

Gerry Snyder's Destabilising Affirmations:

Challenging Authoritarianism through Rapturous Identities

By Mark Behr



I first saw Gerry Snyder's paintings during the summer of 2006 in a small, oddly lit space in Santa Fe New Mexico's Center for Contemporary Arts. On Friday evenings hundreds – at times thousands of people – attend new exhibitions in many of the town's more than two hundred galleries. Nothing seen in scores of Santa Fe openings that year affected me as much as the images in the Snyder exhibition. None of my initial fascination has dimmed.

There is something in the paintings and sketches that achieves both destabilization and an odd sense of affirmation. Like other work with echoes of the surrealist tradition, many of the scenes may be read as narrative: vast, dreamlike landscapes contain beings of indefinable identity. These figures – altering, diverse and suggestive of constant motion – simultaneously

repel and attract the viewer as the viewer inevitably sees in the anthropomorphous presence something almost too profound of and about the self.

Paradoxically, what disturbs us in this work is also what affirms: The concepts and images through which we read and explain ourselves in the world are here displayed as presumptuous norms; regulatory regimes we unquestioningly abide by but always (and secretly to our relief) fail to live up to. Despite shared characteristics, each figure is thoroughly alterior, their forms suggestive of constant flux. From this, Snyder's work raises the most dreaded questions: who am I, why am I thus, what else may I be? The work brings to mind philosophical and artistic work as diverse as that of Adrienne Rich, Frantz Fanon, Judith Butler, J.M Coetzee, Freud, Noam Chomsky, Jacques Derrida and Karl Marx.

Seeing ourselves in these multifarious and transforming figures helps us towards a recognition of the contingent and relational in politics, history, culture, class, race, gender, psychology and language. While many of these pieces do not engage a specific historical context, a number of the titles and much of the content insists on being viewed in relation to and against the grain of contemporary history and popular culture. What else can one do with a title like *Intelligent Design Kansas*? During a time that the USA deals with a plethora of heterosexist legislation a recent painting re-engages and re-reads the biblical story

of Sodom and Gomorrah. Other pieces contain the recognizable features of Carl Rove and George W. Bush – but even these figures are painted in a state of reconfiguration, altering or with at least the potentiality of constant and expansive transformation. The artist insists on the liberatory potential inherent in the undoing of an authoritarian prescription of a singular and coherent self (a self-deceptive myth, in fact) in favour of multiplicity and fluidity.

Our culture's notions of set identities are governed by narratives adhered to in practice through a series of (frequently unconscious) repetitions. Born into a world of pre-existing language, symbolism and signification which we rarely self-consciously contemplate, we are given to taking on – making – identities through and according to that which we know to be accepted and/or given. In truth, we achieve our subjectivity through the (near) constant repetition of a vast body of prescribed gestures ranging from the way we eat and dress and have sex to the ways we do language. However, through this repetition (think of the repetition as the longer line of an electrocardiogram) there frequently pushes awareness (the little blip in the ECG) that reminds us of the actual discontinuity, the impossibility of getting it right. Rushing through the fissures of our repetition, these blips serve to remind us of infinity beyond, below, inside and around the ways we perform the mythologies of self. This recognition is terrifying and must, to our minds, be contained: the possibility that we are infinitely more Other than we perform being is felt as too frightening, too distressing to contemplate – let alone to allow free play. After all, what will be left of this 'I'?



Still, despite our terror, the psyche's blips have their appeal: transmogrification within a vaster landscape – off the boundaries of any map – holds out the promise of staggering personal and social release. What extraordinary relief may there be in freeing that imagination, being some of the Other that constitute the I? And, unless I am delusional, there must be others who recognize this of the psyche's infinity?

When I first saw the Snyder paintings in Santa Fe it was amidst a constant coming and going of others. Listening to comments, overhearing the bemusement and intrigue, whispered ambivalences, in one instance: 'Imagine having this grotesquery in your own house'; and the quiet admiration from many, gave away as much as looking at the pictures. The images do not only provoke the viewer, they may also germinate the psycho-dynamic appeal of resistance to governing myths and widen the openings that lead from resistance to renewal, both in the self and in our wider world once these ruptures are garnered as social engagement. From the joyful recognition of our failure to live up to the undefined and changing ideal comes rejuvenation and multiplicity instead of the neuroses so symptomatic of authoritarianism.

Snyder's figures threaten to release us from fear of things we know nothing of into the realm of symbolic possibility, reminding us of the infinity of imagination and the raptures of identities allowed freer play.