

Dodge



Harry Dodge: MEATY BEATY BIG AND BOUNCY

Curated by Kelly Taxter

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The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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An enormous lark swoops down into a vast desert. The giant bird confronts a tiny little man, a physicist described as “Stephen Hawking without the wheelchair.” Lark and physicist have an absurdist exchange about some missing knives, a wig versus a beard, and infinite beauty; suddenly, “Hawking” pulls a concealed pistol from his pocket and shoots the lark in the chest. A keyhole-shaped bullet wound appears, the landscape visible straight through it, and the lark’s massive wings unfold away from and then back around its body, flapping and folding, flapping and folding until it physically morphs into an infinite plane of hair, body parts, and ooze. The keyhole wound, which is endlessly stretched and then looped, is now a migrating edge of the lark’s formless body; a body out of which the bird-mass seems to seep; or perhaps, into which the body attempts to reconstitute itself.

The scene described above, from Harry Dodge’s most recent video, *THE ASS AND THE LAP DOG* (2013),¹ draws out themes central to the artist’s interdisciplinary practice: transitive states, infinite, simultaneous multiplicities, and the trouble with (or the troubling of) definition. Continental philosophy, stand-up comedy, the politics of representation (what can be, and is “represented”), natural science, and queer theory constitute the spasmodic mix of conventions, influences, and obsessions that inform *MEATY BEATY BIG AND BOUNCY*, an exhibition that, as its title suggests, communicates weighty ideas betwixt and between buoyantly fleshy drawings, sculptures, and videos.²

THE ASS AND THE LAP DOG is comprised of five vignettes. The set-up: a videographer and a sound operator knock on someone’s door; that person answers and says, “Oh, you’re here for the interview,” and the trio take off to a surprise location. Once they arrive, the subject bewilderedly asks:

“You want to know if this reminds me of home?”

The videographer flatly replies, “Yea.”

“No,” he or she states, “this doesn’t remind me of home, but it does remind me of a video I’d like to make. Want to hear it?”

Just as flatly, “No.”

Undeterred, each subject proceeds to speak. Delivered shot by shot, their monologues unfold like a storyboard, loquaciously reveling in setting, character, and prop details. “Tell art department...” “Tell wardrobe...” are directions intermittently given as an aside to a phantom crew. The subjects are male, female, and non-American, from New Zealand, Denmark, Thailand, France, and Great Britain. Thus, words and phrases are frequently mispronounced, mismatched, awkwardly intoned, and emphasized. Thick accents further destabilize animatedly delivered, surreal stories with radically shifting plots. Each place the subjects are taken: a desert-like park, the faux-natural grounds of a condo complex, a construction site, a dark cave, and a taxi, is a “non-place.” The locations are emptied, transitional, interstitial stages between one place and another. In other words, there’s “no place like home” throughout the video, yet that displacement spurs a narrative turn away from reality and toward fantasy, replete with mythical beasts, mass rituals, philosophizing squirrels, and a cartoon Sigmund Freud who gives birth to elves. Our subjects’ refusal to positively respond to the videographer’s queries becomes a fertile gap, allowing that jump from the real to the surreal, a catalyst for the video’s fluidity, wherein protagonist, antagonist, audience, main plot, sub-plot, and script ceaselessly meander, intertwine, and flip around.

Unkillable (2012) is similarly yet more simply constructed. Its sole protagonist—face concealed beneath an ill-fitting, lumpy gray mask—sits on a couch in an unremarkable room. A small yellow- and white-painted cube appears to be lodged into the right side of his head. Immediately, the character begins pitching a film, a sometimes-appalling “text story” rendered in obsessive detail—shots, cuts, audio. He gesticulates often and forcibly, and his gruff voice carries an accent locatable somewhere between the Mid-West and New Jersey.



Unkillable (video still), 2012
Courtesy of the artist and Wallspace, New York

He sets the scene:

We're gonna open with a shot of some really expensive carpet, some really expensive orange carpet. We want to open with it so that everyone will know the people are super-rich, and they have a happy family. Wool carpet. It's wiry. Nubby. But we want to shoot it so you can tell it's a good quality carpet. Really, really good quality carpet. It's a nice carpet, so we just need to be able to see that.³

These first sentences exemplify a narrative device Dodge often employs, allowing him to create moments of pause. The repetition of words and sentence fragments, the frequent cycling back through details, allows a lingering, almost caressing attention on characters whose actions careen toward violent disintegration. This attention perseverates all the more when the characters are literally defaced, bringing an unlikely element of humanness or empathy to moments of oblivion:

His whole head is matted in viscera. It's like a ball of viscera instead of a head—like a bowling ball made of guts. And his eyes are closed. And then we go to an insert shot of his tongue, his mouth suddenly opens up a little bit and we see his perfect little pink tongue. His whole body's mangled up and then his tongue comes out. The only thing that's not crushed, you know, is the inside of his mouth and his tongue, it's perfect. And sweet. And tender. And then it retreats.

While *Unkillable* is told from the perspective of one protagonist as opposed to the five featured in *THE ASS AND THE LAP DOG*, each work is a video in triplicate. There is the video that the audience watches, the video that each protagonist describes, and the visualization of their logorrheic monologues, conjured in the mind's eye of the viewer. Dodge thereby creates a purposefully unstable hierarchy; artist, performers, and viewer are interwoven points of



Autotelia, 2013
Courtesy of the artist and Wallspace, New York

origin and departure in his intricately folded and contoured narratives. The effect is similar to that of the lark, whose massive wings fold in and around itself with so much intensity that it begins to lose definition and yet, in its dissolution, becomes more powerful and complex.

A predilection for fluidity over fixity also pervades the sculptures. Titles such as *Everything Shouts Together* and *Frottage In Dreamtime* (both 2013) connote a cumulative effort with results and experiences that remain inchoate. Both of these artworks have an overall figurative affect, signify solids and liquids, contain hard and soft edges, and have locked as well as flexible appendages. *Everything Shouts Together* juxtaposes two upright wooden limbs embedded in a concrete block. A tidy gray cube rests on one limb and a dingy plank on the other. The plank has a hole bored in its center, through which a goopy, burnt-orange sock protrudes downward, coated in a drippy urethane resin. The sock is at once hollow and tumescent, hard yet dangling. The protrusion reads as an aberration of the whole, a rogue part that escapes geometrical reason. *Frottage In Dreamtime* also involves a set of wooden limbs, but in this piece they point downward. Each is swallowed in a yellow resin “foot,” and an orange five-gallon bucket serves as the joint between the wood pieces. Situated horizontally, a shiny red material spills from the lip, yet it is hardened, its flow arrested mid-air. The notion of the non-binary returns: the red drip signifies a rejection of containment, and presents a (complicated) situation of flux, a renegotiation of the available options.⁴

Twelve additional sculptures populate *MEATY BEATY BIG AND BOUNCY*. Composed of seemingly irreconcilable elements that smash, weave, sink into, emerge from, and ooze towards each other, they display a formal logic dependent upon a faux-organicism, a willingness to believe in their being-ness as opposed to their constructed-ness.⁵ Perhaps this



notion is best encapsulated in *Autotelia* (2013), a black, white, and yellow blob pierced deeply within its amorphous mass by three spears extending skyward. A derivative of the adjective “autotelic,” the artwork’s title describes total disaffection by external forces; all pleasure, purpose, work, and satisfaction are self-motivated and internal.

Various sized drawings on paper, canvas, and board complete this exhibition’s trilogy of media. Stylistically they align with cartooning, yet that light-heartedness belies the complex matrix of ideas they present. Far from codifying the word play and juxtapositions so nimbly executed in the videos and sculptures, the drawings throw a collective monkey wrench into Dodge’s self-assuredness. The artist describes the drawing process as a way to:

Check my thoughts, find imperfections and dissonances, hypocrisies, I try to indict myself, find levity, keep a kind of inner-fascist at bay...When I become obsessed with a thought or an analogy, I try and massage it, look at it more closely with the drawing, you know, tease it up, put a little hairspray on and then hit it with some ice cream. This is a kind of performed irreverence, “Aw take that, punctilio—you won’t get the best of me.” Otherwise I think I might know something. I am avoiding the stasis of certainty.⁶

The drawings evidence an investigatory meandering; between those that are more cartoonish and textually driven (people, animals, human-animal hybrids, ghosts, trolls) on the one hand, and those that are abstract (blobs, holes, and geological formations) on the other. Those lines cross often, but most poignantly in the figure of the ghost. The caption “WITHOUT THIS SHEET I WOULD BE INVISIBLE” floats above a classic, sheeted ghost in *Invisible* (2012). The ghost’s cloak and proclamation transform a negative

into a substantive space, demonstrating how the imperceptible can jump into perceptibility via actions such as naming or encircling. But, as Dodge's drawings suggest throughout, such perceptibility comes at a price: articulation allows for visibility and communication, but can also obscure richness, impede our apprehension of nuances.

Dodge's drawings puzzle through this space between presence and absence, the named and the undefined, investigating the contours of that which defies categorization—what may not be visible or valued, but is present nevertheless, often hovering at the threshold of what can be seen. A threshold, like an edge, is both within and without, a rim over which contents spill, a fissure out of which the interior seeps, a boundary (of nature, the body, the mind) whose limits are pushed, tested, and potentially transgressed. The lark's wings flap and fold into and out of the keyhole wound. It collapses in on itself until the "self" multiplies beyond recognition, transforms into an infinitely complex field of matter. The edge of the lark's body is like the gap produced by the subjects' refusal to recognize "home," the director's tenderest perseverations in *Unkillable*, the elements of flux and flow in the sculptures. Each is a transitive zone that Dodge beckons the viewer into—an indeterminate space that allows us, for however long we can bear it, to be more than the sum of our parts.

Kelly Taxter, curator



Invisible, 2012
Courtesy of the artist and Wallspace, New York



1 Harry Dodge, *THE ASS AND THE LAP DOG*, 2013, video, color, sound, TRT: 33 minutes.
Performers: Sean Grattan, Malene Dam, Ekkaphob Sumsiripong, Mélodie Mousset, and Danielle Dean.

2 Two formative, revelatory encounters with very different types of art propelled Harry Dodge towards the ideas that circulate throughout this exhibition. The first was with a red Plexiglas box at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1974, when Dodge was a child; the second was his connection, years later, to Kiki Gallery, open briefly between 1993–5 in San Francisco and founded and directed by the late Rick Jacobsen (1961–97). Dodge cannot remember the name of the artist or the context of the red Plexiglas box; the potency of the experience lay in his realization that art could be both funny and severe, was not beholden to representation or technical virtuosity, and, in its indeterminacy, could even be a little obnoxious. In 1993, he saw a group show called *Sick Joke* at Kiki. The exhibition probed the unlikely (and taboo) potential for humor in the face of AIDS, and the agency those jokes might provide queer communities to transform the personal experience and public perception of the disease. Dodge was compelled by the possibilities of combining humor and tragedy, and how the tenor of each fluctuates whether on the “inside” or the “outside” of the joke; whether or not the joke is *about* you and your community or *from* you and your community.

3 From Harry Dodge, *Unkillable*, 2012, video, color, sound, TRT: 20 minutes. Performer: Harry Dodge.

4 The video *THE ASS AND THE LAP DOG* derives its title from Aesop’s fable of the same name. The fable tells the story of an ass (donkey) who yearns for the same doting attention his master pays to the dog. To that end, the ass sneaks into his master’s house and begins to act like a dog, licking his master’s face and frolicking around. Sadly, this doesn’t lead to more love, but rather a beating. The fable ends solemnly, “It is best to be contented with one’s lot.” One can glean from the video’s vignettes and these sculptural “renegotiations” that Dodge poses a challenge to the fable’s moral. The artist insists on willful, anti-authoritarian transformation, regardless of whether or not that change is easily effected or readily supported by mainstream culture.

5 The notion of multiplicity is a key concept for Dodge, one that finds grounding in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*. Throughout that faceted work, an imagination and examination of various types of “becoming” factors importantly into their elaboration on the rhizome. The “being-ness” of Dodge’s sculptures, their refusal to remain binary, the flux that they imply, calls to mind passages from the text that, in an almost fantastical manner, ruminate on multiplicity and fluidity. Discussing the duality between orchids and wasps, the latter being outlined on the body of and the pollinator of the former, they write:

“At the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp. Each of these becomings brings about the deterritorialization of one term and the reterritorialization of the other; the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization ever further. There is neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying.” Deleuze, Guattari, trans. Brian Massumi, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 10.

Here, the orchid and wasp form a third being, which depends upon yet flies away from the two. Dodge’s sculptures similarly construct juxtapositions and dialectics that tease out a third way, or contain within themselves multiple propositions.

6 H. Dodge, personal communication with the author, January 18, 2013.

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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THE ASS AND THE LAP DOG (Video stills featuring Sean Grattan), 2013
Courtesy of the artist and Wallspace, New York



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