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Sam Lipp “I’m An American Citizen, I Know My Rights” and Jessica Sanders “Soft Poached” at Neochrome, Turin

April 23~2015

Sam Lipp “I’m An American Citizen, I Know My Rights”



Recollections of Exotic Birds

With Sam Lipp’s exhibition “I’m An American Citizen, I Know My Rights,” I have been given to recollections of exotic birds. These birds, owned by my family over the last 20 years, periodically dart into my thoughts; birds, that impoverished metaphor for empty signifiers.

SL’s exhibition and the three bird stories I tell below don’t present a moral. Too often people feel entitled to resolution, and I would like neither to confine these memories, nor SL’s work to such convictions. After all, that would be missing the joke of I’m An American Citizen...: SL performs the dandy abroad, reflecting language’s paranoid power to exoticize in the dark humor of his American impetuosity. So, rather than a parable of the cage, we have decorum: there are paintings in the shape of car windows (scratchy pixelated pictures of Chicago’s martial South Side [1]); there might be a toilet-paper-mache sculpture 1 of Olaf [2] (a puerile symbol of cartoon queerness); and, taped to the floor, there are inkjet prints of screen captures from Rio 2 [3].

The dandy is a figure, who, like birds, absorbs bourgeois culture and affects its meaninglessness as a perversion of instinct. This inheritance, through SL’s work, also suggests a hostile attitude, an ironic air of ineffectual labors. As might be found in my recollections, when a bird is free, it’s free to cover everything in shit; and in I’m An American Citizen... an artist’s freedom of movement is a decorous reminder of how morose our bourgeois habits are—hygiene, travel, consumption, self-identification, and indeed art among them. Abject attitudes are but reminders, topographies of unnourishing habitats. That we are ever so crude, we shit and become shit when we believe in our confinement. A last note: almost all of the bird’s in these stories died prematurely.

Derosia

Sam Korman, Mousse Magazine, April 2015

Chirpy

For the better part of my life, I lived in one half of a duplex that my parents owned. We depended on the rent from the other half and the four of us shared our portion of the building with our pets. My parents' incomes wavered, but for a few years in my early adolescence, we were comfortable. It was around this time that the number of dogs increased from one to two; my sister was convinced by a bunny; and to my surprise, my parents returned from an errand with a parakeet. It was also at this time that my parents hired a cleaning woman. She came twice a month, spoke to whomever was in the room (I suspect just to avoid the loneliness of job), and the house smelled clean and looked well kempt until her next visit. Animals are antagonistic to a hygienic home and requisite to their increased membership in our household was a cleaning woman. I suppose comfort can sometimes lead to confidence; my parents tread in the exotic aisle of the pet store.

Certainly, if a bird's cage is not cleaned appropriately, the air changes; but Chirpy also suggested levity, effortlessness, and vulnerability. A cage was necessary to contain and protect these qualities. Remember, Clinton was in office; there was a national surplus. Hopes appeared secure, investments well tended, fear and anticipation abated by a much wider, cleaner, better stocked buffer in the shape of a house. Cliches of the middle class are not written by these things, rather, they state them as fact. But birds make light of our symbols; they're graceful when they shit on our shoulders.

Our cleaning woman was generally thorough, but unless we told her, she did not open the windows. One day, the air in our house was stifled with the inescapable ammoniac scent of PineSol. The cleaning woman was only responsible for pet waste in the areas we shared. It's not difficult to see, then, why it was personally dismaying when we discovered Chirpy's cage covered in shit and a dead bird. It could've been that Clinton was on trial at this time – I don't remember. If some level of guilt or blame lingered, the cleaning woman still continued to come. How birds help make captivity seem willful. So, we immediately buried Chirpy in the yard and bought another parakeet.

Cookie

Two parakeets later, there was Cookie. It was a miserable green bird with a black head. It only liked my mom, but chewed all the buttons from her shirt. It drew blood with her bites and pierced my sister's ear and my dad's nose. Cookie detested its cage, preferring to cause chaos in the house. It was a Conure, whatever that is, and it flew away. What is sad about Cookie is not sad about the bird itself. It was an animal that never learned to like the indoors. Interiors are about trust and surfaces. Solid walls are a supposition. Do birds pretend? My mom trusted Cookie to stay on her shoulder when she went outside.

Those are the main details about Cookie. To protect it from the dogs—who would snip at the bird when she was within range my mom chose not to clip its wings. Captivity and dogs, these were not the only things that harried this creature. Even a bird like Cookie, who was supposed to be able to imitate human speech, only let out a relentless, rebellious squawk. I didn't blame it for flying away. I was seventeen and with the ruthlessness of a teenager, I was more sympathetic to the bird. Even if from a mistaken trust, my mom gave Cookie its freedom.

Dusty

Of all my family's birds, there was one I loved. I'd prefer to keep this recollection brief. It was subject to the same fate as all my family's birds; and it causes me pain to think that memories become such cheap metaphors set against the banalities of their history and context. Dusty was in my life briefly, but during a torrent of depression and panic. The bird distracted my attention by carving tunnels through the blankets that covered me in my state of physical and emotional inertia. It'd fly out one end of its chamber, surprise me, and seem to take joy in doing so. Dusty exuded a completely unself-conscious charm, an animal characteristic that, despite whatever type of bird it was, made one want to read kindness and intelligence in her behavior.

But, as I said above, memories, like hand-feeding a bird into happy captivity, are manipulated by language. Hence, if her ironic fate leaves me cold (a pun I won't share), it is an equally valid symbol. As any of these near-moralistic reflections show, it's not the bird, but the odd, hapless, and availing humors with which one keeps them. I suppose it has at least been nice to recollect my family's birds.

Sam Korman

[1] Chicago's South Side is one of the most notorious urban areas in the United States. Despite a borderline police state, it has one of the country's highest murder rates. SL is also a recent Chicago resident.

[2] Olaf is a character in the Disney film, "Frozen" released in 2013. The movie uses climate change as a backdrop for a fairytale romance. Olaf, the snowman, along with other parts of the film, were heavily debated for representing a gay subplot, with Olaf occupying the stereotypical position of gay best friend for the princess.

[3] "Rio 2," released in 2014, is a digitally animated children's movie. The film follows a family of parrots' trip to the Brazilian Amazon, as they struggle to reconcile their life in America with their origins in the tropical rainforest. As with "Frozen," this film uses highly contested issues such as climate change and immigration as the backdrop for a fantasy about self-discovery and-realization. The film casts Latino actors in the roles of exotic animals and white actors in the role of the American birds. The title of this exhibition is a line delivered by the film's parrot protagonist.