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ARTFORUM

Harry Dodge

WALLSPACE



Harry Dodge, *Fred Can Never Be Called Bald*, 2011, still from a color video, 39 minutes 56 seconds.

Intro to Logic, freshman year, college. I recall these sentences on the blackboard: “God is love. Love is blind. Stevie Wonder is blind. Therefore Stevie Wonder is God.” The example was given as the epitome of *fallacy*, illustrating, that is, a breach of reason while appearing to maintain reason’s very form. Such sleights of hand, we learned, are identified easily enough yet are surprisingly pervasive (and persuasive). While nonsensical, they can be steeped in such emotional or affective content that their inaccuracy goes unnoticed or, more to the point, feels inherently correct despite obvious evidence to the contrary.

Harry Dodge’s nearly forty-minute video *Fred Can Never Be Called Bald* (all works cited, 2011)—appearing in “Frowntown,” his first solo outing at this gallery—would seem to follow the illogic of fallacy. Somewhere near the halfway mark of the work, the following language appears: “Fred isn’t bald now. If he loses one hair, that won’t make him go from not bald to bald either. If he loses one more hair after that, then this one loss, also doesn’t make him go from not bald to bald. Therefore, no matter how much hair he loses he can never be called bald.” It’s a strangely comic non sequitur, housed within the body of an otherwise darkly cacophonous video, whose content is largely found footage culled from YouTube. To describe its parts is to do a disservice to its whole, since viewers (this viewer at least) are lulled into a kind of eerie trance as the work unfolds. Here are so many *Jackass*-type shenanigans, enacted mostly by tribes of frenetic young white men: They light themselves on fire, asphyxiate themselves (or others) to the point of passing out, or perform daredevil acrobatics. In almost all cases—and in those clips that provoke anxieties and upset of other kinds, such as one showing a freak hailstorm in which baseball-size globes crash like meteors into a home swimming pool or another depicting an elephant falling to its knees—there is more than a hint of real peril, of the near-death encounter becoming death itself.

Yet these scenes of stupidity and mayhem come to feel incredibly precarious and unexpectedly moving. The brashly mindless participants, nudged into detailing an odd typology of sorts, appear, in their shared terrain, as though they are pursuing something beyond their immediate circumstances and beyond, too, the immediate thrills they seek. One after the next, they are like lemurs throwing themselves off a cliff, slaves not only to their desires but to some relentless pull of biology or spirit or *something*. Throughout the piece, various words—*latent*, *sublimation*, *continuum*, *transubstantiation*, *conversion*, *infinite*, *transitive*, *digital*, *compression*, and so on—and their dictionary definitions appear on-screen, all describing changes in states of being or the orientation of things. A computer voice-over coolly delivers some of this information, too, and the metaphoric implications of, say, the difference between a *continuum* and the *discrete* are weirdly rendered all the more palpable. Near the end of *Fred Can Never Be Called Bald*, there is a shot of a total eclipse of the sun, and then a scene of the artist's brother crying at the foot of his mother's deathbed at a hospice. The sequence is clichéd, but clichéd in the sense of that word's earliest etymology: ringing with a known sound, though without reducing its effects.

Dodge's show included, as well, drawings (abject, but also often quite delicate), sculpture (violent collusions that also often approximate embraces between everyday objects), and two additional videos. The first, *Ipsc Dixit*, uses lo-fi effects to deliver an end-of-the-world message; the second, *Unkillable*, features the artist clad in a pallid clown mask reading out loud the shot list for a film about lives (and life) coming undone. The entire assembly of work in "Frowntown" generated a pathos perhaps better described as a scent—pungent, almost pleasant, yet without question that of decay: a state of being like no other, where internal contradictions constitute rather than undo.

—Johanna Burton