

Mehr Licht / Mehr Nicht

The worlds of Jennifer Levonian's new animations evoke a strange familiarity. One feels at home amidst the myriad pedestrian objects so exactly and sensuously depicted while suddenly realizing that this mundane and comfortable reality surrounding us is much more odd, much more uncanny, than what we normally see.

In three new short films, *Her Slip is Showing* and *Buffalo Milk Yogurt*, showing at the Fleisher/Ollman Gallery through June 12, and *Take Your Picture with a Puma*, which just completed a month-long installation at the PMA as part of Adelina Vlas's *Live Cinema: Histories in Motion* exhibition, Levonian explores the subtle unhings, forgotten hopes and unfulfilled desires of her characters amidst richly wrought landscapes. The stories these films tell through cut-paper animation are often funny – during a recent public dialogue between Levonian and Vlas at the PMA the sight of a wonderfully banal animated lawn sprinkler, from *Her Slip is Showing*, was greeted with uproarious laughter – and the moods produced by the original musical scores are often bright. But the comedy, the brightness of tone, along with the richly variegated hues of the watercolor figures with which Levonian constructs her scenes, serve as counterpoint to an almost mournful disquiet. When, in *Her Slip is Showing*, a small bird watches an ant drag a cocktail olive into an anthill and then expands its tail feathers to reveal the text “Goethe's last words: More Light!,” we might do well to recall Milan Kundera's darkly comic quip that these words are merely one graphic mark removed from their opposite.

Perhaps whoever testified to the poet's final articulate breath heard “Mehr Licht” while Goethe actually said “Mehr Nicht.”

Perhaps we would simply rather hear “Mehr Licht,” and the immaculate

attention that these films pay to the prosaic details of our everyday experience – to our brand-obsessed consumerism, to the kitsch that populates our domestic spaces, to the cultural oblivion of party-hungry American tourism, to the forced exuberance and gaiety that often constitutes proper social etiquette – bears witness to the fact that we systematically avoid the more nocturnal side of things. Even if they sometimes go along with all the nonsense taking place on the surface, though, the characters in these films struggle to find a more authentic place in their world and with others while being hemmed in by the narrow sense of life that this surface, this façade, demands. Sometimes the façade breaks down.

Buffalo Milk Yogurt deals most explicitly with this crack in the façade of everyday reality. An initial tone of lassitude and ennui is set by Corey Fogel's musical score, which produces the stylish cacophony of an unpracticed one-man band as the male protagonist tinkers with a piano, a drum set, a cowbell, a shaker, trying to find something to do to fill up the emptiness of his time. It is the middle of the day. He explodes his lunch in a Panasonic microwave (which I recognized from my 1980s childhood, so fine is the attention to detail). He pours himself half a glass of cabernet sauvignon and then, in a perfectly timed why-the-fuck-not moment of reconsideration, fills the glass. This guy is certainly bored, but it remains productively unclear whether he is plagued by the narrow sense of possibility that his world offers or by his own inability to find a place in that world.

The man's trip to the Bread and Circus Gourmet Market gives one a sense of the constrained horizon of possibility in consumer society. Upon arriving, he encounters a naked woman meditating on a bale of hay, surrounded by pumpkins (it is Halloween). We meet her again when the man leaves the store, being tackled, with a suggestion of sexual violence, by a number of police officers while a crowd of cell phone camera-toting shoppers looks voyeuristically on. In the meantime, in the store, the man has lost his mind. Although he initially performs the normal routine that the marketplace expects of him – responding to the free sample “Try Me!” imperative by eating a piece of cheese, struggling to decide between toasted coconut flavored buffalo milk yogurt and, hilariously, mojito flavored pitbull milk yogurt, surveying the display of Best Friend Cereal – the routine soon becomes overwhelming and he suffers an intense agoraphobic vertigo. The cereal falls out of focus and begins to swoon, and the man knocks over the cheese display and washes his hair in the automatic produce sprinklers. When “freedom” means the freedom to choose between flavors of yogurt and “friendship” is the catchword of a marketing strategy, who can blame him? The façade

has broken down, the fabric of prosaic objects has unraveled, and the world has revealed its *Unheimlichkeit*.

What is to be done in an alienating world? What do we do with our utopian dreams of liberation and redemption, like those expressed at a “Take Back the Night” rally during a flashback in *Her Slip is Showing*? This question becomes more perplexing when the film flashes forward again, and we realize that those with whom we shared our dreams and read Lydia Davis and Annie Dillard in smoke-filled cafés have reconciled themselves to suburban comforts and to the bridal shower niceties of thong underwear cookies, Tiffany & Co. cake, and Calphalon cookware. Who are our compatriots if we cannot reconcile ourselves in this way, or if we refuse to do so? We long for something beyond the dominant social codes – those codes of right conduct governing the supermarket of *Buffalo Milk Yogurt*, the bridal shower of *Her Slip is Showing*, and the bakery of *Take Your Picture with a Puma*. But even when we let these codes break down, making playful puma faces at each other like the flirting pair in *Take Your Picture with a Puma*, hoping for something like a genuine encounter, hoping for something to happen, exposing ourselves, the encounter is so often a missed encounter, and we continue to pass each other by ... at the supermarket, at the bridal shower, at the bakery. What do we do with our dreams and desires? Do we give up a sense of narrative through which we might have anticipated an event, resigning ourselves to the truth inscribed, in *Her Slip is Showing*, on the surfaces of grilling burgers and pineapples? “There

is no plot / no story / and no end / There is only habit / and the turning of minutes.”

The grill returns in *Buffalo Milk Yogurt*, where it is the instrument of a different kind of inscription.

Having returned from his agoraphobic fit at the Bread and Circus, the man approaches his “George Fourman Mean Lean Grilling Machine,” opens it, and inserts Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, to be followed by Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. (This might serve as the punchline to the Heideggerian logic of the *unheimlich* employed above.) Pressing down, the man inscribes the covers of these texts with parallel grilling lines that, like a Heideggerian/Derridean X, cross the texts out, branding them with their own negation. What does this negation without negation (one can still read, as it were, between the grilling lines) of philosophical and literary signification signify? Beyond any narrative (or epochal) expectation of definitive historical, political, cultural or erotic fulfillment, two interpretive possibilities present themselves. Perhaps we have entered the terrain of post-historical and post-political economic management, and the man has decided to give up any concern with anything other than the quotidian reality of consumer society. Perhaps his fit of madness has convinced him to abdicate the empty and potentially creative space of his ennui and to fill up his time with more sober and practical concerns in an attempt to resign and reconcile himself to the world as it is. But the intellectual savvy and cultural literacy of these films makes such an interpretation unsatisfying. This grilled negation should instead be seen as a liberating gesture, not *from* intellectual and cultural passion but *for* a passion that steps beyond those giants of the 20th century who all had, at some point, famously or infamously, big hopes for political change.

Beyond these big hopes, beyond the narrative expectation of fulfillment, we might ask about the missing fourth, as Socrates does in the first line of the *Timaeus*. Three giants of 20th century culture are negatively inscribed by the George Four-man grill. Who is missing? We might opt for Lydia Davis or Annie Dillard, whose texts make appearances, in *Her Slip is Showing*, at a far enough remove from the grill to escape its negation. Before settling on an answer, though, and deciding which voices might guide us through our attempts to find a place in our world without resigning ourselves to it, we should recognize that these texts show up in a flashback. Looking forward, I would prefer to say that the space of the missing fourth is meant to be empty, as the space in which we might creatively and collectively explore our desires, our dreams, our politics and our artistic practices. These films are evidence enough that Levonian will be creatively and productively exploring this space for a long time, in the light and in the darkness.

–Jeffrey D. Gower

Image: Jennifer Levonian, still from *Buffalo Milk Yogurt*, 2010, animation, 7:32 minutes, Courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman Gallery

