

But even paintings I made many years ago took the drip as a signal of too-busy-to-be-neat artistic abandon and turned it into a very deliberate structuring element. I'm working now from a very arid place. I'm not struggling with the juicy paintbrush. I'm very detached, but I've made a decision to work this way, and it creates a different kind of intimacy.

FB: You use a lot of literal question marks, as well as a lot of J's, which resemble upside-down question marks. There is no "decoding," or answering the antinomies your paintings propose: robot or human, original or remake, information or art. You're thrown back onto the structure itself, and the constituent units of the structure—the all-too-familiar keyboard characters.

JH: Right, keyboard characters are both familiar and unfamiliar. They leave you suspended on the razor edge between the pure abstraction of language and the possibility of communication. The promise of keyboard characters is to universally communicate, but it comes with all this disappointment and miscommunication. So I have brought that promise and disappointment into the painting alongside this array of visuals that is also reliant upon the very same components—letters smashed together with color and gesture. But I hope it produces a sense of longing for real communication and content. Is that hopelessly romantic?

FB: Yes, it's a romantic and sublime threshold state. You see and feel these antinomies, and they stay with you, but instead of getting a new artificial synthesis, you're left suspended. JH: That's what I call a limited case of transcendence, which is more about causing desire than resolving it. So the painting frame

remains to keep things bounded, just as dance has a beginning and end, or sculpture has a back and a front.

FB: In one painting, you quite strikingly have a flat smiley-face sculpture tacked on outside the frame. It's a 3D-printed yellow disk of a new emoji, but with the neutral face of a classic emoticon, so it's an emoji-emoticon hybrid.

JH: I needed to put something outside the frame, hanging off the painting. And when that happened, it energized and made the inside active. It is clearly outside; it's been pushed out. That can be narrativized. I did it for formal reasons, but I can't account for my unconscious reasons for insisting on that emoji-emoticon face. I would call it a joke, but we all know what jokes are. :|

FB: It's interesting that you were going to originally use a cat-face emoji, since cats are said to have the adaptability to survive any coming apocalypse. We're digitally fascinated by cats because they've been able to survive every new technological change in ways humans can't. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote that the cat isn't ever really looking at you, but rather erasing your existence, waiting for your death.

JH: Painting is like the cat. The cat is still a cat; it still has its autonomy, and we can never trap it fully. There's the cat-ness before the word "cat" and after. Painting will still have a life after the last painting is made.

FB: Did reusing operations and tropes from your earlier work make you more self-aware of a certain signature style, or has your sense of authorial style become even more incoherent?

JH: Things became more incoherent. Whatever mesh was originally holding the paintings together as an image has disappeared, and the interstitial links are gone. I feel I've finished a painting when it opens up and banishes me, puts me outside the process. But there are many winks of self-reference in the work. I use the characters "J. H. \$" as a playful gesture that self-mocks the idea of painting as authorial expression. Similarly, with the emoticon outside the frame, the joke is that now there's figurative expression or "stamp of authenticity." And I also paint on CAPTCHA tests. The funny thing about those is I always fail at the CAPTCHA test. So maybe I'm a robot. Certainly, based on the test, I'm not human.

FB: A lot of conceptual work generates an interesting and terrifying mathematical sublime from the too-much-information technological overload, but without any beauty. Your work, though, lays bare the interesting alphanumeric code behind experience, which can be alienating but also beautiful.

JH: When we scrape everything away, it's a very scary place to be. I'll literally have panic from the work and this sense of detachment, but also deep implication that puts me in a strange place—arid instead of flowing. Suddenly, so much has changed, and I can't just keep making paintings like I did before. That's why I'm against style. I think the medium should be totally adaptable to the possibility that suddenly nothing is as it was, without having to give up the integrity of medium itself. Painting can adapt to anything—it's all about compression. Why should we abandon something so mutable and protean?

Wang Haiyang

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In Philip Roth's wicked epic *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), the protagonist, the salacious sixty-four-year-old ex-puppeteer Mickey Sabbath, does something stranger than even the strangest Roth characters. Upon the death of his fat mistress Drenka, he visits her grave. Overcome by stupendous jealousy of all the men Drenka fucked when she was alive—a possessive emotion he has never experienced before, as he cares about nothing—he jerks off at the cemetery. Licking sperm off his fingers, he chants out loud under a full moon: "I am Drenka! I am Drenka!"

Wang Haiyang's latest paintings and videos at Capsule Shanghai spectacularly capture this Rothian moment—that is, the absurdist moment when Eros (sex) binds with Thanatos (death). This Eros-Thanatos bondage constitutes the logic behind all three works: the centerpiece, *The City of Dionysus*, a video narration of a death encounter charged with sublimated motions of sexual excess; *Party in the Anus*, a looped video performance of a farcically costumed wo/man party dancing; and the animation *Skins*, showing a tube-shaped object cruising above a pile of hairs, pendant to a set of paintings of atavistic monkey-wo/men.

At the beginning of *The City of Dionysus*, an ominous voice recounts the story of a granny

found dead in her bedroom. Her body is already rotting. This was a true story that Wang heard when he was young, though he never met the granny. The artist revamped it after a visit to Hong Kong, where he attended an underground sex party. It was so dark that he could see nothing: no beauty or ugliness, no rich or poor, no man or woman. People fucked with an abandon that seemingly could only happen upon a radical leveling of all human difference—a counter-civilizational fuck. When the artist came back to his barren urban village on the outskirts of Beijing, somehow the silent rotting death of that unknown granny connected with the ridiculous Hong Kong party. Such is the genesis story that the artist tells, but it is one that makes eminent sense.

Sex, given its animal and primitivist potentials, has often been used as an inquisitive channel for or against humanity (this is why the whores in Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* [1907] also look like monsters).¹ While Wang has dealt with sexuality since the beginning of his career, this death-initiated existential query has taken his sexual expression to a whole new level. With nihilistic electronic music droning, the granny story quickly gives way to climactic scenes of disgorging, distending, spilling, spurting, swallowing. Performed by amorphous agents with occasional heads or arms budding out, these movements sometimes look onanistic or masochistic, but ultimately they exceed any acts based on human behavioral vocabulary. You cannot tell apart the agents from the acts: they dissolve in a sea of Pollock-esque drips of color, only to climb out again like figures emergent from Auguste Rodin's *The Gates of Hell* (1880–1917). They

seem like cries for help. All these bodily holes and skin and organs that we are endowed with and confined by: What indeed are they in the very, very end? Like the seven holes in Buddhist thoughts, these biological entities must be embedded in an infinitely intricate and potentially unknowable world system. The acts herein are done with such furor that the agent (human or otherwise) seems to believe that s/he is not just acting upon a trail of intestine but a tunnel toward the light of our being.

And how such furor implicates us! The colored liquid is not just thrown unto the screen in gestural bravado. Rather, it is ejaculated unto it in the same absurdist impulse that drives Sabbath mad at Drenka's grave. At the same time the work incriminates us as the ones ejaculating, because the spillage comes from where we stand—in front of the video. As if to strengthen the participatory dimension of the work, the tempo also mimics the tempo of sex act itself: fast and furious towards consummation, followed by a sudden stop. End. Then feelings of emptiness. We are but one of those unidentifiable creatures roiling in the sea of sperm-pigment.

The artist's almost furious urge to know, to make sense of his own "maggot-like" existence, has completely redefined one of his most salient staples: matter transformation. Even the most skeptical viewer has to gasp at the wild imagination in his lyrically charged transformation in, say, *Wall Dust* (2016). A pig's anus morphs into a pomegranate, whose seeds transform to human fetuses, which fall to the ground to become kneeling men, who then turn into a green lizard that skitters away.



Sometimes they do share unexpectedly similar formal attributes, as in a pig's anus and a pomegranate's stem. But most of the time, it is the artist's imagination exerting its cogency. The world here is a great reserve against which to trace the workings of the unconscious, the litmus paper to read the corrosiveness of desire. However, in Wang's *City of Dionysus*, the clarity of transformation—from matter A to matter B—is gone. In other words, the basis of surprise—how can A be B?—and its attendant psychic tension are wiped out. Analogous to how Sabbath psychically merges with his mistress Drenka at her grave, the physiognomic boundary between different characters in Wang's latest venture is utterly hemorrhaged.

In fact, the hemorrhaging constitutes the principal distinction of this series from Wang's other video works. One function of the older series of transformative actions is to give the video a narrative structure, like an unfolding story. Here, quite unusually for him, Wang introduces verbal narration. In effect, the artist's voice-over substitutes the narrative function of matter transformation (A turns into B into C into D), leaving the image to return to pure imagery. Now we have on the one hand frenzied accumulations of dripping liquid serving as some sublimated background, and on the other new inventions of composite organisms

brought forth to our vision as a preconceived whole. These new organisms, no longer subject to relentless transformation, as in past works, seem nevertheless to convey what all those chains of transformations want to convey: the Buddha-like obese woman with primitivist breasts, for example, opens up her vulva, but inside we see what seems like an entryway to a dazzling universe. A video that starts with a tale about death climaxes with an emblem of procreativity. But if we harken back to Walter Benjamin's admonition of the purging of death in the modern era—of how hygienic society has streamlined the process of death, severing it from the narrative of birth—procreativity and death are never separate in the first place. They have always been conjoined in the cycle of nature.

To be sure, the exhibition contains more valences: the farcically funny gender-fluid costumed wo/man in *Party in the Anus*; a floating hotdog or penis or worm or bacteria (it resembles all four) cruising in *Skins*. But the central voice pertains to the myth of life. The inexorability of Wang's query is what gives these works their voice. Even the seemingly adjunct elements carry great weight, analogous to the way that the Higher Way is immanent in every small thing. Men metamorphize into atavistic monkey/men in the drawings of *Skins*, as if exploring a backward-looking solution to the

problem of existential meaning. Dalí-esque elliptical bacterial or biomorphic creatures abound. As the most basic makeup of the material world, they seem to offer another perspective—a microscopic one—to understand our condition. Appearing as coming from both the far future and the distant past, they straddle the temporalities reached in the queries made by the works: oracular and primordial.

The artist's next proposed venture will take up another Rothian strand: that of old age (remember that Sabbath is sixty-four and Drenka is fifty-two at the time of her death). Wang Haiyang has not cited Philip Roth as among the authors he reads, but what a delight to find an unknowing Rothian in the visual arts.

1. The marriage of Eros and Thanatos in *Les Demoiselles des d'Avignon* is well established in the literature, see scholarship by Leo Steinberg, William Rubin, and Yves-Alain Bois on the subject. For specific reference, see the entry on Picasso in page 90-96 in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Anti-modernism, Post-modernism*. ed. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois, David Joselit, et al. Thames & Hudson (2005).

Jesse Darling: The Ballad of Saint Jerome

Interview by Isabella Zamboni

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Ballad: a slow, sentimental song, or a medieval poem accompanying music and dances, of unknown authorship and passed on orally as part of folk culture. The term Jesse Darling chose for the title of their Tate Britain show pertinently tackles its concerns and languages: Highly narrative and emotional, the gothic yet playful sculptures, drawings, and installations address myths and ideologies internalized in our culture, particularly in relation to the body. The specific myth that Darling looks at is the one underlying modernity—its religious, political, and cultural institutions, its medical-industrial complex, its white male gaze. And the specific ballad that Darling recounts is the one of Saint Jerome, the fourth-century Christian scholar who, instead of reacting in fear in front of an apparently ferocious lion, recognized and healed a wound in its paw, removing a thorn there stuck. On the occasion of their first solo institutional show, Jesse Darling talks of why Jerome's is a tale of oppression and love, how values are fetishes like BDSM, how bodies and civilizations inevitably fail, and why flowers grow particularly well in a graveyard.

ISABELLA ZAMBONI: As some of their titles suggest, many artworks in this show appear as relics, parts of the holy Jerome's and his lion's bodies within glass vitrines, or devotional portraits, but they seem at times relics also in the sense of leftovers of something that has been destroyed or lost—the hole in the central white wall, for example, the foam bits near the sphinx “strewn like vomit or confetti,”¹ wounded hands and paws, a cluster of birds. What is it that could be revered here? What is the sacred in your story? And what has possibly been lost?

JESSE DARLING: On the one hand, you might say I'm trying to make a case for broken things and people, of which I'm probably one. But I am also suspicious of conservative ideologies that try to keep things whole—legacies, lineages, hierarchies. Archival and packing foams, for example, are polymer products designed to keep important things unbroken, but they will outlive most of those things, along with the people who wanted to protect them. And in this paradox of petroleum modernity, which is a kind of death cult, there is a hole—like a wound, or an abscess, or an absence—which I think of as the center that could not hold. So I wanted this hole to be the “altarpiece” of the exhibition.

And God, or nature—the principle of entropy and regeneration, whichever way you want to see it—will have its way in the end, and that for me is the redemptive idea. Of course redemption is a deeply Christian concept, but then again, so is “apocalypse.” In terms of divine macro consequence I think neither one is a real thing, but within the scope of a single life there could be instances of both. And in the inevitable failure of bodies, structures, and civilizations, there is the certainty of transformation, if not renewal, like how flowers grow especially well in a graveyard. I like to think of wild birds picking at the ribs of great imperial cities, and of the many ways that life goes on despite.

IZ: This act of projecting value or redemption amid the modern “apocalypse” seems to happen through a sort of short circuit between acknowledgment and complicity, condemning and ennobling—a sweet-sour overhaul like birds inhabiting debris. In this same perspective I see the roles of sex and affect you put in play in your works. The story of Saint Jerome and the lion, you stated, is an extraordinary tale of love on one side, but also of domestication, of subjugation within care. In his story that you recount at Tate, references to sex come up: male heroes receiving female attributes, *Lady Batman* engraved with breast and penis; strap-on harnesses or ball gags employed in the sculptures. Do you suggest to see love as a form of extortion,

of exchange at a high price? What role does sexuality play in this?

JD: “Everything in the world is about sex except sex,” said Oscar Wilde. We're talking about contemporary art objects, after all, which have their origins in the religious fetish and the commodity fetish—and which, like sexual fetishes, function as symbols of desire. But there would be no religious “fetish” without the commodity form. And where the European self is constituted as rational and Enlightened, in opposition to the libidinal and impulsive fetish worshippers dreamed up by European anthropologists, there is also a sexual fetishism at play. So this is a little bit where I'm going when I think about the lion who appears out of the wilderness in the story of Saint Jerome: a wild beast from a wild place tamed (or topped, or subjugated) by Jerome into relinquishing the law of nature for the law of the Father.

It's a complex power dynamic: Jerome the scholarly patriarch embodies the power of the institution, but the lion has claws and teeth by which the scholar could easily perish. So there's an implicit ambivalence, but also a mutuality. Queer sex practices like BDSM offer an articulate framework for working out these dynamics in a non-naturalized way as opposed to, say, normative heterosexuality, which is essentially a full-time d/s relationship in which the woman is de facto sub/bottom, but without the understanding that this set of relations also constitutes a “kink.” I don't want to perform the gesture of addressing the straight world from a queer place. I would rather that the work queers the viewer and not the other way around.

There are some technologies of sex in the show—if you know, you know—but many of the items that look like sex toys were bought at a pet shop and intended for domestic animals. The fact of subjugation doesn't preclude love: people love their animals! And men also love their wives. And if love is not enough, it still gets people through. As do painkillers,