

The Queer Grotesque: On the Works of Simon Foxall

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The terror faced amid great calamity can, without a doubt, be pacifying. Nevertheless, when one looks at the hyperbole of horrors that characterize our current period (an endless pandemic, fascist resurgences, climate catastrophes, etc.), it is hard not to laugh at the absurdity of it all. We laugh so as not to cry, or perhaps, we laugh in tandem with our tears, as if they are two impulses of the same yolk.

The humor that undergirds Simon Foxall's work shares its source with this same intuitive and primordial laughter roused in moments of terror and solemnity. Amid flames and darkened clouds, Foxall's figures dance with ecstatic jubilation or pose and play under the ghostly visitation of a long-deceased icon. Their deformed and comically exaggerated bodies at once match their foreboding environments and simultaneously subvert any fear of threat through their cheerful disposition and incontestable charm. Foxall skillfully and with deep sensitivity traverses along the tension-wound high wire of our human condition, wrestling for meaning and joy in the face of impermanence and unyielding change.

These figures who dance amongst flames appear to relish in the heat—the flame's lick only energizes their entranced play. A blue sports car blazes behind the ecstatic couple in *Adam and Denise*. A play on Adam and Eve, no less; however, is this now Adam and his second fling? (Or, better yet, Adam and his beard?) Either way, the religious allusion is made only to be fancifully perverted—fig leaves are replaced with shiny-green, strappy thongs and triangle bikini tops, trading modesty for unrepentant flamboyance. One could imagine finding such a scene among the many intricate and innumerable figures in Hieronymus Bosch's deliriously fantastical triptych *Garden of Earthly Delights*. However, here the three stages of mankind, from prelapsarian to the judgment in hell, have all been collapsed into a single frame, a single event—divisions eradicated, the holy becomes profane. There is nothing saintly or sinful, only life with its tragedies and joys rejoicing arm in arm in a dance macabre.

The overall ethos of Foxall's work is that of the carnivalesque spirit—free and released from the laws of officialdom and in celebration of change, transience, and renewal of life (and death). Here Foxall is tapping into a long lineage of comic ritual dating back to antiquity and finding predominance in medieval culture and art, the principal element of which is the grotesque. Characterized by hybridity and fluidity of form, the grotesque subverts rigid binaries, boundaries, and fixed

law in favor of protean bodies that slip past sanctioned decorum, gender roles, or ableist conformity. The nature of the carnivalesque and the grotesque run awfully close to the ideas and culture of queerness, both of which seek to upturn hieratic structures and divisions, degrading such hierarchies through a universalizing laughter. Perhaps it would be apt to say that Foxall is playing in the visual parlance of the Queer Grotesque.

The paradigmatic figure of this topsy-turvy, carnivalesque pathos is the drag queen. Beyond “chicks with dicks,” the drag queen asphyxiates all dualities with spews of cheap hairspray. Foxall's *Amoureuse* serves us a tickled pink blondie with sculpturally coiffed curls and a four o'clock shadow that darkens a chiseled jaw and dimpled chin. Their candy-red lips appear taut with strain as they effort to maintain a rather maniacal smile. In contrast, their seductive green eyes leak delicate tears, careful not to streak the thick black eyeliner and mascaraed lashes. Happy or sad? Such distinctions are sometimes hard to discern. Gingerly clasped between two fingers (of which hand is uncertain) is a large flocculent dandelion pappus, bringing to mind childhood games of will-she-won't-she. If all the seeds are gone in one blow, the one you love will love you back. However, *Amoureuse's* pappus is still intact, a moment pregnant with potential, fickle and transient, brimming with both hope and fear. Thus is the Drag Queen—a singularity containing multitudes.

The thread of fluidity and transmutation runs deep throughout Foxall's work, not only in his imagery but in his practice as well. From Konrad Witz, commedia dell'arte, and Bernardo Strozzi to Tom of Finland and Monty Python, Foxall gleans imagery from across Western art historical canon and culture and metabolizes his quotations into a purely contemporary pictorial language. Finland's idealized and hypersexed studs are amputated, contorted, cartoonish, and their sex diminutive in Foxall's figures. The archetypal image of the cis-male body is here hyperbolized to the point of dislodging the latter's privileged position—opening space for a more universalizing queer aesthetic. The pieces' small and intimate size (no larger than 45 x 55cm) contrast with their expansive vision, compelling the viewer to draw in closer, to become more intimate. This dynamic emphasizes the onlooker's participation in the experience, absorbing them into the parodia sacra of the Queer Grotesque, laughing and crying at the same time.

Simon Foxall's exhibition *Self Portrait as a Thumb in a Storm* is on view at Alchemy Gallery October 20th – November 12th 2022