



Lloyd Walsh: New Work

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Exotic Neurotic

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Describing the edge of the known world is a gambit that explorers and artists have shared throughout the ages. In the perilous heyday of sovereign-sponsored exploration, audacious seafarers were dispatched to the end of the map and returned as heroes with tales of exotic beasts, gold, and strange customs. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, these voyages whetted many appetites, including those of conquest. But it was often the artist at home in Europe who first attempted to translate these confrontations with the new to the public at large. Early visual accounts privileged imaginative interpretation. Reality and representation sprang from the artist's hand.

“Someone looked at something in nature, not completely understanding it, and put his take on it. Anything you cannot name or explain causes anxiety. And in a sense, to name a thing is to control it,” claims Lloyd Walsh. An artist whose courtly still lifes hark to ages past, Walsh fuses the exploits of the far-flung explorer with the culture-bound easel painter. Though contemporary, his paintings are something of an anachronism, sailing against current

trends by retrieving the Old Masters toolkit. More importantly, his chosen style revives a centuries-old convention that served to inventory the spoils of conquest for the crowned heads of Europe.

Five hundred years of artmaking have yet to address the abuses of the past or close the philosophical gaps between documentation and interpretation. Therefore, Walsh's setting is a mannerist one, where taxonomy and cultural prejudice vie for control. His still lifes mix pathos with deadpan humor, challenging the hegemony of Western culture while undercutting its artistic conventions. In doing so, he reveals anxieties that have a contemporary, if not timeless, stamp. Walsh embodies this endearing tension in a strangely adapted bestiary gathered from all corners of the colonial world. These exotic animals are not only the subjects of his still lifes; they are also victims of the genre. In this contrived universe, nature adapts to cultural preferences. With patterned coats, mannered behavior, and conflicted psychology, they exhibit the sort of adaptive traits that breed discontent.

In one picture, a capuchin monkey with a forlorn expression sits demurely on a finely dressed table. Gathered to the left is a damask curtain whose rich, leafy pattern is duplicated in the fur of the animal. The entire image is suffused with a sallow green light that seems to emanate from the subject. A sickly tint poisons the atmosphere with thinly veiled contempt. In another picture, heavy curtains are drawn to present a similarly patterned ring-tailed lemur on a draped table. Upright on its haunches, the animal holds an ornamental branch in an unnatural pose and fixes the viewer with a gleeful, solicitous gaze. No doubt it is as close to a grin as a lemur can muster, but the dark-chocolate atmosphere at the back of the picture is a menacing void that erases any trace of mirth.

Other pictures situate animals among objects of nourishment, but these conventional still-life compositions are also saturated with sly humor. Two decorous chinchillas feed on Ding Dongs and Moon Pies while eyeing the viewer. Though South American in origin, they are tentative and delicate like the forced Orientalism of their decorative fur. A pair of rats on a linen-draped table ignore a lovely grouping of peaches. Otherwise engaged, the patterned creatures rise to the bidding of an unseen command. They have more in common with the rats of modern science than their plague-ridden ancestors, vermin considered unworthy subjects for court-painted still lifes.

If Walsh's satire seems familiar, certainly there is precedent. Like the sixteenth-century sensation Arcimboldo, Walsh manipulates the viewer by skillfully adapting unconventional imagery to the conventions of a classic art form. Arcimboldo's amalgamations of vegetables and poultry were comic portraits that romanticized nature. They were tributes to the Viennese court, designed to express the emperor's dominion over society and nature. Walsh's "anomalies," as he calls them, are certainly wry but never droll. The animal aberrations he depicts result from an unnatural syntax of subject and setting and contain a foreboding dissonance. Instead of vegetable heads, Walsh has invented animal mimes that surprise us with our own, baleful reflection. It is an image of oppressive constriction held together by elaborate design.

Indeed, the power to control information and representation has been the native, and exploited, territory of both explorer and artist. The unimpeded sweep of colonialism made use of that power. It guaranteed that new information hit the public consciousness through a thick bias emanating from the artist's own hand. Court painters, accustomed to representing the domain and privileges of the crown, extended that authority over new, colonial subjects. Thus privileging tradition over novelty, what Western culture considered a successful acquisition of new information often represented a failure to understand the "new" on its own terms.

Acquisition by force hardly ensures understanding. If the Age of Exploration opened the West to new vistas and phenomena,

the subsequent Age of Reason initiated a struggle to bring that information within the grasp of the individual mind—to categorize, systematize, and pierce the veil of convention with rational thought. Molière, Milton, Montesquieu, and Swift used satire to unravel aristocratic habit. It was a time of lawmaking, Rousseau's *Du contrat social*, Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, and Voltaire's *Candide*. Regarding the rights of individuals, what failed to be accomplished through intellectual arguments was pushed along by revolution.

Walsh implies these different levels of consciousness throughout his work. His subjects are rendered with a naturalist's eye for detail, but it is not their physical qualities that make the creatures so curious. It is their resignation. All the subjects seem complicit in their containment, resigned to their compromised environment. A disturbing spectacle is reflected in the creatures' gaze. Conditioned behaviors compete with strange, new identities. Scumbled and glazed, the surfaces of the paintings have a corrupt, dark luster that hopelessly mires reactions to the new in the mores, prejudices, and aesthetics of the past. Innovation seems hidebound to social and artistic convention.

In this manner, Walsh shares his frustrations and strategies with other contemporary anachronisms, specifically Walton Ford and Odd Nerdrum. Ford's contrived studies of quarreling birds borrow heavily from John James Audubon and are stand-ins for subaltern resistance to colonial domination. Nerdrum's apocalyptic sagas banish figures of Rembrandt fleshiness to an inhospitable terrain of dread and mythic portent. Like Walsh, these painters elicit an instructive frisson between the old and the new, evoking tradition in order to challenge its arbitrary authority. And as symbolists, all three explore the anxieties of their time without binding their art to any time in particular. The use of quaint techniques in this contemporary moment demonstrates the West's unsettled relationship to the world, and art's enduring capacity to describe it.

