

Fear of Falling: On Joan Kaufman's *Suspended*

To be a body, is to be tied to a certain world

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

This will begin with a categorized inventory of sorts, one comprised solely of images: the feet of a tightrope walker moving back and forth along a suspended cable; old b&w film footage of Harry Houdini suspended above a city street wrestling himself free of a straitjacket; a woman in a long flowing red dress suspended horizontally, as if magically floating in mid-air; a pair of arms (male) with white feathered prosthetic wings strapped to them; a man dressed in green khaki tying himself with red straps to the old iron bed frame on which he sits; a man (same khaki clothing) on all fours who has a set of wings (marked with images of the quasi-abstract military symbols known as roundels) attached to his back, a beak-like prosthetic device attached over his face, and a female rider (dressed in red) standing on his back holding onto a pair of reins.

This is a partial, highly selective inventory of images at the heart of Joan Kaufman's new work, and it corresponds with a partial, highly selective inventory of the gravity of things, of visual expressions of what it is that holds us fixed within the context and frame of what Merleau-Ponty judiciously termed "a certain world."

We all know gravity, know its effects even if we don't know its cause. It was Isaac Newton who, in the 17th century, gave us the classical formulation of gravity that we seem pretty content to live by today: two or more bodies in mutual attraction, bound together in this relationship courtesy the effects of some form of invisible action-at-a-distance.

But the idea of "action-at-a-distance" has its shortcomings –aesthetic, philosophical scientific, you name it – so I would argue that Albert Einstein's early 20th century reformulation has more relevance, here, in considering Joan Kaufman's images. Einstein's General Theory of Relativity proffered the concept that gravity as we experience it is a manifestation of a distortion in the fabric of spacetime caused by the presence of matter. Contextualized within the framework that is an image – arguably, a universe unto its own – it functions well in enabling the profligacy of the aesthetic and the metaphoric within.

Consider, if you will, Kaufman's video loop *Fly In A Jar On A Wire*. A woman we see only from the waist down wearing striped red leggings enters the image from the left walking along a tightrope wire. She moves with evident care back and forth along the section of wire we are privy to see within the image frame. But once she has entered the image itself, our rope walker never again leaves.

And in the video loop *Houdini and the Red Suspenders*, the aforementioned man in khaki green proceeds at attempts to bind himself to the frame of bed on which he sits, anchoring himself to it with a length of red strapping, as an apparent response to the background imagery of a grainy old b&w film short of Houdini freeing himself from a straitjacket while hanging by his heels high over an early 20th century city street repeats itself. Freedom won, yes, but one that is deeply historical and antecedent, while in the same image (and arguably even *because* of the image), a more contemporary microcosm of possible freedom is constrained and denied.

In both instances, the image – and Kaufman’s video loops are extended images – has become gravitational, become metaphorically akin to something like the collapsed star that is a black hole which locally distorts the fabric of spacetime to such a degree that once something enters – even light – it can never leave again. Rather than opening up onto the world, the image, here, has become a universe unto itself, closed off and become an isolate thing.

Gravity, then, is the thetical in these extended images, and to match them Kaufman has provided an antithetical response, framed via a series of still images. Gravitationally bound as we are to this planet that is itself gravitationally bound to a minor sun in an arm of the Milky Way galaxy that is itself gravitationally bound to a black hole light years away in the direction of the constellation Sagittarius (and so on, at an increasingly large cosmological scale), the human condition seems to mandate that we strive mightily against its weighty imperatives and delimitations. In the greater scheme of things it’s all futile, to be sure, but ever optimistic is our defiance based, as most definitely it is, on the scanty evidence of the short-term temporal victories we’ve wrought from the world. From the mythic Greek figures of Icarus and Daedalus fleeing imprisonment on the island Crete via wax and feather wings, to the Voyager 1 spacecraft, some thirty-plus years after being launched poised to become the first human artifact to leave this solar system of ours, we ceaselessly challenge the gravitational imperative.

The mythological former pair actually figure more than metaphorically in Kaufman’s new body of still images, for in the *Wing Series* we are in fact proffered the polar images of two male arms – each stretched out across some highly reflective surface as if fallen or in some way held down – sheathed with a series of cuffs to which adhere a plethora of white feathers. “Hope,” wrote the 19th century American poet Emily Dickinson “is the thing with feathers.”

Indeed. And so in another image the woman in the long flowing dress stretches herself out horizontally across the frame, as if floating suspended in mid-air in utter defiance of gravity’s paradigmatic conventions. It’s all magic, of course, but we will ourselves forward towards such freedom, however illusory it actually is. Who knows, maybe it’s born out of some primal fear of falling we have. Whatever its source, Joan Kaufman’s work aesthetically argues that it is only in the kingdom of images, only in that “certain world” they comprise, that we have even the remotest chance of succeeding.

Gil McElroy
March 2009

ABOUT THE WRITER

Gil McElroy is a poet, artist, critic and independent curator living in Colborne, Ontario with his wife Heather.