

From Balthus to Beksinski: the Art of Danny Malboeuf

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Danny Malboeuf ('kolaboy') {1} is a self-trained artist/illustrator from Statesville, North Carolina. Working mainly in acrylics, he paints in an allegorical figurative style that combines surrealist, symbolist and pre-Raphaelite sensibilities {2}. His deviantART gallery and journal are [here](#).

First, let me say that this essay consists purely of personal impressions. I apologise in advance for mixing the famous with the less-well-known, and the living with the dead, but it seems to me that there is much common ground in comments made by, or about, the Swiss/Polish/French painter Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski), Polish surrealist Zdzislaw Beksinski, and American artist Danny Malboeuf (kolaboy). In addition, I must apologise to my subjects: I am sure that none of the three would welcome such direct critiques and comparisons of their work, with Malboeuf always delightfully evasive on specifics, Balthus ever convinced that his paintings should be seen, not read about or read into {3}, and Beksinski claiming that “What’s important is not what is visible but what is hidden... Or in other words, what is revealed to the soul, not what the eyes can see and can be named.” {4} Foolish, I rush in where angels fear to tread. I recall with trepidation Beksinski’s response to Dziworski’s cinematic homage to his art: “This way some jerk has blown his nose over my paintings – there is no relation at all! [...] It is just stupid, awkward, hopelessly parochial and doesn’t lead anywhere.” {5}

Categories and creative process

Fantastic Realism cannot be compared with Surrealism as a garden cannot be compared with a jungle. The fantasy of the Surrealist comes from the subconscious without formal order or relation, whereas the Fantastic Realist uses his images selectively. [...] The automatism of images of the Surrealist are a sharp contrast to the meaningful symbolism of the Fantastic Realist – Wolfgang Grasse {6}

It is easy to imagine Malboeuf’s complex and intensely symbolic tableaux as gardens of Fantastic Realism; as others have remarked, his figures often appear to have been placed in their unusual settings with the deliberateness of statues. And yet this artist professes a process that is largely lacking in conscious intervention: “Thinking is detrimental to the purity of expression, and a ‘figured out’ painting always looked figured out. What is the meaning behind a particular piece? They all mean *something*, but I never know exactly what while I’m painting them. Maybe it’s the visual equivalent of speaking in tongues.” {7} And elsewhere “I detest exactitudes, limits, and definitive answers. If you define something unequivocally, you limit its meaning.” {8} Beksinski took this a step further, refusing even to title his works: “It misses the point to ask me what scenes in my paintings ‘mean’. Simply, I do not know, myself. Moreover, I am not at all interested in knowing. [...] I react strongly to images that have no obvious answer to their mysteries. If there is a key to their construction, they are simply illustration.” {9} Like Beksinski, Balthus left the titling of his paintings to others {10}. Nor would he be drawn into commentary on his intentions, declining with a polite “I can’t talk about my own work. I never do. I’m a religious painter.” {11}

As Dali observed, “Drawing is the honesty of the art. There is no possibility of cheating.” {12} It is significant that, in addition to painting, Beksinski produced a corpus of extraordinarily detailed monochrome drawings, at once both ghastly and beautiful. Malboeuf too has an impressive body of such work, typically of fantastic organic chimeras whose monstrous biology seems all too credible. Who would have thought that we could feel such empathy for the offspring of a genetic engineering program gone horribly wrong?

Shared attributes and circumstances

Malboeuf is completely self-taught. This is no bad thing; to quote Beksinski, “I have no regrets over not having had any formal training as an artist. [...] I must discover the answers on my own.” {13} Even Balthus, who grumbled that he had had to teach himself everything by trial and error, and who learned his craft mostly by copying the work of Old Masters, was well aware that he could not have learned what he needed to know from the art schools of his day {14}. All three were marginalised by the avant-garde art cliques of the times in which they began to forge lonely paths towards their intensely personal visions. Balthus admitted “my early career was very difficult, as I was despised by my generation” {11}, while Piotr Dmochowski’s book *Struggle for Beksinski* describes some of the many difficulties that he encountered in attempts to popularize his friend’s art {15}.

In addition to their autodidact status and early isolation, these artists share a number of similarities in

temperament and character: all modest to the point of self-effacement, private and enigmatic, and yet at the same time well-read, passionate and articulate. All three stand in awe of the genius of music. Balthus claimed “I should like to render the beauty of the divine. Only Mozart has contrived to do so.” {16}, while Beksinski is on record as saying “I am primarily inspired by music. [...] What if I had my druthers? I would repeat after Churchill with a modification: ‘I would compose music for my first thousand years in heaven.’” {17}. And Malboeuf: “All that I have created is born of my understanding of music, and of my own sorrow. [...] Music is the only voice I hear.” {18}

In fact, Malboeuf and Beksinski share a profound aversion to silence. The former writes “Music, the beautiful lie. It taught you to hate silence above all, and so you do. Still, small voices wait in the folds of silence”, whereas the latter went so far as to confess “Silence during the day fills me with horror. To avoid it I am ready to switch on the vacuum cleaner.” {19} Naturally, both men would listen to music while painting. They are further connected by an electric wit and an ongoing dissatisfaction with their own work {20}, attributes which find a joint expression in Beksinski’s “You may say that I’m in love with myself, but this affection is quite unrequited, as most often I do not satisfy myself”. {21}

Beauty and the beast

Of Balthus, critic Jean Leymarie observed that “He shares Rilke’s sense of the wonder and mystery of young girls, including the mystery of angels. Angels, as Rilke says, are frightening. And beauty itself is frightening. Balthus is very sensitive, he shows in his environment, in beings and in nature, that which is divine. Obviously, he is full of fun and irony too. The Lucifer in him is unavoidable, and Lucifer was the most splendid of angels.” {11} Just as Balthus takes a venal scene of violation in *The Guitar Lesson* and surreptitiously models it according to the 15th century Villeneuve-lès-Avignons *Pietà* {22}, so Malboeuf models odd but ostensibly profane images such as *The Cirrus Sea* and *A Lonely Ski Trail* as a *Madonna col Bambino* and *Pietà*, respectively.

To mortals, light loses meaning in the absence of darkness. An obvious justification for the presence of unsavoury elements in some of Malboeuf’s paintings is to heighten the contrast within the picture, thereby intensifying the beauty found elsewhere in the composition. Why else introduce excrement into the mystical *I am Two*, *We are Three*, or urine into the otherwise beautiful *The Northern Lights*? Nothing so clearly highlights the difference between oil and water as mixing the two. But, while convenient – and perhaps, on one level, accurate – logical explanations such as this sell the artist short. Speaking of Balthus’s work, the painter François Rouan hinted at a deeper mystery with the comment “The urine one can cherish when a lover’s body is at issue...” {11}. Indeed, the magical strangeness of forbidden combinations can serve as an intimation of the *ganz andere* – the ‘wholly other’, the numinous, the sacred – whose manifestations in this world primarily inspire a sense of terror and awe {23}. Art critic Jean Clair ventured further in a personal vision of this paradoxical territory:

We can talk about sacred painting, or a feeling of sacredness in painting, if we keep in mind that the sacred is exactly the opposite of the saintly. Sacredness is not saintliness. The saint brings together, the sacred is what divides. The saint is involved with, how shall I say... a sort of foretaste of the delights of paradise. With the sacred, you never know if it’s linked to heaven or to hell. The sacred is etymologically that which is both desirable and repulsive. It’s both what one desires the most, what is most fascinating and yet taboo. The sacred stimulates a desire for possession, but also repels you as belonging to the unclean and the tainted. If we refer to this original definition – the old, primary meaning of sacred – then yes, Balthus’s painting is concerned with the sacred. Artaud immediately realized that, with Balthus, he was up against works that were both fascinating and repulsive. He once called Balthus a painter who smelled of putrefaction, of carrion, with the whiff of epidemics and catastrophes. He saw that, and that’s why he liked Balthus more than the provocative tactics, which were quite superficial, of his Surrealist friends, who never went very far: they were just images that shocked you initially, but which you grew tired of five minutes later. That’s the difference between great art which reconnects with the sacred, and ‘imagery’ that claims to be sacrilegious, and in doing so, goes back to being nothing more than profane amusement. {24}

Beksinski provides an additional perspective. “I quite simply have been trying from the very beginning to paint beautiful paintings. Beautiful. Of course you may take that for coquetry, and yet, it is the essential thing, the only thing that counts. [...] Additionally, the beauty of a painting should not be confused with the beauty of the *subject*. For example, I can imagine a beautiful painting which depicts a hanged person, and an awfully drab one of Venus taking her bath.” {25}

Works by both Beksinski and Malboeuf invite use of the term ‘Gothic’. As one exponent observes of poetry and prose, “To be Gothic, there needs to be something ugly in the beauty, or something beautiful amidst ugliness. A juxtaposition of the startling with the mundane, the sacred with the profane. Gothic requires a certain eccentricity of phrase or imagery or subject or mood, or of the writer him/herself.” {26}. Of course, such sentiments are equally applicable to the visual arts. Given Malboeuf’s location in North Carolina, it seems fitting to add Tennessee

Williams' description of Southern Gothic – that sub-genre distinctive of the American south – as a style that captures “an intuition of an underlying dreadfulness in modern experience.” {27} Or, to quote one admirer's response to Malboeuf's *Epileptica*, “the overall effect of the picture leaves a haunting impression that there is something mysteriously wrong with our American suburban culture.” {28}

Muses and leitmotifs

An artistic predilection for young female models is nothing new, with most of the Old Masters harbouring this preference. Such subjects epitomise the pre-eminent transition of human life (that of child to adult) as it culminates in a form capable of the complementary transition. In mythological terms, the *adolescente* develops into a newly-made microcosm of the life-giving Earth {29}. But while Balthus spoke mainly of a “sacred eroticism”, it has been observed that his adolescent girls are, in the purest Sado-Baudelairean tradition, “now victim, now torturer” {30}. Echoes of this seem to infuse Malboeuf's young models, whose dreamy gazes transport the older male viewer past their girl-next-door '70s clothing and impossibly luxuriant hair to a paradoxical core in which protectiveness vies with forbidden attraction. If at times Malboeuf's wistful eye for teenage girls seems to metamorphose into a fully-fledged mystery religion, we should remember that his creative root resides in his own youth, and that each painting can be seen as an attempt to valorize the joys and exorcise the demons first encountered in those formative years. But risk remains the handmaid of honesty in such endeavours. Balthus, for his part, quashed the recurring suggestions of impropriety in his work with the declaration “I have only ever painted angels.” {31}

Malboeuf often intensifies the visual drama by placing his slender protégées in alien or desolate settings where he can juxtapose physical extremes such as fire and snow. The cyanosed lips of girls painted *en grisaille* hint at the transience of flesh and blood, however beautiful – or is it perhaps just a trick of that mysterious blue Christmas light? When Thanatos dominates, Malboeuf's muses appear in hellish scenes that are more Beksinski nightmare than Balthusian dream. Calling such works “futuristic pre-Raphaelite paintings corrupted by the forces of the darkside” {32}, and acknowledging the “biting admixture of religion and sexuality” in others {33}, critic Linda Luise Brown aptly observed that “there's a repellent attraction to this work that's compelling.” {32}

In a series of images, sometimes it is a recurring combination of seemingly unrelated items that carries significance. Just as three elements – a girl, a cat and a mirror – are repeatedly recruited by Balthus for his visual alchemy, three features are found juxtaposed in some of Malboeuf's more haunting works. The latter's triad seems to consist of a girl; a tower or cylinder of liquid, often containing a creature; and an elongated or rigid object. The Freudian frisson takes a sinister turn as soon as we notice that the container is usually shown with its contents leaking or spilled. Other paintings, such as *I Sing of a Maiden* and *Star-Spangled Girl*, appear to tread the same perilous ground more overtly.

Although crosses and crucifixions appear almost as fetish items in the work of both Beksinski and Malboeuf, the two men are differentiated by the former's avowed lack of religious belief. Malboeuf's Christian upbringing and faith are clear from his writings {34}, although his disavowal of Roman Catholicism {35} may come as a surprise in view of his fondness for incorporating its trappings into his art. For his part, Balthus was a devout Catholic who identified painting with prayer {14}, and claimed of his ostensibly secular output that “everything I paint is religious.” {31}

Malboeuf's blackened tree stumps, with their amputated branches, seem to have grown in the same bleak forests as those of Caspar David Friedrich. Another recurring motif in Malboeuf's work is the use of idiosyncratic flash-cards – captioned icons from a personal and seemingly inexhaustible Tarot deck – to adorn walls and other surfaces in his tableaux. These mysterious cards seem to have something in common with the certificates and diagrams of Pierre Roy's *The Metric System* {36}. While no doubt a coincidence, the fusion of indoor/outdoor composition and surreptitious background action in Roy's painting (complete with its diminutive figure and distant fire) endow it with a number of features that are characteristic of Malboeuf's oeuvre.

Epilogue

Obviously the best way to experience any of these artists' work is to witness their paintings, preferably first-hand. Beksinski and Balthus have the advantage of international renown, with books and films devoted to their lives and accomplishments. Paintings by Balthus hang in major galleries worldwide, while collections of Beksinski's art are open to the public in the towns of Sanok and Częstochowa in Poland. A selection of Malboeuf's artwork is routinely on view at the Queen's Gallery in Charlotte, North Carolina. Artwork by all three artists can of course be viewed online.

Malboeuf is unique in offering non-visual dimensions to the experience of his work, in that his output includes

both music and writing. In particular, the dream-pop songs composed and performed for his solo music project, *Cowgirl in the Snow* {37}, complement his visual art and enhance the viewer's appreciation of it. Truly, the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Let me conclude this essay with perspectives from my three long-suffering subjects. First, from Malboeuf's journal: "Ultimately, anyone who seriously creates art can resign him/herself to being perpetually misunderstood by everyone. [...] Misguided educators, and indeed human nature, compel us to attempt to connect the dots and bring meaning from the mysteries. But the great revelation is that the dots do not want to be connected; they only want to be touched, gingerly." {7, 38} Next, the well-known autobiography telegraphed to the Tate Gallery: "Begin: Balthus is a painter of whom nothing is known. Now let us look at the pictures. Regards. B." {3} And finally from Beksinski, pithy to the last: "I cannot conceive of a sensible statement on painting" {39}.