

# PAINTING BITTEN BY A MAN

**Andrew Suggs**

2 I have found myself imagining and re-imagining that moment in 1961 when Jasper Johns forced his open mouth against the surface of an encaustic painting I like to think he had been obsessing over, and took a slow, meaty bite. I don't know if he was alone, what the room smelled like, or what he was thinking—or of whom. But I allow my imagination to wander. Johns and many of his contemporaries, coming of age in the decades preceding the Stonewall riots and in the wake of Kinsey's famous report on male sexuality, walked a tightrope navigating the disclosure of their queerness or homosexuality, what Michèle C. Cone has called, in Johns' case, a "strategy of simultaneous concealment and display."<sup>1</sup> [It's telling that until very recently Johns held this particular painting in his personal collection, and it was rarely viewed.] The re-imagining of history relies in large part on rumor and gossip: that which cannot be confirmed nor denied and finds its liminal place whispered in back rooms. It also requires one to let the imagination take the reigns. It's a familiar way of being for queers.



JONATHAN VANDYKE

*OBSTRUCTED VIEW*, 2011-12

DURATIONAL PERFORMANCE FOR TWO MEN AND INSTALLATION WITH THREE SCULPTURES

PERFORMED BY TYLER GLEDHILL AND FRANCISCO-FERNANDO GONZALES

AS PART OF *COMING AFTER*, THE POWER PLANT, TORONTO



BRIAN KOKOSKA  
FWB, 2010  
OIL ON CANVAS  
24 X 20 INCHES

Contemporary artists continue to be fascinated by and draw upon their histories, as they invoke coded lexicons and investigate and reinvent both public and private "stories." But in our *Glee*-ed-out moment of acceptance, when legal gay marriage seems just at the edge of the horizon and AIDS is not seen by many Americans as the crisis it once was, what might queer art look like?, and for whom and to what does it aspire?

Brian Kokoska and Jonathan VanDyke propose two different approaches to negotiating these questions. VanDyke, who calls himself a

painter, uses nearly every other medium to push and pull painting's modernist history, particularly macho erotic undertones; while Kokoska chooses the very traditional slathering of oil on canvas to make undulating, queer portraits of the psyche, incorporating history like an invisible but active subconscious. Both conflate painted images and performing bodies, as they tease a deep-seated sexual urge from abstraction. Although their methods are different, VanDyke and Kokoska both work to turn the heroic male painter on his head to their own ends. VanDyke reminds us that AbEx was once in danger of being written off as mere "decoration," while Kokoska forces us, through his juxtapositions, to see the erotic in even the most abstract. These two pull the sex from the drips and dollops, but their aim is not total reveal.

In both bodies of work concealment is an important device: masks and coverings are a consistent theme, in the form of burlap hoods and black rubber coverings on VanDyke's dripping sculptures, and in leather S/M masks and colorful pancake made-up faces for Kokoska's characters. In VanDyke's *Cordoned Area*, composed for and performed on the opening night of this exhibition by David Rafael Botana and Bradley Teal Ellis, the two male dancers who are also a couple moved more-or-less seamlessly between caresses and violent interactions as they wrestled their way over a canvas, recreating a Pollock-esque smear on the floor with paint dripping from their bodies, turning Pollock's romantic dripping ritual into a seedy

club dance, a lovers' quarrel, a night of fucking. *Cordoned Area* also conceals itself, though. The dancers become covered in the increasingly muddy paint and by the end their camouflaged bodies melt back into the horizontal picture plane (and then disappear leaving only the stained canvas).

4 VanDyke's dripping sculptural objects mimic silent but active bodies as they ooze multi-colored paint either onto the gallery floor or within their inner workings. They are wounded (bleeding saints) or in a state of sexual release (coming or emitting an unspecific discharge); maybe this confusion is where the beauty lies after all. The slowly dripping fluid seems at once dangerous, destructive, and startlingly romantic—aesthetically enrapturing, in all its randomness and free-flow. The skeletons of these bodies mimic traditional furniture forms in their patterning and repetitive woven forms. But these sculptures seem to assert that what is hidden cannot remain so; it will come flowing out of its own volition. And so the queer sensibility is expanded upon. Ecstatic bodies perform and are seen, they disrupt and insert—pleasure all around. As VanDyke says, he's invested in "performing one's identity in a way that is not 'pure' or even consistent, discovering the full palette of desire."<sup>2</sup>



JONATHAN VANDYKE  
*ASYMMETRICAL RELATIONSHIP* [DETAIL], 2009  
CEDAR, WOVEN SHAKER TAPE, CAST PLASTIC, PAINT  
68 1/2 x 83 x 5 1/2 INCHES



Frank Stella:  
*Ossippe I*. 1966. Fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paint on canvas. 95" x 138". Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Ernest Kal

LEFT, BELOW. Frank Stella:  
*Valparaiso (flesh and green)*. 1964. Metallic paint on canvas. 84" x 144". Collection of the artist.

ABOVE. Frank Stella:  
*Ossippe I*. 1966. Fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paint on canvas. 95" x 138". Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Ernest Kal

JONATHAN VANDYKE  
*FLESH AND GREEN (EQUIVALENT) [DETAIL]*, 2009  
 ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT, ED. 5  
 40 x 28 1/2 INCHES

In his *Equivalent*s series, VanDyke inserts images of guys at play (those found internet gems that belie their frat shenanigan origins as decidedly homosocial, if not sexual) over photocopies of art history textbooks showing “masterpieces” by men artists, Pollock, Stella and the like, underscoring a sense of erotic longing. VanDyke says, “I was in a fraternity in college, so this type of photograph of the ‘guys gone wild’ genre was familiar to me from firsthand experience. While I was in college I was also in the library late on many a night, poring over art books and looking for a reflection of my own unrealized fantasies.”<sup>3</sup> These unrealized fantasies lie somewhere among the detritus of the past—imagined moments of homoeroticism that might be found anywhere for those willing to search.

Kokoska’s pictures are often readable as sex acts or as objects of desire, but the child-like finger-painting aesthetic he brings into play (as well as the aforementioned masking) saves his figures from being the victims of an easy voyeurism. Instead, we are in a psychic space, a totally imagined utopia of whips and chains, flowers and hippy rainbow crystals. Alongside his more figurative works, though, Kokoska shows pieces where figures are abstracted almost to pure brush stroke. In his moving between the two, Kokoska proposes that small hints are often enough and as important as a recognizable body or may easily stand in. After all, his world is totally malleable and imaginary. He clearly borrows from art history, but pornography, memories of private encounters, and even



BRIAN KOKOSKA  
*PAPI*, 2012  
 CLAY, WOOD, PAINT, HAIR, LEATHER  
 10 x 5 x 4 1/2 INCHES



BRIAN KOKOSKA  
*GIMPHEAD*, 2010  
 OIL ON CANVAS  
 50 x 52 INCHES

beautifully colored moments of pure aesthetic pleasure are all balanced out here.

Kokoska's cast of characters touch, suck, finger and lick, but they're of no particular time or place. And why so erotic? Kokoska's paintings, in fact, are rarely truly "explicit." *Twoface*, for instance, taken on its own, may seem innocuous enough. As in all of his work, though, Kokoska's own hand (and his body) are readily visible. One can almost see him rubbing around the surface of the canvas searching for what lies beneath. And upon closer inspection, *Twoface* is caressing himself, and his head begins to look strangely like a torso, or (why not?), a penis. The goofy eyes and mouth applied over top are there only to fool us momentarily.

Kokoska's small sculptural works in the exhibition function as totems or talismans, objects from some indigenous tribe. In addition to classical materials like clay and paint, he also throws in braided hair, fur, eyelashes—small trinkets that a scavenger has assembled to conjure up souls from the past. Again, though, what time is this, and what place? Kokoska offers only mysticism worn down to its basic function. The only place to go is on a fantasy trip.

One thing these artists' works share is that they occupy an in-between-space where concealment and display happen simultaneously, teasing out meaning but denying any easy palatability. This may be the political imperative of what initially seem like fairly quiet practices. They are not interested in full disclosure (or "outing"), but a place where "meaning" really does lie far beneath the surface, perhaps too far to touch. I find this appealing because



BRIAN KOKOSKA  
*TWOFACE*, 2011  
OIL ON CANVAS  
20 X 16 INCHES

it allows us a space for deviance; fantasizing about hidden histories and marginalized stories might be one way complex emotions are transferred from one generation to another. If we understand disclosure as uncovering, as revelation, then these artists pervert the act through their bodies of work. Instead, things here are re-covered, not to elucidate but to imagine a way forward.

1. Cone, "An Allegory of Sublimation," [artnet.com](http://artnet.com), 16 Feb 2007
2. In an email to the author
3. Quoted in Joseph R. Wolin, "Drip by Drip: Jonathan VanDyke," *Modern Painters*, April 2009: 36