



Dakota & Jonah McFadzean, "Fleshers", details



Cover: Dakota & Jonah McFadzean, "Fleshers", detail, 76.2 cm x 55.88 cm (x 2), 2011

Dakota and Jonah McFadzean THE DENTIST BROTHERS

February 1- March 7, 2012

ART
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THE DENTIST BROTHERS

The word 'comics' is linked to the idea of comedy. There is little however that is truly comedic in the drawings of the Dentist Brothers - real life brothers Dakota and Jonah McFadzean - whose work here provokes rather than charms us with its impossible and even tragic narratives, puzzling non-sequiters and bewildering dead-ends. What we find here then are personal narratives and iconographies that are as unexpected in their drawn configuration as they are confusing in their climactic conclusions (or lack of conclusion). Various we encounter Aesop's Tortoise and Hare, the 'heroic' cowboy; the artists themselves; a panoply of familiar cartoon characters rendered even more strange by the artists parading alongside humans and humanoids; ghostly apparitions; figures fretting in enclosed spaces; figures fretting in empty spaces; human curiosities (be they genetic mutations, sad old men or blithe young fools); natural plant and animal forms grown horribly awry - all in the context of narrative stories either taking a tangential route or gone horribly awry.

As drawings, what we find here is 'comics' style. As comics, what we find here are more alternative than mainstream. Less about superheroes or cute kids, the McFadzean's imageries have their origins not only in artworld symbolism, abstraction and especially Surrealism, but in the provocative underground comics of the 1960s, made most famously by Robert Crumb. Like his work, the work here similarly deploys a multiplicity of subjects and unique visual styles that challenge not only traditional comics and cartoons storylines and visual methods but the comicbook world status quo.

The work here also wrestles with the personal status quo. This is restless inquisitive work that spins on fear, loneliness and failure; on the problems of subjectivity; on the rational versus the irrational; and on the dichotomy between body and mind as well as body and spirit. While Dakota's work noodles around with the familiar 'a to z' narratives and forms of the comic (such as animation-style panel to panel sequencing), Jonah's work hints at a narrative occurring outside the frame in which the figures depicted are hapless or manipulated players.

Dakota is particularly interested in dismantling not only the history but the visual language of comics. In this regard, we find visual suggestions or hints of well-known mainstream comic figures such as Homer Simpson, slightly reshaped and recontextualized. We can see hints of Mad magazine drawing styles. His work then tugs at the history, iconography and narrative structure of comics, by questioning for example how the passage of time is represented in static work, how the individual panels reside on the page as 'art marks', how individual panels function semantically as sentences in a larger whole 'text,' and so on.

Although traditional comics are filled with words which accompany and give meaning to the images, both Dakota and Jonah largely refuse written text in their individual bodies of work. When we encounter it in Jonah's work, it is as largely unreadable squiggles that function both as whispered thought-utterances or visual texture. His introspective drawings and cartoons are grounded in silence and stillness, giving form to the introspective imaginative fears we have that originate in childhood about nature, the body, death and the underworld. Fraught with worry, his images are sweaty nightmares filled not only with strange, slimy creatures but deeper existential fears prompted by paranoia, negation and failure. Here exteriority (what's out there?) is entangled with and confuses interiority (what's in here?).

It should not be surprising that there is a kind of synergy operating throughout *The Dentist Brothers*. It is especially evident in the collaborative works here where the aesthetics and content intersect literally and figuratively in sympathetic ways. *Fleshers* is a comic jam in which Dakota

and Jonah collaborate on a larger sequence of drawings that emphasize the time-based nature of comics and its often quixotic construction. Every day Dakota scanned and emailed to Jonah a drawing he had made and by nightfall, Jonah responded with his own drawing that extended and complicated the narrative. Here two individual voices are integrated into a single narrative that began without a fixed outcome - somewhat in the manner of the 1920s and 30s Surrealist game known as the 'exquisite corpse' - a visual game that sought to unleash the unconscious mind from the superficial strictures and fixed structures of reality.

And indeed in all of this work the physical laws of the universe simply do not apply: time is flexible, objects are mutable, rational progression devolves into un-natural deviation. Always unfamiliar and uncomfortable, the personal symbols deployed here hint - but only hint - at legibility and meaning. As well, given that the narratives and implied narratives we see here are neither complete nor seamless but rather are incomplete and filled with gaps (much is left out of the narratives), it is the viewer who is required through an act of integration to synthesize the symbol-language as well as the separate panels into some kind of legible whole - into a some kind of sensical sequential pattern or structure in which the internal logic of the comic becomes not more rationally logical but persuasive.

Yet decoding this work - making some kind of sense of it - is not a necessary prerequisite for our appreciation of it. The aesthetic values operating here are substantial from Jonah's delicately watercolored creature portraits that seem plucked out of some heavy metal or medieval bestiary, to Dakota's strangely plastic portraits of deconstructing cartoon faces where the applied Benday dots both hint at the history of comic books as well as declare the difference between comics reproduced and those hand drawn. In all examples contained in this exhibition, we find elegantly succinct line-drawn comics where black engages in a delicate but complex visual dance with white, not only within each panel but across the totality of the page. The sheer visuality of this work regardless of content is another reason to make us smile.

As much Boschian as Bugs Bunny, the complex work in *The Dentist Brothers* is sometimes amusing, sometimes ironic, sometimes disturbing and sometimes poignant; but it is always introspective: it reveals both artists' curiosity about comics and art, the world and the self.

Jack Anderson,

Guest Curator



Dakota & Jonah McFadzean, "Funeral Procession At Grandma's House", Ink on paper, 1.52 m x 1.22 m, 2011