and-shoulders pencil portraits of women, which bear reflection.

Whether drawing constitutes seduction—of fluidity and flourish, or whether it is an artform that demands a sophisticated eye, Nutt’s current offerings take drawing to an extreme. Appreciation for these requires a nuanced sensitivity to process and line, the ability to imagine intention, and to be moved by understatement. Nutt’s pale portraits are a bit like marble busts in a snowstorm, subtle to a fault, affectless, albeit with signature Nutt cubist physiognomies, geometric fabric patterns, Art Deco waving hair and asymmetric eyes. The haircuts, serenely severe, subliminally evoke Ayn Rand, missing only the fez and cigarette-in-holder. These portraits feel timeless and referential; directly evoking van der Weyden, Leonardo, and the aforementioned puck Picasso; their features drooped Dalían watches, their black and beaky schnozzles funny paper hybrids.

They are, however, as Nutt once inscribed a painting, “Not Without Virtue.” Roz Chast may well owe her loopy floating caption trope to Nutt. Still, they feel incomplete, like studies waiting to be brought to life by Nutt’s chromatic, tardy brush. In fact, one is just that—a “Drawing for ‘Trim.’” This perception is not helped by the presence of the painted trio of “Trim” (2010), “Pin” (2006) and “Plumb” (2004), which actually make the drawings look like blank sheets of paper at a glance. Nutt may indeed find this amusing. The painted works, intricately detailed down to their ziggurat, color-themed mattes, matching outfits for the paintings’ studied palettes, reveal a glacial production process and an intent, if not-so-restless, mind. There is subtle humor too: “Trim” no doubt has a *double entendre* title, and “Plumb” is the “One-Eyed, One Horned Flying Purple People Eater” of Nutt’s Inspirational Era. Perhaps Nutt has converted to a Hairy Who version of minimalism.

The show’s back room time capsule, which includes greatest hits from the ’60s through the ’80s, such as the quintessential reverse-acrylic-on-plexiglass, “Miss Sue Port” (1967), “Broad Jumper” (1969), and the oil-on-panel “Running Out” (1971), is a different story. The acned, faceless, regurgitating three-by-five-foot-tall Miss Sue dominates the room, with “INCHES OFF YOUR WASTE,” and “SHINY HAIR” on her ambiguous priapic unit. Meanwhile, the pun-definitive “Broad Jumper,” an irregular cut-out composition with a Popeye the Sailor physique unable to contain her giant bopping Breast Sinister in its leopard print tube top, has “I PANTS” in her mouth. Sure enough, there is an R. Crumb dollar-bill pyramid eye on her surreal track pants. Oh, and if you want to know where Keith Haring got his signature motion lines and flying fish, it’s here. And the sage, speckled “Running Out”: the jade-wrapped mummy; his shadow; the flying brown clubby clump o’ sumthin’; the raven-haired Dick Tracy jaundiced woman’s head stage right; and the earthworm painstakingly painted to look metallic, forming a cursive squiggle on the matte.

But back to the drawings, which form the bulk of the show, and represent new work: superficially, they seem to reveal Nutt as unhurried, secure in, or resigned to, his die-cast legacy—coasting, tranquilized, meticulous. On one hand, these works are pristine, the archival paper perfectly torn. On another, they are intimate, unpretentious and undistracted by the bravado of cosmetic color. But dig deeper, and there’s intention. Through silence and absence, Nutt is making a colorless and acid commentary on the current era’s blandeur through these mock-heroic, self-censored, depression-era monochrome portrayals of restrained austerity.