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Gluibizzi's Monsters: Porn Meme Art

Daniel Bosch · Wednesday, February 19th, 2014

Twenty-three brunettes, 10 puffs of pubic hair, nine pairs of panties, two t-shirts, two socks, one tank-top, one bra, one bottle, and one bowling ball—though I suppose it could be a basketball, a medicine ball, or a soccer ball. Twenty legs amputated by the edges of absent frames. Four pairs of legs spread wide open (one of these ass-to-us). Three with hands in the air, as if dancing; one of these walks like an Egyptian. Two squatting and one kneeling as she says “come hither.” One who has painlessly surrendered to Dan Gluibizzi’s composition a yarmulke or crown of scalp and skull. This is too much attention of the wrong kind: tabulation and rational interrogation feels dishonest with images so prurient by design, and at the same time so abstract.



Dan Gluibizzi, Untitled (watercolor, 30 x 22, 2010)

If analyzing them is beside the point, Dan Gluibizzi’s recent watercolors nonetheless have a curious capacity to encourage me to think and to feel—I’m touched by them more than I am encouraged by them to touch myself. This has to do with the relationship of these pictures to their digital sources. For hundreds of years artists seeking inspiration (and trusting very old paths toward what was then understood as mastery) went to Florence and Rome and Venice to draw from classical and renaissance nudes whose stories comprise the foundational tropes of Western culture. Twenty-first century artist Gluibizzi combs D.I.Y. porn, exhibitionist, and naturist pages, collects and curates images from collections already curated by those who like to see—and share—images of themselves being done, then he sifts and selects and re-composes his haul, then he draws. His intervention is catalogical, formal: he’s a seeker of repetition and variation. A culler-ist before he is a colorist, Gluibizzi’s gaze is less like Ruskin’s and more like a flaneur’s. The images he seizes with his eyes and fingertips may have no intrinsic value, and they usually have no market value, if only because their like is infinitely available.

[alert type=alert-red]**HAVE A LOOK AT THE FANDOR “SEX AND THE CINEMA” INFOGRAPHIC**[/alert]

The source photographs are written in flashes of bright, demystifying light that Gluibizzi’s watercolors refuse. In *Les Fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire, theorizer of modernity, confronted a “hypocrite reader” (“mon semblable, mon frère”) who would drink deeply from his poems’ remediation of gothic fictions. In the low, in the base, in the proscribed, in excess of appetite, in the busy-ness that is required to meet appetite’s demands, in the occult, in dark places, in the broken, in the semen-smear, in rooms too dark for photography, in corners too wet for watercolor, he knew, there is yet enough light for reflection. Though many of the source photos earn the adjective

“dirty,” some viewers might feel the steadiness of Gluibizzi’s hand and his skill in applying washes sanitizes his project. In the wake of a Wired.com article on Gluibizzi’s watercolors, a vocal set of readers complained about the article’s “NSFW” designation. And many who would not purposely look at images on an exhibitionist Tumblr account or D.I.Y. porn web page—at least not if they believed others might find out they had done so—are ready to receive Gluibizzi’s images as fine art, which it is. Nonetheless, no small part of the power of these watercolors, a power which distinguishes them from so much work done in the medium, derives from their baseness, from the abjectness in the forms Gluibizzi recounts and remediates, in the figures’ poses—literal and metaphorical—which even a hypocritical reader like me will recognize as his own.



Dan Gluibizzi, Untitled (watercolor, dimensions unknown, 2010)

When he’s finished making a work, his gridded sheets of watercolor paper look like computer screens full of thumbnails or, if you are old enough to know, like contact sheets from pre-digital photography.



Dan Gluibizzi’s studio worktable (2013)

Today’s tablet readers scroll through such thumbnail image grids so quickly the pictures blur, and they slow the slot-machine, hoping for a winner, with infinitesimal pressure from a fingertip. (Lay-people have come to call this “reading”; academics call it “research.”) A traditional still photograph stops time, but in referring to their sources, the grids of watercolor images Gluibizzi paints halt an irrefragable flow of images that passes under my hands and my gazes. In this way Gluibizzi’s grids resist search engines’ algorithms. If photography displaced the hand of the artist in favor of the speedy operation of a mechanism, Gluibizzi’s attention—his touch, brush in hand—criticizes our reliance on Googly eyes. These watercolors challenge us to slow down, to restore time to that obscenity we let pass for attention. His eye and mind filter Niagara so I can drink.

But what exactly am I so thirsty for? Though Gluibizzi only signs the verso of these sheets, he leaves a signature on these watercolors is his omission of paint at eye, nipple, and belly button, holidays which signify his deftness and corroborate the figures’ non-completeness. The figures in these paintings cannot return neither desiring or dissecting gazes. The qualities of any individual figure in these watercolors are not character traits but are rather indices of his handling of his medium: they are predicated upon the deftness of his choices of which images to depict and in what array, on the horizontality and absorbiveness of the watercolor paper, the steadiness of Gluibizzi’s brushwork, and the near transparency of the pigments he uses.

Yet if a watercolor like “Six Happy Couples” (below) is distanced from its origins by Gluibizzi’s craft and frustrates any but the most banal narratives a viewer might try to elaborate from its surface, that surface is yet exceedingly articulate about human recreation.



Dan Gluibizzi, “Six Happy Couples” (watercolor, 30 x 22, 2012)

The happy copulate with grasping hands and encircling mouths and poking tongues and fingers. They kiss and grope. Orifices and members and limbs and extremities are explored, tugged, licked, sucked, stroked, dandled. If the communities Berger describes use words to draw narratives from key objects in photographs, Gluibizzi’s figures find on each other’s bodies sites they have visited

before—and promises that each will be visited again—yet each visit intends not cerebral satisfactions of past moments recalled, but the ever-renewable embodiedness of a “now!”—intense pleasure, arrived at with eyes closed. If there are no plot points here with which to build a story, at least we know the climax.

The first work of Gluibizzi’s I saw was one of his monsters in oil on panel, a portrait of a red id, all eye and all “I.”



Dan Gluibizzi, Untitled (oil on panel, 4.5 x 4, 1999)

In his more recent watercolors Gluibizzi hasn’t turned his back on the gothic and the mutant and the ugly: often these works celebrate the counter-cultural ambitions of the web pages from which the images are drawn, and our naked, post-lapsarian bodies, offered for consumption, may at times be terrible to behold. (Doesn’t the untitled watercolor below from 2012 substitute a camera for the empty gaze of the monster from 1999?)



Dan Gluibizzi, Untitled (watercolor, 15 x 11, 2012)

There is a delicious creepiness to his use of deathly or bloody or radioactive palettes to render the black-and-white and living colors of the once-indexical, now untethered forms from the photographs. Each figure’s or group of figures’ emergence reverses the photographic process: each is made by additions of liquid darkness. Some figures may seem more lively than others, but even the most lifelike do not seem real: stripped of particularizing details, each is profoundly anonymous, a he or she if not “undead,” then “not-living.” Habeas corpus? I suppose, but each body has been, in order, shot, uploaded, distanced from a community of origin, re-contextualized, then downloaded by Gluibizzi, and so cut off from the bodies that issued them, culled, and remade in a medium which is primarily the universal solvent. Gluibizzi’s monsters may frighten us to the degree that they resemble specimen grids in zoological collections, trays of creatures fixed in place by pins and surrendered to a scientific gaze. But this rhetoric of science or science fiction doesn’t mean Gluibizzi’s pictures are any less eloquent about sex. In how many specimen trays has a lab worker stuck six pairs of creatures arrested in the moments before they fuck?

In the greater context of his over twenty years of art-making, Gluibizzi’s recent watercolors remind me that the word “monster” did not originally suggest horror: it comes from Latin monstrare, root of “demonstrate” and “muster,” as in a proof, and in the Renaissance (maybe even until the success of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*) something “monstrous” could even be extraordinarily excellent. His watercolor monsters seem to me to demonstrate something fresher and more difficult to realize than our jonesing for low-hanging fruit. (The root of English “prurient” refers to the scratching of an itch.)



Dan Gluibizzi, Untitled (watercolor, 15 x 22, 2010)

Given their sources, these watercolors surprise and delight me with how they banish the stultifying sameness (not to say hypocrisy) of D.I.Y. and professional pornography. Banished, too, once one starts to look, and to feel akin to these figures, is any outsider's comfortable moral stance. Objectification has long been the subject of moral critique, even when it is self-objectification. Many of the images Gluibizzi uses as sources must have been posted by objectifying eyes. Do D.I.Y. publishers of prurient images like to imagine that they participate in a "traffic," like to represent themselves as having access to bodies (or lifestyles) which others would wish to consume, even at a price?



Dan Gluibizzi, Untitled (watercolor, dimensions unknown, 2011)

This may be the point where obscenity obtrudes: the sadness and loneliness, even if it's not wrong, of paying to imagine what should be freely given. But there is no one in these pictures to objectify. With his monsters, Gluibizzi traffics in images of sex that coolly expose—but not without humor—how trite and redundant our body language is, especially when we would speak what we desire. He presents all our clichés of lust and leer, all our stagy celebrations of how frank and "free" we can be about our bodies, with a master's severity, but without moralizing. To each of the monsters he so rigorously sets free from the web, Gluibizzi offers not judgment, but an empathy rooted in the discipline of his project. The figures are not who they were when he found them, and thus the emancipation offered by these watercolors is not individual, but general.

In the untitled watercolor below, nine distinct intimacies make one impression. What is it? And why is it so familiar?

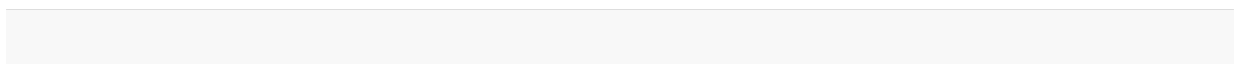


Dan Gluibizzi, Untitled (watercolor, 18 x 15, 2011)

The likeness of the hues use to depict these nine couples suggests they were drawn in an afternoon from a single tray of puddles on Gluibizzi's worktable. In concert with a hundred other formal and compositional similarities, those inhuman hues suggest to me how difficult it is for any human couple to express to other humans, by means of their bodies, and light, and shade, the lived uniqueness of their knowledge of and feelings for each other. We are always trying to present or represent them in photographs, our feelings, but when our pictures are finished, our feelings are never there. And yet we never stop creating images of ourselves! How human it is to respond to this felt discrepancy, this failure of any one image, by taking, or making, another one!

In these nine couples I see one couple, an Adam and an Eve whom Satan has not yet tempted with any greater knowledge. But in the context of his project Gluibizzi's "happie pair" is already well aware that they are naked. Old Testament angels stood by creation with flaming swords; in Gluibizzi's re-framings of our naked truths, any such dispensation is over. Lifting them from the web, re-mediating their figures, Gluibizzi grants each Adam and Eve and all their descendants a grace period which starts over each time we look at them. To feel for and with these nine couples embracing is to imagine that as Adam and Eve became less ideal, they became more perfectly human.

Dan Gluibizzi's show 'Between Friends' is at the Kopeikin Gallery in Los Angeles March 1-April 19, 2014. Information at <http://www.danluibizzi.com/>



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