

***Joan Kaufman: News from Nowhere***

This is a memory, black on black: years ago on my way to work walking in the early morning winter darkness through the woods of Victoria Park next to downtown Charlottetown, the branches of the leaf-stripped trees filled with thousands of roosting crows waiting for dawn, restless and rustling, stretching their wings, preparing to meet the new light of morning.

Black on red. On a ring of video monitors an intermittent image of a lone black bird soars high in a blood red sky that fills the screen. Density manifests itself as the monitors fill with a motion – black on red – that verges precariously close to the abstract: a tightened shot of birds, a seemingly crazed and chaotic mass in frenetic motion flying every which way in and out of our frame of view. Context then takes hold as the proverbially bigger picture emerges, a view of red sky and black earth in and above which the marvelous occurs: in the vastness of the sky the localized chaos of individual birds in motion gives way to the larger miracle of self-organization as a vast flock of black birds, thousands of them, move about the sky as one, a unified body – a kind of mind, if you will – swelling and boiling and twisting and writhing as a single integrated mass sweeping back and forth across the monitor, over the tiny bit of black landscape we are given to see. And then individuality appears again: the whole becomes particular as single birds encircle us, flying through and between each video monitor in a self-contained loop about us. Flight gives way to an image of a crow raucously cawing (though we hear it not above the soundtrack of the video, we know its cry well and in our minds fill in the aural void) that itself gives way to pairs of birds tightly entwined at the claws, each holding fast to what the other tightly clings to as they descend together in a ballet-like tumble, slowly spiraling down in perfect control through the blood red sky.

This black on red non-memory comprises the video loop that is at the heart of Joan Kaufman's gallery installation *News from Nowhere*, a work which employs a series of interconnected flat-screen monitors to create a ring of kinds of digital cages for the images of these marvelous creatures of movement and motion, containers for the restless, probing intelligence that marks them as makers and users of tools, capable of problem solving. Just like us.

Just like us. In *News from Nowhere* we too are digitally entangled and abated, the gestures and poses of us, *homo faber*, chilled by the lens down to the absolute zero of a series (actually two) of still images, down to the very limit of the symbolic, and the possibilities of metonymy and metaphor. There are miracles of a sort in the imagistic offering here, as well: the magic of a ball – red, mind you – seemingly suspended between the fingers (nails painted red) of a man's hands, or above the bare, exposed chest of a male figure splayed out and prone, arms tugged down by gravity. And there is somatic freedom alluded to within the stillness of some of Kaufman's figured poses. The garment on a male figure, for example, is unzipped at the back revealing the tattoos of a pair of wings – the real of feather and sinew and bone and glorious motion become nothing little than a (rather beautiful) mark etched with ink into his skin. The energy of the all that is possible and potential resides in the feet and shoes of a figure standing at the edge of a

pool of water, then tells of becoming all that is kinetic in the shadow of a figure – arms spread wide, feet together in an almost Christ-like arrangement – suspended and dramatically juxtaposed against the ground of a pool of rippled green water.

In this world of representation, these images all add up to acts – or symbols – of resistance to the tyrannical status quo of the weight of the world, ultimately futile as, in the end, they most certainly are. The ball is held in place by some kind of magic, and it will inevitably fall when the magic inevitably fails. The mark of wings can only symbolize and dream, but never actually be. The potential and the kinetic will always end up canceling one another out. They must.

Knowing all this, still we resist, still we argue against the inevitability of decay and disorder, of the ultimate leveling of all things. We crave the moments of magic in the world. We seek the intoxication of flight, of straying, even, too close to the warming sun, no matter our wax melt, our feathers fall away. Edges are for leaping from, to feel, if for only a moment, the weightlessness of such grace. The water will part before us, will accept and envelope us, no questions asked, no matter that we cannot sustain it.

It bears repeating: we will do all this with the knowing that in the end it'll all have been for nought. We and the world we have struggled so hard to make will all succumb to entropy, to the fact that things must crumble, must fall apart, must decay – that even the universe itself will experience a heat death as the cosmos inevitably winds down to the still, calm absolute equality of zero.

Joan Kaufman's *News from Nowhere*, its still images and its endless loop of busy crows black upon red, grounds itself in the aesthetics of such inevitability, but figures itself in the pure acts of resistance that begin, even, with the unspeakable and awesome magic of life itself.

And then moves on.

Gil McElroy  
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