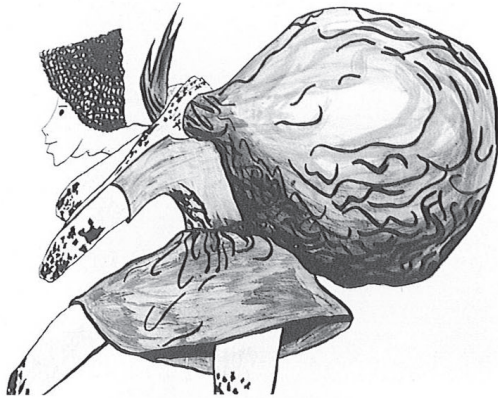


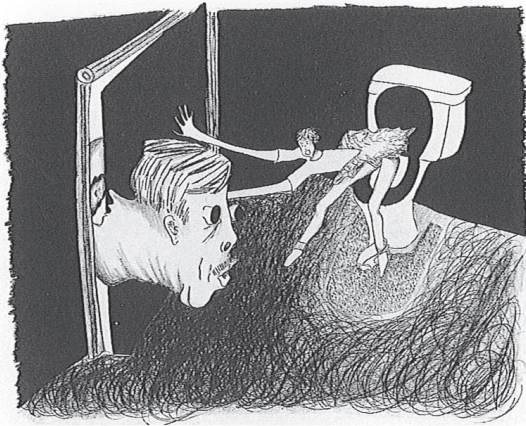
Sandra Meigs' work, especially many of her earlier installations, takes a child's perspective and blows it up to our scale or larger. She does so as an adult, presenting this child's world with a laconic seriousness and straightfaced, philosophic conviction that, perhaps precisely because of this, reads as a joke, or irony. It would all be quite straightforward if *The Room of 1000 Paintings*, for instance, is simply seen as a statement to the effect that: "the contents of a suburban kid's room collection of favourite, good and bad heroes are equivalent to the contents of avant-garde art." I think to myself, that could be valid, in a Duchampian sort of way. I can even make myself feel better by refining the statement, making it a little more subtle, by taking out "avant-garde," and taking the whole installation as an allegory of the psychic contents of collective fantasy and the imaginary of mass culture — a confusing, perhaps innocent world of characters and role models, of monsters and heroes derived from childhood but lingering on in adult consciousness. Good enough, I guess. But then, there is a hitch. Like "Popeye," for instance. Presented in our scale, he stands around in a goofy sort of way, a paper-maché dummy of the famous spinach-eating cartoon, gawking with his one eye popped at the room with 1000 paintings around him and putting up a good fight for the idea of strength in a spindly and p(r)opped up body, decked out all around by

funny bumpy muscles. Popeye — even the name tells me that he stands in for the viewer, standing in my place, representing me, or as I've been told, representing the "ideal viewer" because he was "strong, moral and earnest." All of a sudden I compare, and fall short — how can I be serious about him? A cartoon-figure isn't serious. Looking at *him*, how can I be moral and earnest? That's not an adult thing to do! But, if I was a kid he would seem a good adult — like a great dad.¹ So it is, in this way, that everything in Sandra Meigs' work appears on an edge and depends on what side one looks at it all. It is either comedic or deadly serious; either "Eeh Aaaah, funny," or positively moving like the idea of average joe Popeye who makes mistakes but defends his love to the teeth. Perhaps all of Sandra Meigs' work is a matter of scale, a kind of prism which elevates or lowers, exaggerates the scale of things, and thereby turns the ordinary into the unfamiliar, either large, too large, exaggerated, freakish, or small, tiny, a little bit of nothing at all, funny — physically and psychically speaking. All along I was caught between both, I guess, zigzagging, and running head-on into one from the other.

In fact, the German art historian Wilhelm Fraenger, in his *Forms of the Comic* (1920-21), analyzed these two "optical" extremes as the two faces of the grotesque — that which



The Scab Picker, 1984



"The child beheaded her father."
from *The Western Gothic*, 1984

tends to withdraw from philosophic definition just because it takes as many shapes as "shapelessness," forms as "unforms" or *informe*. On the one hand, it is that which looms larger than life, where something ordinary becomes monstrous, demonic, and sick. On the other hand, there is the comic grotesque, that which dwarfs, subdues and shrinks the world, so that it becomes our turn to look down at it from a place of superiority, sovereign masters of the forms of creation turned into toys. And in between, where they both meet — like the face on the arse, or the vulgarities mouthed off like a string of farts from someone's mouth² — there is the burlesque, the broad path of looking at things from up close, in closest proximity.³

In Sandra Meigs' work examples of the different forms of the grotesque abound. In one of the earlier wall paintings, *The Scabpicker* (1984), there is the scab-picking girl with her elbows covered with black blotches from scratching. She is running away with what is supposedly her little dirty secret. But the secret has turned into a gigantic weight flung over her shoulders: a bulging sack which, according to the stomach-turning title, is full with scabs. Conversely, in the hot and sexy series of paintings, *Love Muscle* (1989), it is the world itself which has gone awry in scale. A cowgirl, tiny as a lizard, lies resting against one of the hoofs of her horse — her horse and her lover

are later found at a campfire held on a branch of a giant tree that jots sideways across the painting with a vertical horizon; they are together as small as crows in a West that's gone Sublime. Of course, there is also *Orifaces* (1990), where strangely amorphous, ambiguously smiling or laughing animals, ghosts, and monsters are barely recognizable, except for their orifices (eyes, nostrils, mouth) which stand out as black holes in the wall beyond which everything is frightfully dark and turns into nothingness.

But perhaps nowhere is the distending shapelessness of the world, its comic withdrawing into the diminutive and fearless, and its nightmarish rise into the realm of super-monsters and gigantic freaks, as frightening and bizarre as in *The Western Gothic* (1984). Already the name in the installation bears the connotations of monstrous gargoyles and shapeless darkness, as well as the light of heaven, a cathedral's elevated perspectives. Even its form participates in the distensions. A sort of Natural History Museum, it also works as a theme-park monster ride, and thereby plays ball with the adult as well as kid's stuff, with both seriousness and silliness, to the extreme. The stories that unfold in its corridors, however, twist the simple categories of the comic and horrific grotesque into more complex, psychic scenarios (which are exacerbated by the accompanying artist's story of highly charged



"into"

from *Love Muscle*, 1989

FOLLOWING 2 PAGES

Untitled, 1996

sado-masochism, murderous coitus, and the like). Two entrances offer a journey that is as unforgiving in one direction, as it is relief in the other. Entering via the *Corridor of Paleontology*, a museum educational history lesson unravels a comic Western in drawings where husband and wife, Clayton and Charlie, have gone on a sightseeing trip "hunting dinosaurs." Clayton, the cowgirl, can be seen lassoing the giant skeletons of dinosaurs — "A beauty!" And Charlie-cowboy rides the boney remains — "Eeee Ha Pardner!" Here, the giant monsters ("Daspletosaurus torosus, the 'horrible lizard,' lived up to its name," reads the caption of one drawing) are dead; they've been subdued, have lost their dreaded power — all that remains are the museums's preferred relic: bones, bones, bones. And, as if to make fun of their demise, to even diminish monstro-sauruses further, the museum traces their history in street-wise, slap-stick theories: "The gaseous theory of extinction: Pouff! They all exploded." From here Meigs sends us — without so much as a notice — into the *Corridor of Dreams*, an archaeological excavation of a child's psyche. Child-like, but strong cartoon drawings depict a nosey Daddy sticking his giant, bulging head — as large as a door itself — through the bathroom door to pop his eyes over his ever tiny, spindly girl on the toilet, who recounts to us that at some time she has held his *frog* for as long as she could bear. In her dream or her

confession of secret, perverse, desires, she beheads the father with the bathroom door and shoves him under a carpet; in one drawing, we even find him, in the shape of a sort of dinosauric ox impaled in a tree, while in another she herself escapes to heaven — floating larger than, and looking down onto, a tiny house, too small to protect her or so small as to have entrapped her. The whole installation, then, ties into an inextricable knot the libidinal economies of the museum (the place of boney remains and monstrous realities subdued), the theme park (as fun ride playing out entertainment in the form of hunting down evils), and the powers of sexuality, fantasy and the imagination, which together rotate as a visual nightmare, in eerie proximity of evil and abuse, with screams of pleasure and terror in the narrow corridors of the mind.

But, if in this as other earlier works, caricature, stereotype, and cartoons toss us back and forth between safe zone high-ground and unsafe psychic drives and perverse obsessions, between a funhouse where one comes to unleash anxieties and conquer the monsters, escape from childhood nightmares and master them, and a childhood where one suffers monsters, is trapped into conflicting desires which themselves turn monstrous, the recent series of "paintings," entitled *Dummies*, take another turn. Here, the two sides of the grotesque — laughter and horror —

are collapsed into one surface, driven into a pulsating indistinction. Presented as if a type of Fine Art portrait series, these works show viscerally melted faces whose surfaces are a foaming brew of materials, textures, and figural references, and look like they've been hit by chemical slush. Underlining the inside-out quality of these "portraits" (the depiction of raw flesh rather than skin) a small library light, also borrowed from the portrait tradition, is clipped upside-down to the bottom of each stretcher so that the glow of the light appears to cast itself like a glimmer of a smile across the surface, even onto the surrounding wall — only to plunge all facial features into monster-like disfigurements.

In fact, if the traditional portrait has been to preserve (and often elevate) the living form before it "lies mouldering in the tomb,"⁴ whether as a means of propaganda for the needs of the well-to-do, upper class, and aristocracies, or the commemoration and veneration of loved ones, Meigs offers a condensed, hypernarcotic, *contemporary* version of that tradition's internal, less official history. With the title *Dummies*, her painting's haunting qualities recall the faces of those on the margins of the *roi du soleil*, images of his ass, those of the underclasses; or, the court jesters and clowns whose ugly faces shore up the innocence of his sons and daughters; the villagers and peasant zombies

who at once parody and elevate the aristocrats of Spain; the drunken captains, burghers, and folly peasant soldiers propositioning virtuous maidens in the burgeoning Dutch Republics; or, more tilted toward melancholy, the slithery green and purple blue flayed skin of Michelangelo's anamorphic artist's self-portrait, right there under Jesus, in the Sistine Chapel's *Last Judgement*; and finally, outperforming all disgust, the bourgeois nightmare: "communist workers [. . .] as ugly and dirty as hairy sexual organs, or lower parts."⁵

In this tradition, Sandra Meigs' portraits are the place where the sun has indeed met the anus, the arse-face, the grotesque visage, the distended caricature, the big blobby clown in the smeared feces of multivalent featured matter. Needless to even say, both abstraction and figuration are driven over the edge. Few surfaces could sustain more kitsch and gore, car-lacquer, candy colours and other, gooey ooze of horror film camp (ketchup and mustard staged as bloody, infected wounds). In fact, Meigs' paintings seem *topped* like sundaes at the Dairy Queen — ice-cream and banana split boats loaded with jelly beans and crunched Oreo cookies, or Tim Horton's cherry-glazed cream puffs — but paved over with tar and rocky blobs in a way that gives abstraction a new bend. No longer emblematic, such as the early

adventures of totemic abstraction — flags, crosses, targets, diamonds — these works pick up on the physical and affective qualities of the *informe* — cut, slashed, punctured surfaces or even Yves Klein's blue blobby grit-like sponges. But where these artists sublimate substance into esoteric, spiritual form, disembodiment by making it subtle, pictorial even, in Sandra Meigs' work substance is biological *mass* in a way that still manages to pull off the idea of a cartooning.

That is, the melted mush of facial traits indeed extends and exacerbates the themes of earlier installations — a close up look at pop, toy, cartoon characters, the faces of love, pleasure, and fun as well as the terror that may underlie them. A short little stick stuck into the middle of a canvas indicates the place of the nose, but reads as a pig nose, erect dick, or the obscene gesture of giving me the middle finger. A few scattered Smarties read as eyes and mouth, but also rotten teeth, or sickening sweet-talk. Eyes register a visual dictionary of drunkenness: they go from bug-eyed to pop-eyed; from drunk-eyed to screw-eyed; from gaping eye-holes to dead fish eyes — looped, sloshed, flogged, soused.⁶ Mouths, made of tin foil, suggest steel teeth; others are like Darth Vader's vibrating barred voice hole, or reveal gnashing vampire fangs. Some of the paintings actually bear the decipherable out-

line of a face — like that of a doll or a puppet, a girl or guy, again framed with tin foil shards to suggest that portraits were (or are?) a form of mirror. But others just seem like raw skin, or a skinned face, barely a face with all warts and pussy blemishes, oozing wounds with a little bit of glitter, or are we looking at bodily orifices, a dirty anus or filthy snatch? Some are bodies: limp, with stump-like legs, fat arms; cuddly and yucky at once; bloated dolls from the gutter, shredded teddy-bears from the brothel; drunken desolates or hung-over Johns.

If historically, the subjects of religion, class, gender, and race have functioned as a foil for the transgressive expression of folly and grotesque humours (just as they worked in the opposite way and confirmed the elevation of God, king, country and the order of ideology and symbolic law), with these recent paintings Meigs joins a whole number of other (past and recent) artists, whose works are preoccupied with the strange and abject, the infantile and erotically pungent, the puerile and base. Vomit in spaghetti dinners, decomposing cadavers, "bodies in pieces," come to mind, or in the more distant past Robert Smithson's *Glue Pour* and *Asphalt Run-down*. The urinary, olfactory, and anal pre-occupations in sculpture, the use of life-size plastic dolls with exchangeable sex and facial organ parts that parody coitus with murder. The "shit movement,"⁷

the larger phenomenon of “excremental culture,”⁸ the recent theoretical interests in the notion of the “abject” — the remembrance of immersion in the maternal body which the self must expel (in the form of border substances like spittle, blood, tears, etc.) to become its own “subject”⁹ — all these have become familiar terrain grazed by both art and theorists’ interests.

But such apparent sympathies do not seem sufficient to cover for cause. A more interesting arc, it seems, comes from Meigs’ very title for the series, *Dummies*. Derived from dumb — as in mute, silent, or speechless — the (of course, prejudicial) tendency to conflate silence or the inability to speak with a lack of intelligence, with “foolishness,” and stupidity, even, reveals the valuation of the presence of speech in a logocentric system. At the same time, however, there is a perhaps more ironic twist to their presence. On the one hand, the name confers a sense of a somewhat ambivalent (still damaging, but cuddly) “empathy” for someone a fool, someone “all-too-human” (comic to a certain extent, as produced by the distance and sense of superiority on part of the viewer). In fact, if once intellectuals and social reformers alike took the mass of people as dummies (i.e. in the infamous Marxist dictum that they are “unable to speak for themselves, and therefore have to be represented/spoken for”),

Sandra Meigs’ characters may be an homage to the eloquence of that silence or its eloquent gestures (like, giving the finger, being drunk, swearing or hissing, casting a look, etc.). In other words, the dummy raises him/herself as the darkly funny, vulnerable and scarred face, the sultry masturbator or bloated “couch potato” of the “all-too-human” self — the one that is the parody of the smart-age, the “you gotta be smart” in the age of smart-bombs and smart-ass. [One might find other examples, such as the redemption of the “dummy” in movies like *Dumb and Dumber* and *Forrest Gump*, or in the success of the marketing of *Wordperfect for Dummies*, the *Internet for Dummies*, and beyond, of *Sex for Dummies*, *Dying for Dummies*,¹⁰ etc.] It is as if *Dummies* are to the “smart” of contemporary electronic culture (with its promise of vastly increased motility and information-literate, net-surfing, out-powering hackers), as the court dwarf was to the prince; the drunken peasant-soldier to the self-identified, upright middle-class; the communist worker to the owner of the means of production. They are the comedic and horrific grotesque prismatically projected onto the other side of a culture that hails the subject to armour itself with prosthetic ABS and muscle machines, education, advancement, productivity and increased competitiveness: the real, soft, mouldering flesh; the flayed, wounded, speechless stupor of a body in pieces.

It may even be that *Dummies* are portraits of that form of resistance that has already been noted as specific to the information age, that is, to the argument and demand of the system (and the media in particular) to be a subject (hailed as such by advertisement and consumer ideology), "... to constitute ourselves as subjects, to liberate ourselves, to express ourselves at any price, to vote, produce, decide, speak, participate," against which the lines of defense may be a refusal of meaning and a refusal of the word, "practices-as-object," the renunciation of the position of subject and of meaning — "exactly the practices of the masses — which we bury and forget under the contemptuous terms of alienation and passivity," that is to say, in exactly the opposite manner of subjecthood: "infantilism, hyperconformism, a total dependence, passivity, idiocy." ¹¹

If this analysis lends itself to Sandra Meigs' own statement on the works in the exhibition (that these paintings have their beginning in the horrible story of her 60 year old brother, who was a derelict alcoholic, had been drinking solidly for about six weeks, and then slits his wrists ¹²), it also indicates a close relationship to those artists who render themselves abject-objects, in contemporary art, those who enact the "lumpen proletariat" or soiled self, "Pants Shitter and Proud of It." ¹³ However, Sandra Meigs' portraits of subjects who have melted, laughing at us while

falling apart, that is, of subjects who seem to desire death — in an intoxicated low and drunken high — are not themselves the mimetic enactment of such regression (where she herself desires or even becomes such an object, that is, to entertain such a fiction). Her portraits represent this culture's internal Other — the assassinated, imploded subject, the swollen face of drunken abdication and chemical dissolution — through the oblique prism of the grotesque dummy, a decoy, an imitation or human stand-in, and in this way recuperates a very old role for painting in the age of hypnotized mass culture.

BY BARBARA FISCHER

I would like to thank Kim Adams and Andy Patton for their attentive reading and helpful discussions.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 I owe this insight to Dr. Karl Loszak, Toronto.
- 2 By what strange twist of fate, anyways, is it the letter "r" in farce on account of which the face turns round, rolls around like a moon, and turns up its reverse, the about face, the other face (the ori-face, orifice, orifice), the mouth's parody, the anus between full cheeks? Reversals such as these are inscribed in the operations of the farce — grotesque literature and art — the method by which the high becomes the low, and the low rides down the high.
- 3 Wilhelm Fraenger, *Formen des Komischen*, Verlag der Kunst, Dresden, Basel, 1995.
- 4 Quoted from John Evans' "On the Utility of Paintings," in Richard Leppert, "Portrait: Dramatizing the Body," in *Art and the Committed Eye*, Westview Press, Harper Collins Publishers, Boulder and Oxford, 1996, p.153.
- 5 Bataille, "The Solar Anus," *Visions of Excess*, ed. by Allan Stoekl, The University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1985, p.8.
- 6 I owe some of the vocabulary to Martha Rosler's work, "The Bowery in Two Descriptive Systems," 1974-5.
- 7 The term appears in Hal Foster's essay, "The Return of the Real," in *The Return of the Real*, October Books, MIT Press, Cambridge and London, 1996, p.160.
- 8 Arthur Kroker and David Cook, "Excremental Culture," in *The Postmodern Scene*, New World Perspectives, CultureTexts Series, New York, 1986, p.100.
- 9 Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, tran. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982.
- 10 Janice Gurney's idea. It would be a hit.
- 11 Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and John Johnston, Foreign Agent Series, Semiotext(e), Inc. New York, 1983, p.106-07.
- 12 Sandra Meigs, unpublished exhibition statement.
- 13 Hal Foster, "The Return of the Real." op. cit., p.160-1.