

an essay by Doug Ischar

on Elijah Burgher: Friendship as a way
of life b/w I'm seeking the Minotaur

10 / 12
26 / 07
13 / 13



**Elijah Burgher:
Friendship
as a way of life
b/w
I'm seeking
the Minotaur**

Essay by
Doug Ischar

Western Exhibitions

10.26.13 - 12.07.13

Hartley, Demuth, and perhaps a few less well known others. These men – along with other homosexual writers, poets, and photographers – dared do it when it was undoable. And even they often hid their indiscretions from public view, Demuth's wonderful watercolors of pissing sailors appearing only after his death. Elijah Burgher's early work grows (in part, only) from this tenuous tradition. EB's early work was peopled with young nude men performing various ritual acts upon or in concert with each other. Always modest in scale, these drawings laid the groundwork for the mature work in this exhibition wherein the boys spawn men, drop cloths are erect; magic signs proliferate; and decapitated heads loom.

Flags, banners, rugs used by Berbers to partition their tents. Or perhaps the lure of an incipient maze, the promise of a groping bewilderment left virtual, for now. The old promise of a formal garden's diverting confinements – le jardin clos. Nothing panoptic here. The inmates are well aware of being watched and they look back at us, sidelong, with bemused and diminishing interest.



Sick sun, sick sun /acrylic on canvas drop cloth /9 x 6 feet /2013

Still flat but hung now. Once trod on, now traversed by promiscuous eyes. The drop cloths block, direct our progress through the exhibition. They sway in air displaced by passersby. Supple walls, they impede via their allure then welcome via imposition. False walls to which (some) qualities of wall-ness adhere.

Absolutely no Painting here. EB's suspensions have other histories, histories gone down on, fondled, jerked off on. As receptacles and indices of desire, not for Art but for a new kind of living with art. For an art reared differently. This exhibition is an exercise in the embodiment of magic, both in objects derived from ritual acts and those in which magic is indexically embedded.

Meticulously, lovingly drawn magic signs in a post-industrial world where Mechanical Reproducibility no longer looms, charms rather. What to make of this seeming anachronism? The return of the ritual object and not just, but – preceding it – ritual itself. The human body, its products, acts, its coming together with

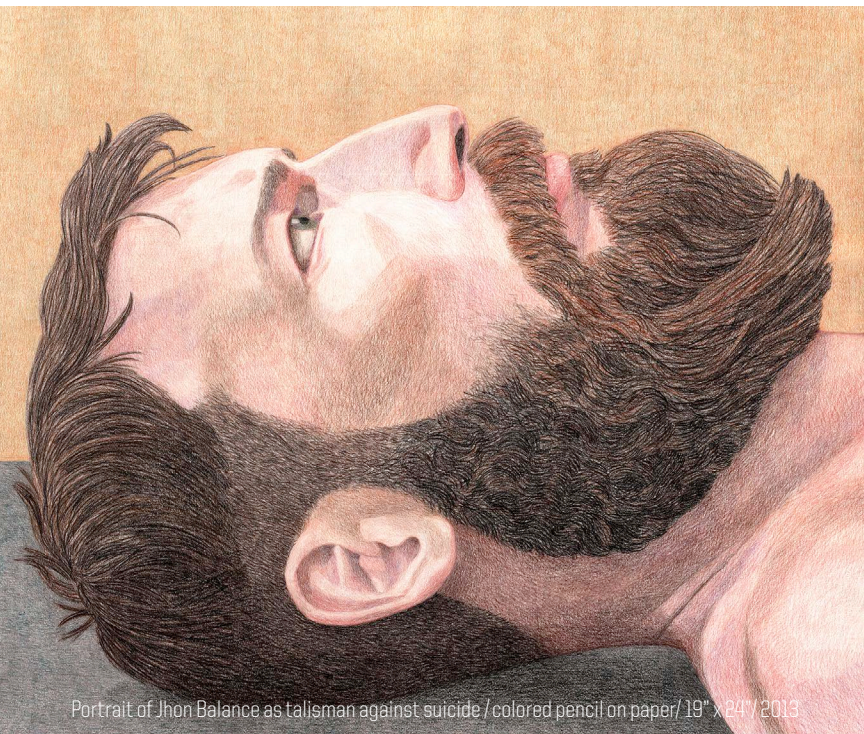
like others. The formalizing of the put-to-use, the vital: a spiritual/erotic playground becomes aesthetic field. What – and how much of – its ritual origins persist? (That old first question put to Art.) Might the object resist aesthetic arrest and revert to active agent of magical acts? Would it like to? Once inside contemporary art, how does it affect its wasted host? A bit of life support? Agent of a faltering recovery? Or rather infector at work in a moribund body, one not waiting to die, dying as I write here. If you are reading this you are there. Where? Like me, louse in the crack of a vain, preening Art (worm holes in a Grünewald: if only).

Once we navigate the swaying walls we meet the real ones hung with works in pencil on paper. The two portraits in this exhibition are both its Greek chorus and protagonists. Their subjects – the “Portrait of a Young Man” by Botticelli and Jhon Balance, lead singer of Coil, severe alcoholic who fell over a bannister and landed dead on his head, sing to each other – and to us – from across four centuries. Their summoning here, to this gallery, to our time, to each other’s

company, is itself a ritual act. Here we meet the artist's a priori loves – partners and fellow travelers from other times – and in doing so join them in a state of incarnation common to every portrait, every iconic aid to remembrance. But – brought together here – they clearly share more than recollected endearment. These two men are surrounded by metaphysical remnants and must 'turn' – as a werewolf turns – in sympathy with them. They turn from wondrous drawings to a kind of miraculously quickened object. The catalyst for this change is a whole history of recuperating the lost beloved: Eurydice looks back again.

The abstract sign as bearer of otherworldly meaning – or worldly meanings of an otherworldly cast – is no stranger to Modernism. The early Russian Futurists produced books filled with drawings either abstract or bordering thereon and this extraordinary work led more or less directly to the constructivist experiments of the Malevich circle (Vitebsk). EB's relation to these distant historical precedents is multiple. Like them, Goncharova, Larionov, et. al., his work

draws on folklore, on those narratives that, having swollen inside history, eventually sunder it from within – e.g. the outsize lore enveloping Aleister Crowley's Occultism and that of the resurgent urban-magical that underpins the carnal hunting, social bonding, and mass cultural refusal of those opting for other (queer) worlds.



Portrait of Jhon Balance as talisman against suicide / colored pencil on paper / 19" x 24" / 2013

In the horny deeps below finding / colored pencil on paper / 17" x 14" / 2013



Why not choose an elsewhere, intuited or not, and intuition swells as one's fellows piss theirs into the long stainless trough of metaphysical imagining. This is not 'escapism' but rather a deep hunch to leave behind the come-ons of a stricken society, one whose philosophical pathologies seem ever more terminal, ever less alluring, despite the lure of the blighted and wasting that every sensitive soul, every reckless adventurer has felt sweetly drawn to.

But this is decidedly not about some sort of Radical Fairy chastity nor fantasy of egalitarian fucking: these are the same guys who get sucked at the Hole, cruise Grindr, smoke weed, drop acid, etc. To be clear, these are not their terminal pleasures. Their erotic/comradely longings are not sated by these ever so typical youngman indulgences. For them, something remains to be sought, to be felt, and perhaps placed at the heart of a new art.

Emotion lies just beneath the surface of this work. It's couched in the ravishing beard of the Jhon Balance portrait and in the punishing

exactness of the Sigils, reminiscent of both Constructivism and Precisionism. In the drop-cloths, a broader brush allows for the more immediate emotional charge of an errant, markerly line. But more importantly, feeling penetrates EB's art via its roots in a social/magical practice in which psychic impacts and outcomes – and their human hosts – are prime motivators. The joining of magic and desire seems almost a no-brainer. What other human emotion so routinely defies logic and reason and what other so often evokes the super-Natural, the mysterious, the inexplicable? Distilling magic from erotic desire – or vice versa – is one of EB's central alchemical feats. Not least so because it's been left dormant for so long, hiding in plain view, awaiting his over due arrival.

EB describes his multiple-sigil works as 'alphabets of desire' and, as such, they arrive just in time. Does not desire – of all flavors – in all its mind-numbing complexity – outdistance most current work done in its name? As for gay art – male queer art – do we need more tasteful nudes or puerile tableau of twinkles playacting in

Nature? We do indeed need a new alphabet, a new language in which to couch our longings and despairs thereof. EB's multiple-Sigil drawings, though Modernist in derivation, afford us access to the artist's exploration of morphing repetition, organic variation, and a kind of ecstatic peroration which contaminates this entire exhibition. Here often, the 'root' Sigil serves as suggestive legend to entire works while also denoting a long-past historical inspiration/derivation. This type of quotation is not about the 'copy' but rather about the discovery, among the innovations of the past, a starting point for a bracing new Art of the moment, our moment.

And this is what is happening in EB's quietly game-changing exhibition. Of course, his work has its distinctive and often breathtaking formal charms. But something much more is going on in – has gone into – this work. And this something more ought to be paid close attention to.

Gone, entirely, is the ironic distancing associated with quotation under Postmodernism. Like John Neff's groundbreaking exhibition

at the Renaissance Society, something new is being inserted here, inserted into a field of practices filled with glib, emotionally arid, 'conceptually' shopworn academic irony. If the work occasionally looks less than masterful it's because the look of mastery – so familiar from the slick, well turned-out crap that fills the galleries – has not been fudged here.

Elijah's present work is massively in progress, a progress that promises, somewhere not too far down the road, work that will breach the canon walls, leaving much of recent vintage looking like the derivative Mannerism it is. But Elijah is a gentle – mostly – invader. Leave it to hot-headed writers like this one to harshen his arrival in an effort to make its force felt fully.

EB's work so often originates in love, love of his human fellows, compassion for their struggles, and most of all, a love of making that imbues the work with an oxymoronic emotional rigor and, needless to say, beauty.



A machine to catch ghosts / acrylic on canvas drop cloth / 9 x 6 feet / 2013

**WESTERN
EXHIBITIONS**

845 W Washington Blvd 2nd Floor
Chicago, IL 60607

T: 312.480.8390

E: scott@westernexhibitions.com