

The Lions: Really Good Mine

by Lance Blomgren

In the crudely figurative yet decidedly Rorschachian world of The Lions' collaborative drawings there exists an overwhelming sense of unease. Moving page by 8 ½ x 11 inch page through even a small sampling of the this group's prolific, ever-evolving project—around 1700 drawings at last count—the viewer immediately becomes aware of the very visceral type of contemplative engagement these works will both demand and elicit. There may be some discomfort, some disorientation, a sense of hovering ominously on the precipice of some sort of pictorial bedlam.

The divergent quality of most of their works, which shift easily between the minimal and the baroque, the detailed and the abstract, is at times unified only by a sense of integral collapse. There is often little to settle comfortably into in these drawings. Nothing remains fixed for too long. In spite of the representational signposts that regularly crop up—figurative allusions to fantasy, science fiction and horror genres, as well as a small cast of recurring characters—the images routinely dissolve into something else. Figures and objects run into one another: chickens grow out of necks, torsos become vegetables, and foregrounds recede into backdrops. Doodle, portrait, scene and story-board are given equal status. Images are double-exposed, added onto, erased, or even killed off as the work changes hands throughout the group. Styles mesh together, either seamlessly or discordantly, with clean line becoming scrawl becoming wash.

For The Lions, notions of fixed perspective are regularly downplayed in favour of a more temporal, conceptual approach to mark-making which, in spite of how "central" an image may seem, often necessitates the viewer shift their expectations into a realm of emergent comprehension. The focal point of these drawings becomes fleeting, often dissolving into an undifferentiated field of graphic noise or decoration; narrative understanding is suspended, with our ingrained, codified yearnings for pictorial conclusion often yielding to more theoretical notions of process, labour, and the nature of representation itself. The contemplation of What in the image, almost always gives way to the How of its creation. In this light, the loose procedural notion of the *Cadavre Exquis*, derived from the Surrealist

parlour game, remains a helpful, unifying context from which to take stock of The Lions' divergent work, a site which enacts its own meaning. As a five-headed creature, with five distinct intelligences and personalities, The Lions render their world, indeed their "body" of work, through a disconcertingly labyrinthine barter of voice, space and style. Indeed, the work brilliantly activates the Borgesian question of whether art can be a self-sustaining universe which will subsume individual viewers—it would make an interesting case study for current critical theories surrounding the problematic tensions inherent in authorial voice.

And, of course, there is the unease of what *is* certain in these works. The figures and characters that do manage to occupy centre stage in these drawings are usually in some sort of corporeal crisis, subjected to violence in many forms, in the process of extreme transformation. Here, the connotative resonance of the exquisite corpse notion takes on a very tangible quality. Bodies, when you can call them that, are disfigured, cut in half, reduced to components. Faces suffer the effects of serious mutation, internal organs are exposed, or worse, and bodily orifices often seep fluids that would worry the most seasoned of disease specialists. In these drawings, the figure, as distinct subject, is neutralized through the erasure or reduction of familiar, identifying characteristics. He, she or it is often physically restrained, subjected to new innovations in bondage technique. It's a dark, often brutal vision that awaits us in these pictures.

Interestingly, in many of the drawings the unsettling degradation of the figures remains secondary to the more distressing nonchalance and general acceptance of their situation. In The Lions' cosmology, the freakish and unsavory have become both normalized and mundane. There is an ominous sense of repose. Any urge the viewer may have to conceptualize or rationalize the violence of these images within our safe, predictable structures of drama—causality, conflict and climax—will likely be frustrated; these works posit a subtle temporal reversal where the lurking sense of menace becomes pointedly undramatic, almost quotidian. The imagery, while figuratively worrying and formally under threat of disintegration, nonetheless belies an uncanny sense of ease and calmness that turns the work in on itself, tightens the tension. This world, these works suggest, is indeed some version of our own. Indeed, the truly horrible, as Law and Order, the late night news, and, of course, Hannah Arendt point out, is always the underlying banality of misery and mayhem: the serial killer is almost always the nice guy next door, everyone is just following orders, the kidnapped learn to accept, often embrace, their new lot in life, and even the most desperate or wretched among us would generally take offense at having our existence

deemed abnormal. In this sense, The Lions' drawings take on a sharp, critical edge, that while providing some sort of contextual cohesion for this sprawling project, only acts to heighten the sense of unease. Similar to the work of Belgian painter James Ensor and the photographs of Ralph Eugene Meatyard, The Lions reveal that, more than likely, we are the hideous faces in the crowd, the disarticulated, and that (with echoes of Bakhtin and Bataille) the grotesque burlesque that is human abjection is little more than a celebration of everyday life, a pressure valve that needs to be opened to remind of our shared humanity, or even restore it.

But ultimately, what gives the Lion's work its lingering sense of disquiet, as well as its power, is its highly refined ability to dwell comfortably in the porous boundary between the recognizable and the ambiguous. There is an almost graceful refusal to pin itself down, to look away from the sometimes paralyzing terror of the void, or succumb to the urge to fill it in. While the viewer can discern familiar referential nods to concepts and tropes of nostalgia, nightmare, black comedy—not to mention the visual language of comics and Surrealism—he or she soon comes up against the fact that many of our normal, closed contexts of analysis will likely be insufficient here. Like someone who spends too long in front of the mirror, or too many years in therapy, the viewer is quick to realize any sustained examination of these drawings will result in self-examination. These images are unsettling, but they are your own.

Lance Blomgren is the author of *Practice*, *Walkups*, and *Corner Pieces*. His writings have appeared in journals and magazines internationally. He currently lives in Vancouver, where he acts as the Director/Curator of the Helen Pitt Gallery.