

MARGARET MEEHAN

Hystriotics and the Forgotten Arm



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

OCTOBER 6 - NOVEMBER 12, 2011

AUSTIN, TEXAS

MARGARET MEEHAN
Prying Optics:
an essay in four incongruent
parts with an epilogue

I. PACKAGED FICTIONS, PRETTY PICTURES
Her name was probably Annie, or Elizabeth, or Margaret and she was most likely from New Jersey. She became, under the tutelage of P.T. Barnum (or some cheap imitator), Zalumma Agra, or Zoe Maleke, or Zoerida Luti. This new name, with its bizarre beginning – the omega of our alphabet – was like the call of a myna bird recorded on a phonograph to be played in the parlors of good Christian men and women. She was at once the flight of Orientalist fancy and the picture of originary whiteness. Like the A and the Z folded into the same name, nothing was mutually exclusive for a Circassian Beauty. Here's the common story: plucked from the heart of the Caucasus region which is on the shores of the (ahem) Black Sea or perhaps sold out of bondage from some Turkish harem where she was valued as a mistress amongst slaves – she was haughty, vain, and able to command great prices from prospective husbands. Barnum added to the popular imagination of Circassians by changing their previously plaited dark hair to a “mossy” hairdo teased out with beer, fabricating further stories of seraglios, and providing a tricked-out wardrobe of slinky clothes. In short, the figure of the Circassian Beauty was able to hold disparate pieces of nineteenth century white identities together and to exhaust their meanings.

She made whiteness strange.

Margaret Meehan picks up on these contradictions – fictions packaged to keep culture moving ever forward – histrionics, feelings of empathy, titillation and horror that accompany the display of live human bodies – and pries them open by staging a metaphorical boxing match. Prying being that form of looking that is at once curious and intrusive. A chalk circle marks the path of the combatants. The ring

has four sides (this essay, four parts). Yet we return again and again to the image of the Circassian, the round-faced girl, or to the hypertrichotic with an excess of hair like a werewolf. This second character is the albino pugilist who, being sensitive to light, nevertheless surrounds herself with white ensuring sustained discomfort.

A Warning: there are lots of pretty pictures here, like *The Pugilist* (or other name) but I'd like to remind you that the boxing gloves are lined with glass. You will leave this circle squared with millions of little lacerations covering your hands. Contradiction is not just the heart of the Circassian condition but also yours. You are in the melodramatic mode, nestled between languorous rest and up-and-at'em fighting. Ding Ding.

II. STRANGE

Margaret Meehan's ability to harness historical conceptions of race and the attendant visual evidence (some would sneeringly call her source material of vintage cabinet cards Victorian ephemera) is remarkable. In effect, she joins the ranks of artists like Ellen Gallagher, Layla Ali and Kara Walker by insisting that the history of representing race matters in the current moment – a strike against those who live in the fantasy world that we are post-race.

Meehan pulls out the Circassian as a visual example of whiteness qua whiteness in an effort to “make whiteness strange” – an intellectual project begun by film critic Richard Dyer, who sought to describe the socio-historic outlines of white identity.¹ Dyer does this to counteract the cultural fictions of normalcy that accompany such white identities, and thus makes them seemingly immune to contemporary dialogs.

There is little doubt that nineteenth century racial systems operated differently than the U.S.'s current, largely phenotype-based model



Glass Jaw, 2011. Vintage glass glitter, cords, bulbs, punching bag, paint and chair rail.

where race is determined by how dark or light your skin is perceived to be. In nineteenth century America and Europe these notions were instead bound up in the pseudo-sciences of phrenology and physiognomy – specious branches of the comparative anatomy studies tree. Ulterior motives were cloaked in the “public good” intentions of reason and science. For example, Irish folks were placed in the same racial category as African folks, and not coincidentally, both Irish and Africans served as primary domestic servant populations in the U.S. during the period which saw these pseudo-sciences bloom. Here, racial origin stories were the comforting tales that let those with racial privilege know that all is as it should be. So great was the distance thought to be between whites and their myriad colonized counterparts that one anatomist was so moved to claim that it was easier to “distinguish an African from a Circassian skeleton” than that of an ox from a horse, a panther from a tiger, or a hyena from a dog.

Meehan's group of cabinet cards that make up *The Barnburners* (2009–2011) reflect Linda Frost's analyses in *Never One Nation: Freaks, Savages, and Whiteness in U.S. Popular Culture 1850-1877*. Frost sees the Circassian Beauty as "a kind of minstrel figure" and thus not a transcription of otherness per se, but a reflection of whiteness.² The work of both Meehan and Frost frustrate colonial intentions by pointing out the ways such identities have been deployed to work as the handmaids of privilege. Counter to the more popular narrative of Otherness, which enfold aberration, exception, and freakdom, Circassian women were closer to the white normal in that their visuality and attendant fiction contained racialized mimetics of colonial power (the mossy hair, the slave status, and the mouth-feel of made-up names).

III. AN ECSTATIC TRUTH

Spoiler alert: Werner Herzog's recent film *The Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, that focuses on the 30,000 year old Chauvet Cave paintings, features a non-sequitor post-script focusing on the existence of a group of albino crocodiles apparently mutated by nuclear wastewaters streaming extremely close to the ancient cave paintings. Herzog's mission is to combine incongruent elements – some fabulist, others solemnly factual – to arrive at an "ecstatic truth" about representation and our environment. Ecstasy is an experience of sudden, intense feeling. Truth, of course, is the favorite guise of fiction. Meehan prefers the term histrionic, which has specific gendered connotations stemming from the belief that nineteenth century women who were non-conforming were in fact sick with hysteria – that state of an overabundance of emotion.

Regardless, there are a lot of feelings. But instead of pathologizing, Meehan honors them by inserting them in a support structure for paradox and conflict – the boxing ring. Boxing is the bodily analogue to hysteria. In it

the body that is ravaged by fast and furious fists, so drained of energy, is in fact, still producing dopamine (reward and pleasure juice) just to keep the body moving. The boxer's body is a beat up mass of muscles riding on ecstasy, resting uneasily alongside throbbing, impossible pain.

The boxing ring, a white ground lit by white lights serves as the ideal arena to see blood – the same drips of red that mark the face of the character in Meehan's series of photographs entitled *The Pugilist* (2011).



The Circled Square, detail, 2011. Aluminum, vintage glass glitter and oil stick.

IV. AT NIGHT... LIKE AN OWL...

A short notice on page three of *The Daily Republican Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI) dated Monday, July 31, 1882 discusses:

"A family named Foley, who recently moved from New Jersey, have a veritable curiosity in the person of a 7-year-old son, known as "Jimmie." A more perfect specimen of an albino it would be difficult to find. The lad's hair is as white as snow, as soft as the finest silk, and so long that when arranged in a single braid it will hang several inches below his waist. His eyes are a pale pink, and so affected by the light that in the daytime he derives but small benefit from his sight. At night, however, Jimmie, like an owl, is in his glory. The little odd eyes are then wonderfully bright, and hidden things are often discovered by his

prying optics. Prominent showmen have offered the parents large amounts of money for the privilege of exhibiting Jimmie, but Mr. and Mrs. Foley, although not in the most comfortable circumstances, have invariably declined. The boy has continued to "bleach" since his birth, but his health has been good."

EPILOGUE

In our time together, I hope something messier and more constellated has come surging through: a sense of the world and maybe even a sense of history's strangeness. You've developed, no doubt, a prying gaze – curious and intrusive – and so you are now identified not with the Circassian, the hypertrichotic girl, albino Jimmie or the boxer. Such transference is too easy. Their identities, their public struggles are too opaque for you. Sorry.

You are, instead, the one who paid admission to see Zalumma Agra "The Star of the East" lie about before you; you are the stranger on the subway platform who can't help but stare; and you are the one who revels in the bloodshed. And after the fight you slap your friend on the back, and you tell her:

"That was a real good fight, a barnburner."

Andy Campbell,

Ph.D. candidate in Art History at the University of Texas (Austin) and Senior Lecturer at Texas State University (San Marcos). His current project is entitled *Bound Together* and examines the limits of community and 1970s gay and lesbian leather visual cultures.

¹ Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen 20.4* (Autumn 1988), pp 44–64.

² Linda Frost, *Never One Nation: Freaks, Savages, and Whiteness in U.S. Popular Culture 1850-1877*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, p 84.

MARGARET MEEHAN

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 Women & Their Work, *Hystriotics and the Forgotten Arm*, solo exhibition, Austin, TX
Centraltrak, *Gun & Knife Show*, Dallas, TX
- 2010 Marty Walker Gallery, *Small Sculpture*, Dallas, TX
Marwen, *By Your Powers Combined*, Chicago, IL
Texas State, *New Fables for Our Times*, San Marcos, TX
Modern Ruin, Curated by Thomas Feulmer and Christina Rees. Dallas, TX
- 2009 Fort Worth Contemporary Arts Gallery,
Death of a Propane Salesman, Fort Worth, TX
Road Agent Gallery, *Far From The Maddening Crowd*, Dallas, TX
CADD Art Lab, *Flash: Photography*, Dallas, TX
- 2008 Road Agent Gallery, *On Sugar Mountain. Up Shit Creek*, solo exhibition, Dallas, TX
- 2006 Eastfield College, *Imnocence and Otherness*, solo exhibition, Mesquite, TX
Centraltrak, *Vicious Pink*, Dallas, TX
- 2007 The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, *Pretty Baby*, Fort Worth, TX
Mulcahy Modern, *Mulcahy 2007*, Dallas, TX
Mulcahy Modern, *Introduction: 2007*, Dallas, TX

SELECTED TEACHING

- Current Adjunct Lecturer, University of Texas, Austin, TX
2009 Visiting Lecturer, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO
2006-08 Fulltime Lecturer, University of Texas, Austin, TX

SELECTED RESIDENCIES

- 2009 Bemis, Omaha, NE
2003 Greenwich House Pottery, New York, NY
Millay Colony for the Arts, Austerlitz, NY
2002 Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT

PRODUCTION THANKS TO: Robert Boland *photography*.
Dave Allen *special effects*. Colin Doyle *printing*.
Emma Whelan *photo assistant*. Robert Hamilton *framing*.
Trish Allen-Bentley *seamstress*. Rick Mansfield *foundry*.
Landon O'Brien, Mark Garcia, and Nina Simone *music*.

EXTRA SPECIAL THANKS TO: Amy Revier, The Pugilist, for her patience and exquisite loveliness throughout a long and uncomfortable shoot, Catherine Lee, Chris Campbell, curatorial advisor Risa Puleo and Noah Simblist.

SELECTED LECTURES AND AWARDS

- 2009 The University of Colorado, Boulder, CO
Bemis Artist Residency, Omaha, NE
- 2008 Dozier Travel Grant, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX
- 2007 The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, TX
- 2004 University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA
- 2003 Milton & Sally Avery Arts Foundation Fellow, Millay Colony, Austerlitz, NY

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2010 *Sculpture Magazine*, Charissa Terranova, "Margaret Meehan," Nov 2010
Bad at Sports, Claudine Ise, "By Your Powers Combined," Sept 2010
Art Papers, Erin Starr White, "Modern Ruin," July/August 2010
Might Be Good, Allison Hearst, "Modern Ruin," Feb 2010
- 2009 *Art Lies*, Charissa Terranova, Margaret Meehan: Road Agent Gallery, Issue 61, 2009
The Dallas Morning News, Kriston Capps, "On Sugar Mountain..." January 14, 2009
Art Lies Quarterly. #61, Charissa Terranova, "Margaret Meehan, On Sugar Mountain..." Spring 2009
- 2007 *Glasstire.com*, Stephanie Ball-Piwetz, "Photographing the Truth: Pretty Baby and Family Pictures," April 2007
Artiles Magazine, Charissa Terranova, "Introduction: 2007" Issue #53, Spring 2007
Associated Press, Angela K. Brown, "'Pretty Baby' Probes Images Of Childhood," March 17, 2007
The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, *Pretty Baby Exhibition Catalogue*. Copyright 2007



The Barnburners, detail, 2009-2011. Cabinet cards, gouache, vintage glass glitter, paint and chair rail. Courtesy of Catherine Lee.



Room view of installation:

Rope a Dope, 2011. Velvet, aluminum, poly-fil and thread.

Lacing, 2011. Edition 5 & A/P. Archival inkjet print.

Foreground: *The Circled Square*, 2011. Aluminum, vintage glass glitter and oil stick.

Cover Panel: *The Pugilist*, 2011. Edition of 5 & A/P. Archival inkjet print.



Jab, 2011. Edition of 5 & A/P. Archival inkjet print.

Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 33rd anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,860 artists in 272 visual art exhibitions, 117 music, dance and theater events, 14 film festivals, 23 literary readings and 471 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from

the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 950 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



women and
their work

1710 Lavaca St.
Austin, Texas 78701
(512) 477-1064
info@womenandtheirwork.org
www.womenandtheirwork.org
Mon. - Fri. 10-6 & Sat. 12-5

