I OF THE STORM

Daniel Marcus on the Art of Leidy Churchman

Essay by Daniel Marcus
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TUCKED WITHIN THE DENSE ARRAY of canvases in "Leidy Churchman: Crocodile," the artist's survey exhibition currently on view at the Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, is a small painting of a rat perched on the edge of a body of water. Pressing its nose close to the water's surface, the rodent appears vexed by the sight of its inchoate reflection. Created in 2013, the painting was first exhibited in 2015 under the title *Narcissistic Rat*; Churchman later retitled it *Basically Good* in 2017, as if to allay its protagonist's dysmorphic concerns. Does it matter what species we see when we look in the mirror? Or what gender? Or what shape? Not really, *Basically Good* reassures us. Still, something is not quite right about this scene of pondside self-examination: Churchman handles their rat Narcissus with Bonnardian wit, picking out the whites of the rodent's bulging eyes and the hairs of its penile tail; yet the reflection in the water looks more mouse- than ratlike, its beady eyes peering meekly from an inscrutable face. Rather than resolve these differences, the painting seems to articulate the terms of their mutuality, positing rat and reflection on either side of an unbridgeable, but paper-thin, divide.

Basically Good is emblematic of Churchman's unlikely—and often disquieting—approach to representation, which, while never depicting the artist's own countenance per se, nonetheless toes the boundary between ego and imago. Of course, the coexistence of subjectivity with alterity furnishes one of modernism's core teachings, a legacy stretching from Arthur Rimbaud's dictum *Je est un autre* (I is someone else) through Adrian Piper's exaggerated self-portraits and beyond. For Churchman, who is both trans and a student of Buddhism, Rimbaud's mantra resonates in several directions, echoing queer-theoretical accounts of gender (and gender transition) while at the same time resonating with aspects of their own identity—including their racial positionality—that might well give the rat pause.

THE PREDICAMENT OF CHURCHMAN'S rodent owes much to the legacy of queer theory. It is, perhaps, especially indebted to Judith Butler's still-powerful critique of identity as a lived social category.

Attacking the foundations of the gender binary, but with the entire philosophical edifice of identity in view, Butler emphasizes the inevitable failure attending each and every performance of self-coherence: It is just because identity *cannot* be adequately performed, she argues, that we are condemned to repeat its scripted gestures, enacting time and again "the vain and persistent conjuring and displacement of an idealized original, one which no one at any time has been able to approximate."[1]

These lines set the tone for Churchman's early experiments with performative self-representation. They publicly presented their work for the first time in 2002, while they were still an undergraduate, in the context of the New York–based queer feminist journal and art collective *LTTR*. Cofounded in the wake of 9/11 by K8 Hardy, Every Ocean Hughes (formerly known as Emily Roysdon), and Ginger Brooks Takahashi, who were later joined by Lanka Tattersall and Ulrike Müller, *LTTR* aimed to multiply rather than synthesize the diverse strains of new-millennium feminism (including transfeminism, then taking shape), while at the same time, and with increasing stridency, advocating street-level resistance to the forces of Bush-era neoconservatism. A friend of and collaborator with the group, Churchman contributed a drawing to the journal's first issue in which they confronted openly, albeit enigmatically, the theme of gender transition. Framed with a proscenium, with heavy curtains tied up in neat bows, it depicts a skeletal cyclopean figure who sports a strap-on cock and tightly bound chest. Posing beneath the awning of a film studio, and gesturing with Scissorhandsian fingers, the cyclops offers a simple greeting: "Cheers."

It is hard to imagine a better alter ego for *LTTR* than this. From the beginning, the aims of the collective were frankly (and often uproariously) libidinal, defined in opposition to the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identities and subcultures. Eschewing calls for gay and lesbian visibility, the journal's editors advocated a politics—and an aesthetics—of queer invisibility, proposing "a fluidity of names and gestures, outfits and pleasures, spaces and meanings," in which each new role or pose is shed without hesitation. Churchman's drawing resonates with this project of transgressive self-performance, echoing Hughes's defense of the subversive potential of "dramatic arts." (On *LTTR* 1's cover is a photo of Hughes wearing a David Wojnarowicz mask and a strap-on erection.) "Not an example of what has been termed 'post-identity,' implying progress beyond or transcendent of all categories," as art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson argues, *LTTR* advanced "a vision of a more permeable, unbounded sense of possible identification."[2] Writing in the opening pages of *LTTR* 1, Hardy offered a slogan for this queer unboundedness: "Everyone in their own uniform!"

In everyday practice, social identities are harder to escape than Hardy's cheeky slogan admits, race and class in particular. Yet the journal's openness to transfeminism, and its centering of trans voices, was exceptional given the pervasiveness of transphobia even within feminist and lesbian circles at the time, and it remains

exemplary. While there was little emphasis on passing in *LTTR*'s milieu, the importance accorded gender fluidity (or, per Hughes, "invisibility") in queer circles often placed trans artists in an ambiguous position. Reflecting on the stakes of transfeminism in the journal's first issue, theorist and activist Dean Spade, who had recently founded the Sylvia Rivera Legal Project, a legal-advocacy organization serving poor and marginalized trans communities in New York, countered the charge that trans men and women had betrayed the gay and lesbian cause with a rousing assertion of the subversive power of gender transition: "All of our bodies are modified with regard to gender, whether we seek out surgery or take hormones or not," Spade argued. "I want to be disturbed by what you're wearing. I want to be shocked and undone and delighted by what you're doing and how you're living. And I don't want anyone to be afraid to put on their look, their body, their clothes anymore."[3]

As *LTTR* morphed from a curated publication into a roving program of exhibitions and public events, Churchman's contributions to the collective took an increasingly participatory form. For example, on the occasion of 2004's "Explosion LTTR: Practice More Failure," an anarchic series of workshops, film and video screenings, lectures, and installations held at Art in General, New York, Churchman teamed up with artist Luis Jacob to produce *Make Out Make Out Make Out Couch*, a plush sofa intended for amorous use. Answering *LTTR*'s call for practices of queer jouissance, Churchman and Jacob's contribution also responded to the group's assault on artistic norms, recasting the framework of success and failure in terms of collective libido. The following year, on the occasion of *LTTR*'s fourth-issue launch party, Churchman offered free haircuts to their collaborators; the gesture made use of their talents as a hairdresser (their day job), but also made space for social transitivity, affirming the participants' desire to change hairstyles at will. Mobilizing the prefix *trans* in a spirit of deviant self-fashioning, these undertakings drew strength from transfeminist accounts of performativity and self-modification, celebrating failure as destiny and inadequacy as basically good, or good enough.

This embrace of illegibility, misrecognition, and failure informed Churchman's nascent studio practice as well. In a statement posted to their personal website in 2008, they declared their commitment to "mak[ing] transgender pictures," linking the in-betweenness of trans experience with "the humor of uncertainty, and relationships of supposed opposites. I see people and their environments morphing into transsexual, not as a definitive destination but a space of complexity and amusement."[4] Although a handful of Churchman's early paintings openly represent gender play, such as the dildo-wearing duo in *Purple Pals*, 2008, the impact of trans-ness in their art, and of their formative experience with *LTTR*, is best understood in terms of their release from the burdens of consistency and selfsameness.

This "practice more failure" ethos was equally pronounced in Churchman's forays into video, as with

their *Painting Treatments*, 2010, in which they and associates apply various raw substances—paint, but also potatoes, wooden planks, and charcoal powder—to the bodies of assorted friends, who lie naked together on the studio floor covered in towels and slathered in detritus. As Amy Sillman noted in these pages, Churchman's videos treat mise-en-scène as a substitute for the painter's blank canvas, rehashing the gestures of Pollock's drip paintings and Yves Klein's "Anthropometries" "not by a parodic emasculation or a cynical recapitulation, but with a newly enthusiastic form of painting as nudie activity."[5] Not unlike other, equally unproductive group nudie activities, 2010's *Painting Treatments*—and a related 2009 piece—give full rein to pleasurable excess; that they fail to coalesce into a fixed form (the videos loop before any "complete" pictorial state is achieved) is par for the course. Around the time they made these videos, Churchman began to experiment with sculpture, generating awkwardly painted facsimiles of commonplace objects—including a dildo in a sock, cigarettes, a wilted tulip, an oversize piece of Brie, and the then-ubiquitous *Art in Theory, 1900–1990* sourcebook—in a queer repetition of Claes Oldenburg's flaccid commodities.

AROUND 2010, Churchman dialed back their work in painting and sculpture to devote themself to a new series of videos. At least partly necessitated by their residency at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende in Amsterdam, where they committed themself to making large-scale floor paintings as "sets" for videos and performances, the hiatus also followed from the dissolution of *LTTR*, which published its fifth and final issue in 2006. Upon returning to easel painting around 2013, and now working exclusively in oil on linen, Churchman devoted themself to the medium more fully than ever before, in the process summoning a new constellation of art-historical forebears—trading Pollock and Oldenburg for Marsden Hartley, Henri Rousseau, and Chaim Soutine, among other modernist lodestars.

Churchman abandoned video when they returned to painting, yet they insist that this change of medium grew out of their work with digital technology, aligning the tabula rasa of the canvas with the performative space of the film studio—and also, importantly, with the networked spaces of social media. Like semi-inscrutable posts, their paintings since 2013 often cull their subjects from the internet's churn, making the task of parsing their studio output in the aggregate akin to surveying an unfamiliar Instagram account. ("I can't believe how many images I've seen," Churchman admitted to a recent interviewer. "I'm in a scrolling world.") In some cases, the subjects broached in Churchman's paintings are unmistakably personal, as with *New Dawn Marsden Hartley Soutine*, 2014, their copy after Hartley's beefcake painting *Madawaska—Acadian Light-Heavy*, 1940: Like Hartley, Churchman has put down roots in coastal Maine, where *Madawaska* was painted. Both artists approach the question of masculinity from a queer perspective, Hartley as a semi-closeted gay man, Churchman as a trans person.

Yet even in Churchman's homage to Hartley, the differences between prototype and copy signify in ways

that verge on illegibility: As its title suggests, the painting ranges promiscuously in style, as if treating Hartley's *Madawaska* to a process of Soutinification, rendering the beefy model's torso more literally beef-like. (Churchman's liberal application of red pigment, streaked with chalky white, recalls Soutine's paintings of flayed beef carcasses.) There's a shift from sculptural solidity in the Hartley toward flat artificiality in Churchman's copy, but this flattening effect is countered at the painting's upper edge, where the model's coiffure spills over onto the frame, as if projecting (ejaculating?) beyond representation into reality. The opposite of parody, *New Dawn Marsden Hartley Soutine* expresses an unrestrained zeal for its source, as if the copyist were bent on unleashing the erotic charge pent up (repressed, albeit only barely) therein.

While Churchman's appropriation tactics might recall the anti-authorial (and anti-patriarchal) gestures of Sturtevant and Sherrie Levine, the "I" remains an open question in Churchman's art, a signifier neither empty nor full. How, if at all, might Churchman identify with the taxidermy passenger pigeon in *Martha*, 2015, the very last member of its now-extinct species? What led them to discover the Bauhaus toymaker Alma Siedhoff-Buscher, whose wood-block sailboat is the subject of Churchman's *Bauhaus Boat Building Kit*, 2014? Did the image, a jpeg that has made the rounds on Pinterest boards, find them instead? In *Antique*, 2018, is the zebra who returns our gaze in the ornate bureau mirror Churchman's mammalian avatar or a smoke screen: the personification of the self's inaccessibility and vacuity? And what is to be made of their copies after friends and peers—see, for instance, Churchman's *Kruger*, 2017, which translates verbatim a photograph of Barbara Kruger's, *Untitled (Seeing through you)*, 2004, into oil on linen? Likewise, in *The Piers Untitled by Emily Roysdon*, 2016, Churchman copies a photograph by Hughes; elsewhere, they have appropriated an image of Frank Benson's *Juliana*, 2015, a 3-D-printed sculpture of artist Juliana Huxtable, and Cameron Rowland's *National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association Badges*, 2016, as seen on the Museum of Modern Art's online database. What does it mean, moreover, that Churchman's appropriations of these works (should we call them Regrams?), and of other imagery as well, circulate not through the palimpsestic spaces of online social media—at least, not primarily—but within the closed circuit of the art market, where the codes of authorial self-expression remain as guarded as ever?

These questions can't really be answered; nor should they be. If Churchman's return to painting implies a departure from the queer-communitarian framework of *LTTR*, accepting studio solitude and the valorization of individual authorship, their work remains steeped in the collective's core values: illegibility, misrecognition, and failure. Devoted as ever to *LTTR*'s tactics of invisibility, Churchman's art thrives on the tension between contradictory models of selfhood and alterity. This tension becomes especially pronounced in their paintings of nonhuman life, such as *Giraffe Birth*, 2017, a work derived from a BuzzFeed listicle, "Tour Operator Captures Incredible Pictures of Baby Giraffe Being Born." Typical of its genre, the BuzzFeed post aggregates a group of images shot by photographer Andreas Knausenberger into run-of-

the-mill clickbait, tracking the newborn giraffe's progress out of the womb and into the world (the listicle ends by showing the baby giraffe's confident first steps). Isolating the first photograph of the BuzzFeed series, Churchman's painting calls attention to the mother animal's unexpected stoicism; indeed, were it not for the amniotic sac and the stray pair of legs protruding from her hindquarters, we might not guess that anything out of the ordinary was transpiring.

At first blush, *Giraffe Birth* seems to celebrate the miracle of nonhuman nativity, perhaps aligning the infant animal's phallic protrusion with the self-birthing experience of gender transition. Yet the painting's subject—and its hero—is unmistakably the mother, not the child: Notice how Churchman leaves the body of the giraffe—at least, the pale parts of its reticulated coat, up to but excluding the animal's head—unpainted, letting raw linen show through, so that the central presence in the image turns, on close inspection, into an eerie vacancy. Likewise, the shadow cast by the giraffe, which barely registers in the original photograph, becomes a dark stain in Churchman's painting, its arboreal shape impressed on the grass like a burn mark or discarded skin. Then, too, the whole subject of the painting, a female giraffe in the throes of labor, points toward the political significance of pregnancy in trans communities. In any case, the enduring presence—or rather, the presence-as-absence—of the mother giraffe, the "I" of the painting, is unmistakable.

Other aspects of Churchman's paintings seem calculated to highlight their own awkward presence-as-absence as painter: For instance, in a diminutive painting titled *Is the Universe a Simulation, Moderated by Neil deGrasse Tyson*, 2017, Churchman renders a paused image of the American Museum of Natural History in New York's 2016 Isaac Asimov Memorial Debate, including their video player's volume bar at the top of the canvas—a marker of the artist's power to amplify or mute their sources at will. In other works, Churchman expresses their authorial role in quieter ways, by marking arbitrary borders around the edge of a painting or decorating its four corners with small circular marks, as if to emphasize the artist's paradoxical status within and outside the field of representation. While Churchman's paintings (including their paintings from photographs) rarely fail to make the artist's hand felt, the feeling is most often equivocal, communicating imposture more than mastery.

THIS AWARENESS OF IRRESOLVABLE DUALITY, and especially of the artist's dual role as author and receiver, stems from Churchman's study of Zen Buddhism—an aspect of their recent work about which they are unusually voluble (unusually, insofar as artists and their critics rarely admit to the significance of spirituality as motivator). Placing themself within a rich tradition of modernist and queer Zen, from John Cage's aleatory experiments to the writings of bell hooks, Churchman has come to describe the task of self-unfolding (and self-othering) in their paintings as a practice of mindful self-emptying. Consider

Churchman's account of their painting *Crocodile*, 2016, a picture born after an unusually long gestation: "In 2013, when I was living out in the desert town of Twentynine Palms, a line came into my head: 'A crocodile walks into the water.' It was such a plain sentence, so I Googled it and found a couple of images that pictured my feeling. They gave off a stunning sense of immersion, of going *into* the world—farther." Speaking with art historian Arnisa Zeqo, Churchman attributed this unbidden catchphrase to their yearning for a "feeling of meditation, a glimpse into a mind so large, reflecting, empty, endless, aware, and awake, with no time at all or all the time." The crocodile thus becomes "a portal into the self," Zeqo suggested. But it is also, simultaneously, a portal *out* of selfhood, casting the artist as an unfathomable reptile—a figure, like the rat Narcissus, poised at the limit between identity and difference.

Several recent paintings make Churchman's debt to Buddhism explicit: In *Infinitely Rich Qualities of Mind*, 2017, for example, a pearlescent (and not subtly clitoral) chinoiserie pattern, painted against a Robert Ryman–type background, figures the mental void multiply, as arabesque, as cloud, as genderless bodily substrate. In *Own-Being Emptiness*, 2016, Churchman depicts a solitary console table, its wooden body left unpainted, highlighting its thingly impermanence; *Relief of Weariness by Ultimate Mind*, 2017, juxtaposes the artist's empty shadow with a menagerie of bugs and cats copied from a medieval manuscript. Each of these works is a meditation on subjective vacancy—less a glimpse of the artist's mental furniture than an attempt at opening the mind to what exceeds it.

Churchman's effort at mental exfoliation informs their largest, most ambitious work in "Crocodile": *Don't Try to Be the Fastest (Runway Bardo)*, 2019, a massive floor painting on linen, thirty-two feet in length, made with collaborative input from the painter's Buddhist mentor, Gayle Hanson, and friend Siobhan Liddell (who helped embroider its framing edge). Images of all kinds appear laid out in trompe l'oeil fashion across its throbbing red ground; as Churchman explains, the painting was meant to "have a runway effect." Rather than articulate a fixed web of relationships, however, the runway evokes a void as capacious as the mind; the images—which include NASA's ubiquitous black-hole photo, an April 2019 cover of *Vogue Paris* featuring model Adut Akech (an homage to the late Karl Lagerfeld), paintings by René Magritte and Giorgio de Chirico, a kente cloth, and a trans-rights poster emblazoned with the words safe space—scatter like paper in the wind. Interspersed throughout the composition are mind-training cards bearing slogans of the twelfth-century Tibetan Buddhist master Chekawa Yeshe Dorje: in postmeditation, be a child of illusion; self-liberate even the antidote; abandon any hope of fruition.

Dorje's slogans chime with *LTTR*'s "Practice more failure," albeit in a more personal, self-hectoring vein. As Avram Alpert has recently argued, while Zen Buddhism is often misinterpreted as a call to blissful self-erasure (self and world becoming one), its theorists emphasize the necessity of "return[ing] to the

world not with demands but with gifts of clarity and insight."[6] Drawing inspiration from the Reverend angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, and Jasmine Syedullah's 2016 book, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*, which aligns the path of self-awakening with the difficult work of racial consciousness, Churchman has come to locate race—implicitly, whiteness—at the root of their Buddhist practice: Insofar as the "sociopathic environment of white supremacy plays out through minute, fractured thoughts that race through the analytical mind and make everyone sick," they suggest, *Radical Dharma* attempts a "conversation from this abstract place of self. It is different from trying to be effective; it is trying to understand the truth."[7]

It is hard to say, though, where truth—and especially the truth of identity and difference—might find a viable outlet in Churchman's art. In a series of works from 2014, painted during a high-water mark of recent black liberation struggles, they come near to addressing their own position as a white artist—see, for example, *Chief Police USA* or *Flotsam & Jetsam (Jail)*. Distinguished by their foregrounding of logos and text, these works largely abandon Churchman's premise of ambiguity; easily read and comprehended, they offer little room for tactics of authorial invisibility. Legible as confessionals, they lay bare the artist's position within networks of economic power and state violence, figuring whiteness in place of the "I." As exercises in self-exploration, they reveal familiar truths, but ones art rarely lets be seen or said: Wealth is power, and power keeps the police in uniform. The mind can be emptied, after all, but power, unlike evil, is mindless; it keeps its hold where all else is swept away.

If self-emptying is self-othering, how are we to arrange ourselves before a binary that cannot be so easily circumvented, that resists performative imitation and self-transfiguration alike? In a recent interview with Sara Ahmed, Butler offers a tentative answer, reframing the question of identity and alterity in terms of mutuality and copresence: "What if we shift the question from 'who do I want to be?' to the question, 'what kind of life do I want to live with others?' . . . If the I who wants this name or seeks to live a certain kind of life is bound up with a 'you' and a 'they' then we are already involved in a social struggle when we ask how best any of us are to live."[8]While the truth of white privilege, and of other forms of privilege as well, can't be performatively sidestepped, as Churchman's project makes clear, we can nonetheless imagine a framework in which such truths might be lived with—not singly, solipsistically, but reciprocally, in a space over which no one (neither identity nor difference; neither "I" nor "you") can exercise full sovereignty. Letting hope of fruition fade, we might learn to cultivate this fragile mutuality, a place of common life—and also, necessarily, of common failure. It wouldn't be everything, wouldn't solve anything; but it would be basically good.

Notes

1. Judith Butler, "Lana's 'Imitation': Melodramatic Repetition and the Gender Performative," *Genders*, no. 9 (Fall 1990): 1.

2. Julia Bryan-Wilson, "*LTTR*: Repetition and Difference," *Artforum*, Summer 2006, 110.

3. Dean Spade, "Dress to Kill, Fight to Win," *LTTR*, no. 1: "Lesbians to the Rescue," 2002, 18.

4. Personal statement posted to www.leidychurchman.com, accessed via the Internet Archive.

5. Amy Sillman, "Ab-Ex and Disco Balls," *Artforum*, Summer 2011, 325.

6. Avram Alpert, *Global Origins of the Modern Self, from Montaigne to Suzuki* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), 275.

7. "Lauren Cornell and Leidy Churchman in Conversation," in *Leidy Churchman: Crocodile*, ed. Lauren Cornell, Karen Kelly, and Barbara Schroeder (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; New York: Dancing Foxes, 2019), 141.

8. Sara Ahmed, "Interview with Judith Butler," *Sexualities* 19, no. 4 (2016): 491.

https://www.artforum.com/print/201908/daniel-marcus-on-the-art-of-leidy-churchman-80812