Nostalgia for the Present

Recent Work of D. Dominick Lombardi at Artlexis in New York

by Stanford Kay

D. Dominick Lombardi’s recent show at Artlexis in Brooklyn, Toyota vs. Godzilla, is a bit of a departure. After ten years of working on the Post Apocalyptic Tattoo series in which our deformed descendents inhabit a world where physical beauty is in the eye of the beholder, even if the eye is not quite lodged in the skull as it should be. These future denizens carry on bravely in their severely damaged world and their tattoo portraits are how we come to know them. This conception of a possible future has propelled Lombardi to create hundreds of graphics, drawings, sculptures, and paintings on both canvas and Plexiglas.

The new collection of works consists of eight small paintings on canvas, two Giclée digital prints and three Urchin sculptures that are the more evolved offspring (artistically) of his signature Beachcomber character, a horribly deformed but recognizably human figure who has found his form in both paintings and sculptures. The urchins are much cuter and are made of a sand and polymer mixture over an armature of plastic toys and post-industrial flotsam, some of which is actually culled from beaches. The plastic objects emerge proudly from the back of the figures. Possibly the hardiwork of future beachgoers, these sand sculptures seem to be a nostalgic reference to a past where children were merely orphaned by the unraveling of our world and genetic mutation had yet to manifest itself in the population. These figures are adorable and crafted lovingly. Set on low white pedestals and each standing on a flea market tome, like Fun with String or similar books for children, they are both creepy and endearing. The book bases add another level both figuratively and literally to each work.

The new paintings are also a step forward. In this iteration, his paintings are contemporary scenes tattooed with the future. The underpaintings reflect Lombardi’s recent trip to Japan and Korea and the night scenes of noodle shops and street life are softly rendered in acrylic washes and then emblazoned with a hard-edged tattoo image. The contrast is welcome and enlivening. The contemporary Japanese urban landscape gives Lombardi a healthy perspective on his own time. This pre-Blade Runner world grounds us in the present and the tattoos place us in his imagined future, looking back at this merely out-of-balance society. There is compassion in these works as in much of what Lombardi does. The soft palette of both these paintings and the prints convey the sensitivity of the man. These are not harsh indictments, but nostalgic reflections on the dysfunctional present, which is not nearly as grotesque as he imagines the future is going to be.
uninflected hues and a part in larger narrative. Replete with monarchs, aggressors and victims, a band of heroes, and the unseen creator of a fallen world, Lombardi echoes the myth-making impulse that has been a perennial in comic books and video games.

In this eleven year survey of The Post-Apocalyptic Tattoo, we get a sense of Lombardi’s playful and harrowing feelings for his world and its inhabitants. In paintings, drawings, and free-standing sculptures and reliefs, he continues to explore a place that exists as an imaginal construct, and an ever-expansible portmanteau for the artist’s obsessions.

One of these obsessions is graphic: the unending pleasure in creating images that boldly exist in time and space, and assert the artist’s own presence as ringmaster of the abject and the comic. Lombardi’s line is clear but bulging, organic but stylized, perfect for short-hand representation of guts and brains. The tattoo is another graphic touchstone, echoing the traditional art of many cultures, that translates a wall of small faces into an array of abstract signs that hang in space like the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland. In a series of Graffoos, tattoo-like patterns spread like a psychedelic virus over older and newer

Post-Apocalyptic Tattoo:
D. Dominick Lombardi’s Dark Vision

Burt Chernow Galleries, Housatonic Museum of Art,
Bridgeport CT

by John Mendelsohn

D. Dominick Lombardi paints a damaged world. The fact that this world is a fictive invention makes it nonetheless ruined. Mutant beings, melted, twisted and hydrocephalic, populate this domain. Dominated by flat, slightly retro colors, painted in reverse behind lightly sanded plexiglass, Lombardi’s world is a place where identity is everything: who you are is defined by your personal damage and the role it creates for you in a network of relationships.

If this sounds like our world, it is because Lombardi’s art is a grotesque vision of not only the post-apocalyptic, but a satire and an embrace of impairment and survival. In style, his creatures are genetic cousins to comic book characters, with black outlines,
D. Dominick Lombardi, Tumor Heaven, 2001, reverse painted acrylic on Plexiglas, 10 x 8" paintings by Lombardi, which range from abstract images to landscapes.

A second obsession throughout this large exhibition is the desire to create avatars, characters who live out a role, fulfilling the maxim "damage is destiny", and yet often have an independent, spirited presence. There is Pre-Raphaelite Preemie, mostly head, unable to move, a witness and a seer, "finding heaven in hell." There are The Elite Eight, a circle of misfits, the super anti-heroes, including Exotic Dancer with Tumor, dragging her blackened foot in the moonlight, Tumor Heaven, the exotic, nearly featureless "gateway to colorful bliss", and Death of a Clown, the deceptive flower power trickster. And there are the lovers, the melting Blue Boy with his spilling innards and Twister, a sexy snail of a girl.

Other notables include Johnny-Two Heads, "a misogynistic gossip hound" whose skill is to create shrunken heads, both as trophies and remembrances of individuals. The paintings of these heads are among Lombardi's strongest work here, almost abstract, coloristically complex and resonating with the work of biomorphic surrealists like Miró.

There are a raft of other characters both named, like Super Man/Boy Surfer, an elusive traveling legend, and anonymous, like the barely human Fragments, "victims of aggressions." The descriptions of these avatars come from the comic book-style catalogue that Lombardi produced with writer Carol Kino, which is an essential guide to the entire project.

Lombardi often realizes his creations in a number of different mediums. In the exhibition is a small selection of deft tonal charcoal drawings of a number of characters, including Kitten, a lovable but dangerous feline, and the creepy, impulsive Hercules and his trusted advisor Digitus.

The wall sculptures, created in mixed media, are made to resemble plaster. In high relief, some of these pieces are dimensional versions of recognizable characters, reminiscent of those found on the facades of retail outlets of the corporate titans of animation. Others of this group have a provocative weirdness to them, as do a series of ball-like heads, art deco-ish abstractions with a hint of Mayan art. Each is an inner child, bad boys all, and all up for some nasty fun.

The single free-standing sculpture, The Beachcomber, is a kind of monument as ruin, the great man made of sand, intact on one side, the armature of recycled detritus revealed on the other. As is the case throughout the show, the best of the sculptures have a real psychic charge that allows the characters to escape the strictrues of their assigned identities.

D. Dominick Lombardi, Shrunken Head #11, 2001, reverse painted acrylic on Plexiglas and on board, 24 x 20"
proportions. In it, fantasy traverses a selection of levels.

D. Dominick Lombardi’s *Post-Apocalyptic Tattoo* series rearranges notions of the biological, normal and expected. His grid of India ink works on paper, all 8-1/2” x 11”, might be genetically reformed heads, caricatures, tattoos or Rorschach blots. These images, graphic and grotesque, contrast primal innocence with boardwalk rawness. While playful, they call up fears about how we all might be guinea pigs in a bizarre pseudo-scientific experiment. Touching on issues of mutation, the studies bring to mind the work of Nancy Burson and the paintings of Arcimboldo in that they bear the imprint of both the hideous and the beautiful. The smoke-like shapes, fashioned of delicately attenuated brushstrokes, also perform as figures, deformed in the same way the current fascination with surgically altering one’s body fosters beauty gone awry. Lombardi’s provocative signs mark the twisted paradox of a culture of complacency.

Revealing a new twist in the game of text and image, Amy Porter’s North American *Mammals Speak the Truth and Often Flatter You Unnecessarily* poses the following questions: Can animals speak? What would they say? Would it be true? Like Lombardi’s work, these small gouache drawings approximate cartooning, but contain a nostalgic element. Rendered in naive, brightly-colored oddness, the animals—a pink deer with green antlers, a blue boar, etc.—speak pithy phrases in curly script, nonsensical sound bytes culled from popular publications. The washes lend veracity to an underlying theme in the show of conflict between nature, the organic self and imposed boundaries. They voice detachment suffered by a folkloric reimagining of the wild. Toying with our belief in the absolute innocence of animals/nature and the contention of human superiority, the pieces review the distortion of truth by the media, while hinting of a fairy-tale world where animals deliberate and humans are confused.

Bewilderment between fiction and fact is pondered by *Dismemberment*, a floor installation in which Loo Bain creates a decayed, inadvertent reference to Huysman’s *Au Bout de Rebours*. A tree facsimile made from screen-printed muslin and recycled elements is cut into segments and scattered on the ground. It laments the violence perpetrated “against nature.” Meticulous craft is evident in her work. Faux grass made of strands of paper is lovingly hand-hooked in *Flawless*, in which a truncated section of yard symbolizes suburban dislocation and the desire for perfection. The sculptures reflect on misunderstanding of wilderness and its overly developed alternate reality, the homeowner’s paradise. While few dispute the impact of suburban development on the environment, Bain’s premise needs a more persuasive image than the lawn as source of societal decline.

All three artists trade in idyllic and unachievable realms to create a theater of culture clash. Artificial dream states (or nightmares) are realized through a mysterious, loose logic. The result is a cautionary tale about the complexity and finiteness of the unrefined world and the substitution of the synthetic for the actual.