



done. Scott has clearly examined not only manuscript illuminations but also a great many medieval documents from many countries. The interplay between current fashion, heraldry, marital status, social position, profession, and wishful thinking is played out in those pages, but it takes a knowledgeable eye to discern it.

The illustrations in *Medieval Dress and Fashion* are taken from the most magnificent manuscripts of the period, and the figures in them will never look the same after you read this entertaining yet scholarly account of our ancestors' garb.

SARAH LAWSON  
Writer and translator, London

### THE ALPINE FANTASY OF VICTOR B AND OTHER STORIES

JEREMY AKERMAN AND EILEEN DALY (EDS)

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The two editors of this collection of short stories, an artist-curator and an editor and writer on art, have brought together a range of examples of what they regard as an increasingly widespread phenomenon: fiction writing by contemporary visual artists. The contributors include visual art practitioners from different generations with very different outlooks, and most have probably never previously been grouped together, either in print or in exhibitions.

For the majority of them, writing already forms a significant part of their

Mikey Cuddihy, *Gypsy*, Courtesy the artist. Cuddihy is one of the artists whose writings appear in *The Alpine Fantasy of Victor B and Other Stories* by Jeremy Akerman and Eileen Daly (Eds).

output. Some, such as Balraj Khanna, have parallel careers as writers and visual artists; some are well known for their use of language and writing alongside or interwoven with the visual, for instance Ian Breakwell; some, such as Brian Catling, operate in both ways. Others, such as Donald Batchelor or Jon Thompson, have made significant contributions in terms of art theory. Nonetheless, many of the stories may come as a complete surprise, even for followers of the artists' past work, as when an old friend suddenly reveals an unsuspected talent: perhaps the ability to play the violin or converse in Arabic.

The editors are careful not to be too prescriptive about what they hope readers might gain from the book. It may be read as entertainment, much as any collection of short stories: it is possible that the adventurous general reader might chance upon it, and find an agreeably surprising and challenging range of tales. Several pieces, however, also seem to offer oblique insights into the artists' various philosophies or approaches to their visual work, or to attempt to float allegorical paper boats for art in general. The publication will sit well in those increasingly dynamic bookshops attached to many museums and art centres, where visitors, emerging from exhibitions, seek distraction and elucidation in equal measure.

Sex, death, memory, childhood, history, relationships and the paranormal all

feature. The following examples demonstrate the invigorating variety.

Mikey Cuddihy's three pieces – 'Gypsy', 'The Bonsai Man' and 'Sistine Chapel' – describe encounters from the narrator's past through the filter of poignant humour that memory sometimes bestows. The stories are led by the visual and tactile senses, in that the events described are corralled, or even displaced, by a compressed accumulation of remembered detail: the possessions of a family, the dresses worn on a holiday, the furnishings of a room. The stories are an affirmation of the persistence and significance of visual detail. This is the important stuff, she seems to say.

Polly Gould's honed and epigrammatic 'Breakfast at the Beauty Spot' weighs the qualities of a long-standing relationship through the physical and verbal dynamics of a brief domestic exchange. This is described with the precision of a choreographer's instructions, and achieved with an economy of which Raymond Carver might have approved.

Juan Cruz's 'SEDA – An Interesting Story' takes the form of a translation of a letter to the shareholders of the successful Spanish family-run instant coffee firm, from its retiring founder (confusingly, a namesake of the artist's, or perhaps even a relation!). The rise in the company's fortunes – its changes of name and of the very nature of its business through a half-century of chance and wily dealing – mirrors the regime changes in Spain itself and the country's changing relationship with the outside world. Cruz's interest is not merely in the history embedded in the story, but in the inevitably distancing effect of his translation, an operation the artist has previously employed as a kind of performance, a subtle form of critique.

Paul Rooney winds out a convoluted narrative of a spectral encounter in a nightclub dressing-room; a tale of ingenious complexity involving swapped identities, Lenin's embalmed corpse, Che Guevara and Les Dawson that is in essence a warm tribute to the billowing, ludicrous but masterful word-pictures conjured by the latter in his famous comic monologues. Rooney achieves this with some skill, conveying a persistent romanticism repeatedly squashed by the intrusion of inevitable and prosaic events, with which Dawson would surely identify.

## Norbert Lynton – An Appreciation

Norbert Lynton taught me how to look. To look at works of art in an intense and focused way takes time and requires a degree of openness and curiosity. Norbert himself learnt how to look at art from artists and by spending time in artists' studios, and he privileged the act of looking over and above any text-based or theoretical frame. As Professor of the History of Art at the University of Sussex, Norbert taught hundreds of students how to encounter works of art, mediated by only their own senses and experiences. Equipped with a slide projector and a carousel of slides, Norbert would take us on a compelling and magical journey through the history of modern European art. In the process, he endowed us with a passion for art and the confidence to encounter and engage with works of art directly and on their own terms. Through his teaching and writings, Norbert communicated his innate belief in art and culture as civilising forces in society. Although much younger than his fellow émigrés, Karl Popper and Ernst Gombrich, his childhood experience of escaping Nazi Germany undoubtedly made Norbert wary of any attempt to place the work of artists at the service of any ideological or theoretical agenda.

I first met Norbert when he interviewed me after I had requested a course transfer to History of Art. Alienated by

the structuralist approach embedded in the English Literature department, I longed to return to the text and artwork as the central object of study. This must have been music to Norbert's ears and he welcomed me into his department. As my teacher and personal tutor at Sussex, Norbert instilled in me a deep appreciation not only of art but also of artists and their role in society. When he reviewed my failing marks in French on the eve of my year in Paris, Norbert dismissed classroom teaching as inferior to the experience of learning the language in France. The primary experience, whether in another country or in front of a work of art, was the most important learning environment as far as Norbert was concerned. If this seems a romantic and idealistic view in the contemporary art world then perhaps this is because we have lost sight of the transformative and radical role that art can play in society and in our lives. In an increasingly commercial art world, where artists are often marginalised and artworks viewed as commodities, Norbert's voice will be sorely missed.

When Norbert died he was working on at least two projects. One was an exhibition at Brighton Museum & Art Gallery (scheduled to open in December 2008) with Nicola Coleby. Norbert selected works from the museum's collection of paintings and proposed an

exhibition that reveals unexpected juxtapositions between works, compelling us to look again at works from different historical periods and traditions and trace the connections and affinities between them. In his characteristically generous way, Norbert passed the baton for completing the project to his friend Hilary Lane. It seems appropriate that he has left us with something to look at and think about, and an exhibition that emphasises the connections between artworks and cultural moments, rather than their differences. The second incomplete project was a book with John Milner on Tatlin's *Tower*. This work, perhaps more than any modern work of art, could be seen to represent the innate potential of art and culture to shape and transform our lives: an unfinished project, Tatlin's proposed *Monument to the Third International* would have 'served to steer the course of humanity on earth . . . symbolizing and also representing man's existence in time'. It was to be the counterpoint to the Tower of Babel of Genesis and the occasion of mankind's loss of a single language. It would be, according to Norbert, 'its answer, bringing mankind together again'.<sup>1</sup>

GILANE TAWADROS  
Art historian, London

<sup>1</sup> Norbert Lynton, *The Story of Modern Art*, Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1982, p.106.

Continued from page 54.

Jake Chapman – the more loquacious half of the Chapman Brothers, whose work has been the chosen instrument of calculated scandal for many of the world's most famous art centres in recent years – contributes one of the most formally inventive stories in the book. Your first irritating realisation that every conjunctive 'and' in the story has been replaced by 'plus' is similar to becoming aware of the nervous tic on the face of a stranger you have unwisely engaged in conversation, shortly before you realise that they are, in fact, completely and dangerously insane. The whole story pivots around a central cataclysmic discovery, from which point events

run backwards, like a film shown in reverse. This has the effect of revealing and, simultaneously, miraculously healing a series of horrific blood-splattering traumas, the gothic underbelly of the fairly innocuous narrative previously recounted. That Chapman's central character is called Vonnegut is a clue as to the metaphysical aspirations of the story: a meditation on time, memory and alternative realities in which the late author of *Timequake* would find much to commend. It also shares the central time-reversing supposition of Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* and Philip K Dick's *Counter-Clock World*.

Although the editors' claims for their publication's uniqueness may be techni-

cally correct and justified by the impressive range of contributors, artists' fictional writing and the related area of writing inspired by artists' work have been the focus of other recent publications. If you enjoy this book, as they say on Amazon, you may also care to seek out *Infallible*, *In Search of the Real George Eliot*, pub. ARTicle Press 2005, edited by Roxy Walsh; *Silence Please! Stories after the Works of Juan Muñoz*, pub. Scalo 1996, edited by Louise Neri, James Lingwood and Juan Muñoz; and also *Short Stories about Painting*, pub. Art Space Gallery 2005, edited by this reviewer.

JEFFREY DENNIS  
Artist, London