

Paper Monument
Nr. 1, Fall 2007

JAMES BAE

WHAT WILL THE COMMUNITY THINK?

If confusion is in fact a necessary step in the creative process, a *before* to the *after* of the successful artistic act, then the overwhelming dishabile of Lara Schnitger's Los Angeles studio can first be seen as the ne plus ultra stomping ground of her very particular kind of creativity. The place is littered with objects in every possible relationship to works of art: raw materials, discarded scraps, maquettes, subject matter, reproductions, as well as the incidentals of the process—bits of food, coffee cups, FedEx envelopes, receipts, and cigarette packs (I left one behind myself).



A whole team of art directors and prop stylists couldn't have made a more convincing set for a film about heroic aesthetic entropy. And as a Dutch émigré in Los Angeles, Schnitger is well suited to the role of spiritual tour guide to the city: an outsider, an insider, and neither all at once. Yet accessing her work through the culture of Los Angeles means subscribing to its dominant mythology (Hollywood rules all, black lamé at funerals) and doesn't really place her work in a richer context. I'd rather do the reverse and ask: Can Schnitger's work provide a context for the place?

Though rooted in formalist practices, Schnitger's work has an overtly humanistic set of concerns. The sculptures—anthropomorphic totems with rickety wooden skeletons and sewn fabric skins, often adorned with stenciled mottos—come across as hagiographic panaches of contemporary life (childbirth, sex, death), consecrated to form and conflated with an

LARA SCHNITGER

could be the great-great-grandson of the unnamed gentleman whose portrait is torched in *Gangs of New York*. Pretorius's presentation of contemporary fashion in the self-consciously stiff, academic manner of early American art is an excoriating satire of both the vagaries of fashion and the pretensions of painting.

These themes of history, originality, and technique are given an even more outré treatment in *Self Portrait* (2007), a *grand machine* of sorts that depicts a digitally rendered ape in a disheveled studio painting an academic portrait of a young artist. The elements of the painting, much like those in Courbet's *The Painter's Studio*, serve as an index of Pretorius's concerns and, as in Courbet's work, establish a hierarchy of representation. The ape is taken from Pretorius's son's favorite video game: "He's Donkey Kong's cousin," says Pretorius, "I think his name is Diddy Kong." Diddy Kong is copying a photograph of a male model wearing a gray collared shirt, suspenders, and paint-spattered pants. The photograph, clipped from a fashion spread in a magazine, is collaged onto the center of the canvas and shown resting on a music stand. The painting on the easel is a blown-up and skewed reproduction of the photo, made by the same printer that produces Pretorius's replica backgrounds. The scene is captured in medias res, with the portrait on the easel half-covered with smoothly blended chiaroscuro oils. Diddy Kong himself is painted to emulate the simplified renderings of slightly outmoded computer graphics. The ape's studio evokes a midcentury New York bohemia: a grimy radiator, peeling wallpaper, a tin ceiling, and the edge of a tenement window.

The painting's deliberate garishness, its discordant styles, and its jarringly keyed-up palette, seem like a calculated assault on the culture of connoisseurship in which Pretorius finds himself embedded; it is difficult to imagine auction agents and collectors of Impressionist paintings clucking over the nuances of brushwork in Diddy Kong's fur. Yet if one accepts the extravagant terms of the painting, its allegory is much more sophisticated than the classic painter-as-monkey theme. In fact, it presents a specific and bleak model of the state of painting circa 2007: the artist as a mindless extension of entertainment technology, endlessly aping an alienated model of creativity and existing in a space of simulated historicity. Or, as Pretorius calls it, "some kind of postmodern hell."

1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are taken from conversations between the author and André Pretorius, Spring 2007.

2 Randy Cohen, "The Ethicist: The Art of Faking it," *New York Times*, November 19, 2000.

3 Ibid.

4 "Mike Bidlo talks to Robert Rosenblum," *Artforum*, April 2003.

5 "Haim Steinbach talks to Tim Griffin," *Artforum*, April 2003.

6 Mark Honigsbaum, "The Master Forger," *The Guardian*, December 8, 2005.



utterly human proposition (want, need, desire), sprinkled throughout with choice base words (*fuck, bitch, cunt*). They are often installed in groups and seem to relate to one another. It's not entirely wrong to consider her works, in their chorus, as related subjects in the artist's kinky dramaturgy: characters in a hackneyed porn script or a Dadaist play.

But this description slightly misses the target. Consider the case of the phallic pajama tripod *I Want Kids* (2005) installed next to the darkly sibilant *Grim Boy* (2005), a Reaper-ish figure wearing a cravat made of printed dollar bills: procreation, money, and death make interesting bedfellows, but are they always related concerns? By providing a discrete structure for each set of desires (instead of cluster-fucking them down to one indifferent complex in a moralistic show-and-tell), the artist supplies the sculptures' main means of defense against misreading: individuation. When standing in relation to one another, the pieces communicate in a way that's closer to semaphore than conversation: they're all emitting signals, just not always to one another.

One could speculate endlessly on whether this intention—saving the integrity of the part from the domination of the whole as a way to preserve the self from the smothering effect of society—stems from aesthetic, social, or emotional concerns. The stretch along 4th Street in Los Angeles' Toy District, near Schnitger's studio, yields a more promising starting point for interpretation. Killing time, I watch a young teen dressed in a schoolgirl's tartan uniform skirt and a plasticized camouflage scarf buy a Mexican flag. She is also wearing a tattered tee with the image of Pope Benedictus XVI in benediction, the phrase *Fuck Me till I'm PROSTRATE* emanating from the Holy See in transubstantiated bubbles. Her boyfriend, smoking a cigarette cradled in his lips like a joint, wears a shirt that reads *FREE CHORIZO* with an arrow pointing down to his baggy crotch. Shopping for porn in an urban Babel. I think: They would understand Schnitger's work. They fish for change in their pockets. They barely glance at me—undoubtedly a bourgeois punter—as I walk by.

It is along and around this main drag of Los Angeles' in-serviced maquiladoran hum, littered with the newly rendered detritus of lowbrow commerce, that the fabrics, knickknacks, and baubles



comprising Schnitger's *découpage* are found. Embedded in this cheap pageantry is a lewd form of melancholia, mitigated by the noisy, ongoing symmetry of urban flux; people slip in and out of flumes in the sidewalk like dull coins in an arcade. All cities have hierarchies, and this is the socio-financial nadir of Los Angeles: a vicinity that buttresses Skid Row, officially known as Central City East and largely believed to be the highest-density zone of homelessness in the United States. To be faceless here isn't a matter of choice; nor can it be seen as an act of desire.

When Schnitger's more anthropomorphic works rise in somnambulist longing, they seem to predict the local ethic. The homeless don't really talk around here; they only recite by rote. Disheveled and monosyllabic against a backdrop characterized by some of the most elaborate displays of fashion and language ever seen, they are rendered into a visual coda: penurious singularity. You know exactly what they need. You know exactly what they are denied by want. The difference in communication between the haves and have-nots is a performative one. Two homeless people on the street—you feel uncomfortable calling them a couple—wake on a grating on the sidewalk. She wraps a tartan fabric around him, a green version of the blue one used in *I Want Kids*, as they get up from their nest. One waits when the other stops. There's some relief in the proximity and silence that's exchanged: both the same, if only by judicial loss, circling each other like flightless birds, bound together by an inexorable lapse of adaptation. It's an inward form of congress.

Southern California is surely one of the world's most visually communicative cultures, but it doesn't inspire feelings of empathy. Here is a culture that goes in more for teenage heiresses and celebrity chefs. This is where Angelyne, a copiously breasted, pink vinyl-clad icon of the 80s, still reclines on billboards across Hollywood. She is the exemplary denizen of the geography: Los Angeles's sexual Kracken, an unconscious beast that slumbers with its mouth wide open, swallowing anything that comes along, gaining fame without exegesis, swelling infinitely.



But from what desire, exactly? No one knows for sure what she does, or why she does it. Or as a linguist I knew used to say, "What is the fucking *point*?"

Gaining notoriety is a purely atelic activity: one wants to be famous in order to be famous. Like Kafka's Odradek, the ur-blonde reliquary does no imaginable harm to anyone. Yet, having seen her age so little over the past two decades, "the idea that [s]he is likely to survive me," I confess, "I find almost painful."

As studies in language acquisition have indicated, even a two-year-old child knows the basic intention of shapes. When presented with an image of a *glip*, a dot, or a *glorp*, a figurative blob, he can differentiate between the simple and more complex purposes. If Schnitger's sculptures look at first glance like indifferent examples of generic biomorphic abstraction, made for visual pleasure and billed with glib titles, closer inspection reveals a higher level of determination. Look at the variety of her figures and notice precisely their shapes. The appropriately titled *Lick It* (2005) looks, if viewed closely enough, like a clitoris. *I Want Kids* resembles a birthing statue, the knees of the tripod in mid-bow. Together, the two illustrate the development of identity as a march of progress from immediate carnal wishes to the more complex, second-order desire for reproduction. Like learning a language, understanding art can be a matter of identifying schemata in the mode of a game. Both the make-up of Schnitger's forms and the titles they are subsequently ascribed are governed by the serious rules of child's play. This is an effort by the artist, I suspect, to generate an emotional grammar through her works, as much as it is a strategy to produce an aesthetic effect: the tableaux of life. Though she avoids a signature style, the closest thing to a representative piece in Schnitger's oeuvre is the strangely suggestive *Father sighed, Mother cried, into this terrible world I flyed* (2005). Part *glip*, part *glorp*, its transparent Lycra skin yields a view of the crosshatched scaffolding of the sculpture, one side of which bulges out in apparent mitosis. A sewn slit on the main body of the piece balances a mass of cotton batting on the bulge, which resembles a wad of spermatozoa navigating towards an egg. The Brothers Grimm-ish title itself captivates like the onanistic dread, post-coitus, of a blown rubber.

Between a pointless birth and the grave, the biological impetus represented in Schnitger's work has a tendency to mutate, wending its own curious elocutionary paths. Estranged from its original function, it can warp into the sexual golem of *Fun Bags* (2005), sagging pierced nipples and all, ballasted by or collapsing under the weight of its own desires. Or it could just as well shift geographically, as in *Beijing Bitch* (2003), a towering silk yurt of cultural inaccessibility so named, the artist said, after living there and realizing that "China is a *bitch*." But this attitude is globally coincidental; one can bitch about the details anywhere, depending on the particulars of a given national spirit. In London, *I Want Kids* caused a minor scandal under the suspicion of glorifying pedophilia. Whether the artist had such transgression in mind (*very doubtful*), or a culture's furtive interest in taboos, desublimated into moral outrage, found a target for

release (in a porn-in-your-daily-newspaper England sort of way, *more than probable*), Schnitger's practice is ultimately one that works to desexualize society's fixation with dirty thoughts, as black mirrors reflect an internal construct of a more perverted, cloistered social reality: Who's the sex-crazed bitch *now*, old sport?

After visiting the studio, I showed pictures of Schnitger's sculptures to someone in hopes of benefiting from the insights of a differently wired mind. She called herself a psychologist, a Los Angeles psychologist, and for all practical purposes, I saw her as one: a Los Angeles psychologist from Clearwater, Florida, who drove a Saab. Most of our discussions started by looking at a particular work and ended with talk of sexual politics,



an entryway she would use as a pretext for a candid conversation about her own sexual persona. After a while, the similarity between the psychologist and Schnitger's art was palpable. Watching her strained attempt to maintain a façade of authority was like seeing *Fun Bags* for the first time: a ribald eminence of awaiting holes, sagged paps, and an ill-defined—and strangely sad—biological yearning.

Love's labor soiled.

I finally lost interest in our conversation after she put down her drink and said, after pausing too long, "And then this patient stared silently at me, with a look that asked if I'd ever been *properly* fucked."

A poet manqué.

I was never so turned off. It was like talking about a family trip to Philadelphia in winter.

It was like *death*.

Had she begun to understand Schnitger's work?