

Zamudio, Raul, *Never Mind the Bullocks, Here's Abdul Vas*, 2009.

*Never Mind the Bullocks, Here's Abdul Vas.*

Abdul Vas' work reminds us with a visual fierceness of how quotidian culture and art can be transformed into a volatile, revolutionary concoction. His conflation of so-called "low brow" entertainment with his distinct, artistic practice has run the gamut from works that reference Australian mega-rock band AC/DC, to the American major league baseball team Cincinnati Reds, as well as the American porn star Sasha Grey, and other characters that often populate society's margins. The diverse media that Vas deploys, from which his iconography manifests, include large-scale painting, photography, work-on-paper, and installation.

His paintings, for example, are a confluence of aesthetic elements: aggressive, violent, and ostensibly marked by a frenetic handling of pigment, they nonetheless have an elegance to them that creates a formal tension within each work's pictorial space. Vas' art is generally figurative, though he does incorporate a myriad of other elements including text and symbols. In doing so, he charges his creations with an intensity that adds narrative layers subsequently configuring works that are open-ended rather than what at first appearance may be straightforward or singular in their meaning. Observe, for instance, his Cincinnati Reds series. In each of these paintings Vas has depicted a nightmarish rendition of the famed baseball team via what are ostensibly individual players. As a corpus, the single figures collectively constitute a kind of lineup of the demented; a cavalcade of scars; in short, a team from hell. Yet the individual team members are not identified, which leads one to believe that what Vas is depicting is an archetype of the Cincinnati Reds or even baseball in general? Are these gargantuan and threatening ogres some sort of fantasy or nightmare of what has been described historically as America's past time and gift to the world?

Baseball today, however, is so universal that it is played all over the planet and its expertise can be found in geographically disparate areas including the shanties of Puerto Rico to the make shift fields of any Asian country. But by focusing on a specific American team, what is it that Vas is conveying to us? For the way he depicts them are menacing and inundated with a hyper-sexuality that borders on the pornographic. The re-contextualization of the Cincinnati Reds baseball player as some kind of twisted incubus is an example of testosterone gone amok. Looming larger than life and Neanderthal-like, these daunting paintings are within a complicated lineage of figuration from the past 100 years. The diverse and broad trajectory detected goes as far back to the Expressionists, particularly to the work of Emil Nolde.

Emil Nolde, the quintessential Expressionist known for his manic and borderline psychotic pictorial tropes, is formally close to Vas' Cincinnati Reds corpus. Compare, for instance, Nolde's famous *Masks Still Life III* (1911) and anyone of Abdul Vas' paintings from the above series of works. Nolde was the most radical of the so-called Expressionists. His important painting of visages is directly influenced by the tribal sculpture of New Guinea. And the way he depicts them alludes to decapitation and something slightly cannibalistic, and primordially ritualistic. In the case of Abdul Vas, his renditions associated with baseball are similarly powerful; but are nonetheless further complicated by other elements incorporated

into them. Some of these include the morphing of baseball bats into penises with dripping semen, engorged orifices that could be vaginal as well as anal, albeit that they are located frontally rather than from behind? Or, one can find peppered in other paintings scrawls and marks that allude to the Ku Klux Klan, Nazism, fascist dictators, and violence of all sorts, transvestites, and a plethora of symbolism including those associated with Christianity. These works manifest an iconography that is primeval, scatological, corporeal, abject, and deeply unconscious. To complicate matters even more, is that the works are not only made with paint, which in general is acrylic rather than oil, but Vas' pigments are mixed with hand lotion made by the designer Tom Ford as well as Senok tea. While these additives are formally incorporated for texture as an artist may add marble powder to pigment, aesthetic decisions ultimately need to be rethought when such materials engage the image that they create. For example: Robert Morris may use rubber for its formal properties of softness, but when the same material is used by the Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco or the African-American artist Chakia Booker, other narrative elements come into operation beyond the compositional aspects of pliancy, malleability and so forth. The same thing could be said of Vik Muniz and his use of chocolate syrup in his portrait of Sigmund Freud. The viscous quality of the syrup is a concomitant allusion to Freudian anal stage because it looks like liquefied excrement, as it refers to the oral stage in that one can consume the New World confection. If Muniz had used another medium than chocolate syrup, these subtexts become less tenable.

Abdul Vas' use of Senok tea and Tom Ford lotion de-centers his work into a register where constructions of masculinity collide with male stereotypes of baseball and the so-called "metro-sexual." Tom Ford lotion is a cosmetic designed by a gay man for both hetero and homosexual men. And its powers of lubrication are certainly not limited to more conventional applications. Vas' incorporation of lotion, then, complicates his work because of the hyper, twisted virility that is pansexual rather than either gay, straight, bi, or transgendered? The tweaking of genders is one aspect of many that underscores Abdul Vas' art whether it is painting, work-on-paper, photography, or installation. One can see, too, that Vas is also the progeny of Francis Bacon as well. Vas' meditation on the male human figure is more about the social and cultural milieus that construct it; for this is also underscored in his intervened photographs of an isolated figure titled Barry Times (2009).

Shot in black and white and covered with graffiti and other visual interventions, Barry Times has an aesthetic affinity residing somewhere—yet at the same time far afield—between Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, Andres Serrano, and Larry Clark, to name just a few. There is, however, a poetic brutality to Barry Times that bespeaks of the marginalized in empowering ways. The savage honesty in rendering one of society's outcasts underlines Vas' anti-authoritarian aesthetic, if one can articulate it as such, were art is wielded as weapon. It is in this same spirit that his allusion to Sasha Grey amounts to a kind of beautification and reworking of the Book of Revelation's Whore of Babylon. If the Whore of Babylon is the nadir of female sexuality, then Abdul Vas' reification of Sasha Grey amounts to her transubstantiation.

For the prostitute has a rich tradition in religious, secular, and art history; but often she was configured as victim, or predator, or as sexual object of male desire. Rare is the artist who gives her back her agency and subjectivity. The most important artist to do so is, of

course, Edouard Manet and his historically important Olympia (1863). Olympia was such a powerful work that it was publicly derided and ridiculed. Its appearance in the 1865 Paris Salon caused uproar and was condemned as immoral and vulgar. Manet, however, has given the lowly of social characters of late 19th century Paris dignity and self respect: the woman, and the prostitute. Abdul Vas' Sasha Grey (2009) has been altered in specific ways that also questions our own presumptions about prostitution, and our attendant, vindictive self-righteous, bourgeois morality. While in one image we see her jumping in the air in the nude with her genitalia fully exposed, there are elements that have been blocked out by Vas that forces us to look at her with less moralistic undertones. Vas' Sasha Grey is playful, joyful, and maybe even innocent? She is the epitome of an unconstrained, healthy, female sexuality. Through careful editing that tones down the pornographic dimension we so much associate her with, Sasha Grey is now the person that she has always been: someone's daughter, someone's sister, someone's friend and confidante. It is these polar extremes that Vas works in, that is, between the intensity of his Cincinnati Reds series to the endearing and touching renditions of a porno actress that manages to create a sense of pathos that underscores his intelligence as an artist.

Abdul Vas' powerful works in myriad media including painting, work-on-paper, photography and installation are testament to a unique and powerful voice of a new generation of artists. Through a broad purview of sources that he refers to, whether it is the rock band AC/DC and its powerful anthems of youth culture, to baseball, to the (in) famous Sasha Grey, Vas is that rare artist who is unapologetic in the unmediated way he interprets his subject matter. Indeed, in rendering a controversial personality as Sasha Grey, for example, whose Youtube videos include her eating sperm and discussing with nonchalance the different seminal flavors found in each guy she fellates, Abdul Vas is interrogating the morality of each viewer of his work. But in the same way that the Sex Pistols had asked us in 1977 to disregard the controversy swirling around one of the most important bands in the history of popular music, we must also have that same attitude in approaching the work of this important artist.

So, then, ladies and gentlemen, without further ado: Never Mind the Bullocks, Here's Abdul Vas!

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