Vast Hybridities

Dan Nadel

Therefore the individual who wishes to have an answer to the problem of evil, as it is posed today, has need, first and foremost, of self-knowledge, that is, the utmost possible knowledge of his own wholeness. He must know relentlessly how much good he can do, and what crimes he is capable of, and must beware of regarding the one as real and the other as illusion. Both are elements within his nature, and both are bound to come to light in him, should he wish—as he ought—to live without self-deception or self-delusion.—C. G. Jung

Jameson Green's *The Man* (page 74), inspired by Bill Traylor's indigo silhouettes, features a blue "coon" figure with a stovepipe hat hotstepping across a red sky, shoes defining the borders of the picture plane. Marching west toward *The Man* is *New Beginnings* (page 75): a young "Sambo" character striding also through red, though not so carefree. He holds a branch with a bad-omen crow perched atop, swinging a wizened Picassoid head, and a bloodied Philip Guston hood in his other hand. The two paintings intertwine the histories of anonymous racial caricatures and the various threads of identifiable art history with which Green is so fluid: the luscious, iterative faces of late Picasso, the radical modernism of Bill Traylor, and the glorious ambiguities of Guston's final decade. Green likens these moves to using samples in a song—offering something familiar to pull the viewer into unknown territory. His mixture of art-historical, racial, and iconographic languages and techniques asks questions without answers: Is the boy carrying anger with him or preparing to blind himself to a difficult future? Is that old head a bit of family knowledge or a weight of family memories? Does that Traylor-man stand a chance in the idealized landscape? What does he know that the child will learn? Why are these postures familiar to us in the first place?

These paintings and their questions are rooted in our oft-forbidden, rarely acknowledged cultural miscegenation. No one said it wouldn't be messy. Green can be understood as part of a heterogeneous tendency described by Robert Storr in his essay "Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque": "The ruin of perfection is the origin of vital hybridities, mutation, and cross-fertilization—the source of hitherto unseen combinations of familiar forms. Thus the breakdown of a previously established order provides the armature for rearranging its components; and from that process the shape of a provisional new order emerges."[i] We can all agree that things have broken down; Green is surveying the ruins and offering paintings undergirded by a naturally fluid and structural drawing sensibility and a joyous love of paint: the hot yellow sun as an ironic Christ- halo around the kid; the swooshing pigment along the "man's" overalls held aloft by vigorous stacks of magenta strokes. *The Man* and *New Beginnings* are so alluring as sensual objects that it's easy to miss the subversion within: What are we taking pleasure in, here? Are we watching an artist subvert caricature? Is he implicating himself by making the things? Or the viewer? What, precisely, are we supposed to think?

No one could respond better than Robert Colescott:

I was brought up to make paintings that were important visually, with an internal structure and rhythm that grabs people, surprises them, and moves them, like Duke Ellington. It is so ingrained that even when I ignore that aspect, it happens. It has a lot to do with my generation of artists. But when I get my work up in a gallery, you see this room full of big, sensuous paintings. It's the first impact that people get. They walk in and say, "Oh wow!" and then, "Oh shit!" when they see what they have to deal with in subject matter. It's an integrated "one-two punch"; it gets them every time.[ii]

Green gets to his own sensual paintings by starting with drawing, which is where it mostly began for the New Haven native. He was early under the spell of superhero comics and precision-engineered twentieth-century illustrators like J. C. Leyendecker, and he studied illustration at the School of Visual Arts, which, like any professional school, honed his chops, and then painting at Hunter College, where he found his visual and painterly vocabulary. That vocabulary is driven by line, color, and figure. The paintings begin with a skeletal mental image from which he draws out the players

OPPOSITE: Jameson Green's studio. Photograph by Tod Lippy.

Jameson Green in his studio. Photograph by Charles Roussel.

in charcoal on canvas. Then he paints one figure at a time: his lines delimit the shallow, nearly Cubist spaces, and then articulate each element, leaving space for plenty of painterly accidents and experiments that reward close looking. The artist's thick hues come from a personal color synesthesia—he makes his chromatic choices primarily by the feel of each pigment on his fingertips. Once one figure is fully painted, he moves to the next, then to the next, giving each a distinct life. This approach shouldn't work—he "should" be laying down a color ground and then building it out—but Green wants to work faster than he can think, to stop any doubts about each particular being so that he can be as free with the paint as possible, within the given structure.

This mode of working is successful because, first, per Colescott, each image has a traditional compositional structure—*In Hopes That We Find What We Need* (page 20), for example, reads as a slightly tilted triangle; and, second, because the elements within that structure are, likewise, fastened by confident black lines. But within the superstructure and between the substructures, Green gives himself plenty of license: he binds together the gaggle of bodies and faces (including his own) with material moments—a beige sack zigzagging into an arm, or centering an orange hair tie as if it were the bellybutton of the painting, or depicting only three sets of legs for eleven figures because that's what you can do in art.

The permission inherent in the medium also allows the artist to load ever more weight onto his icons. *Neighborhood Games Pt. 2* (page 31) offers two Black men passing a blunt between them at a Braque-like table stacked with guns. Each is under a Guston hood. In another painting, *Look There Boy, Way Over Yonder* (page 37), a child is under the hood following an adult. When will the boy be wise enough, be man enough, to see for himself? *The War Drum Echoes on Into That Impossible Line Where the Waves Conspire* (page 16) is a past, present, and future vision set on a beach freely swiped from Dana Schutz. Here's a ghostly femme who may exist in a different era (stark white figures can signal a time shift in Green's images) than the drummer next to her with a hood halfway down, facing a child who is marching into the water, rifle in hand. For Green, as for Guston, the hood is a mirror and a blindfold; it doesn't always signal the Ku Klux Klan. It's an all-purpose art historical device, a tool that, though highly charged, can be deployed as easily as a crow or branch—like any agile tinkerer, Green likes "a basic object with maximum utility." This allows him to simultaneously address the dialogues within painting and his own sociopolitical concerns. The hood can signal, he says, that "this evil exists in the best of us. You can become the oppressor if you don't recognize it in yourself."[iii] He asks, but doesn't have answers: If we're killing each other, are we doing the oppressors' job for them? If we blindly follow the logic of any philosophy are we ultimately deforming ourselves? Are we so different from the evil we fear?

Green's project isn't reducible only to the grotesque, but it certainly sits alongside similar tendencies found in Schutz, Robert Crumb, Ellen Gallagher, Carroll Dunham, Mike Kelley, John Currin, Kara Walker, and Maria Lassnig, among many others. This partial list is pulled from "Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque," in which Storr goes on to explain:

The grotesque results in this fashion from an eruption of things systematically denied: instinct by convention; the Id by the Super Ego; minorities by the majorities; majorities by more powerful minorities. But as Freud insisted, the return of the repressed always involves distortions of the primary impulse or idea. We may lament them, but such transformations are neither a moral nor an artistic failing. Furthermore they are inevitable. Longings for perfection should not divert attention from striking imperfections, much of whose interest resides in the telltale traces left by the forces that inhibited the full and free expression of the feelings or thoughts at their source. If anything, the most artful grotesques enhance those traces. When the repressive forces are largely internal, the image or object may take on a dreamlike or nightmarish aura. When they are predominantly external, the deformations generally resemble burlesque or horrific magnifications of otherwise ordinary realities. To the extent that either type of grotesque pointedly reminds the public of its baser inclinations and unadmitted transgressions, then the tendency is to blame the messenger.[iv]

It's an uncomfortable truth that Green's work does indeed query the messenger—the artists, really—and his and their culpability in foregrounding but not resolving (as if anyone could!) what lies beneath even our most well-excavated ideological and aesthetic surfaces. And about Schutz—Green has painted four (and counting) paintings in a two-year span explicitly referencing *Open Casket*, the controversy around it, and the idea that any image is too sacred to make or sample. It's a painting Green loves, and found liberating, both for its audacity and compositional rigor, and for Schutz's stated empathy. With *Neighborhood Games Pt. 3* (page 39), he blends *Open Casket* with Ludovico Carracci's *Lamentation*, starring the artist himself as John the Apostle gleefully pointing at the swirl of paint that leads back through time and media to the photograph Mamie Till-Mobley wanted the world to see. The interpretations double and triple back on themselves: Is Green satirizing the idea of Till as a Christ figure, or making an affirmative suggestion that Till was a sacrifice of the son? If the latter, sacrificed for whom and to what end? Is he elevating Schutz's painting to the status of Carracci's? Is he laughing with the audaciousness of *Open Casket*? Another meditation, *My First Enemy and the Last* (page 11), is a self-portrait in a coffin, the artist's wrists bound and hands forming a grayscale heart. The composition is a bold insertion of himself into the titular statement. *It Was Us, Not Them* (page 35) asks after the desire to blame the other and not the self. *I'm Sorry* (page 34) has a boy with a gun at his side in the casket. Is he sorry for shooting someone? Sorry for failing to stop something? Green says his "paintings are infused with my own experience, they are not meant to preach. But I do believe that my paintings harbor human elements that interlock with people's lives." And they do—once the questions begin they keep coming, rightly remaining unresolved.

Open Casket is a well to which he keeps returning, as he does to Colescott, whose *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware* of course took off from Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. As Colescott wrote, "Appropriation can also challenge cultural values that have led us to honor certain artworks. When George Washington crossed the Delaware in Emanuel Leutze's painting it was about heroism and nationalism. But when George Washington Carver crosses in mine, it's about the flip—the sham of tokenism and how the black role in America was other-directed, other-determined."[v] Green's version, *The Child Who Is Not Embraced by the Village Will Burn It Down to Feel Its Warmth* (pages 78–79), removes all the historical figures and iconography from both paintings and places the scene

on a small rowboat within the confines of a shallow Cubist room blown out by a deluge. Here is Colescott's tuxedoed crow and wolf character (itself borrowed from Tex Avery's 1940s Slick Joe McWolf, a zoot-suit-wearing caricature) symbolizing the worst of us; a desperate January 6 seditionist clinging to the Stars and Stripes; and aggressors of shapes and colors. Green is investigating what it took to make America what it was and, now, what it's becoming. It's a painting that asks what a revolution might look like now, when our lives are inundated daily with images of young men committing violent acts as, they imagine, the only means of asserting their power and autonomy.

The most recent cycle of paintings digs much further back to a group of myths centered around the sacrifice of the son. In three large canvases and a group of related portraits, Green explores the human emotions, paint languages, and contemporary implications of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ for a better future; Abraham's offering to sacrifice Isaac as a show of faith; and Cronus eating his son out of sheer power hunger. Green is painting these with ever sharper edges looking to the pine tree angularity of F. N. Souza's religious paintings. We are privy to Cronus's depraved indifference as he tears apart the pearlescent child, setting off crimson fireworks. Rooted in the pageantry of Rubens and the grit of Goya, these paintings are asking what's worth a sacrifice, what lessons are on offer, and how, as with the American story, we go forward on a ground riven with violence. Green, a son and soon to be a father, is deep in the weeds of the human project, offering questions beautiful, terrifying, and necessary.

Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Robert Colescott, *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook*, 1975, © 2017 The Robert Colescott Separate Property Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Jameson Green, *The Child Who Is Not Embraced by the Village Will Burn It Down to Feel its Warmth* (see also pages 78–79)

NOTES

EPIGRAPH: C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 498.

i. Robert Storr, "Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque," in *Writings on Art 1980–2005*, ed. Francesca Pietropaolo (London: Heni, 2020), 543.

ii. Robert Colescott, "Cultivating a Subversive Palette," in *Art and Race Matters: The Career of Robert Colescott*, ed. Raphaela Platos and Lowery Stokes Sims (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2019), 232.

iii. All Jameson Green quotes are from a conversation with the author, July 28, 2022.

iv. Storr, "Disparities and Deformations," 554–55.

v. Colescott, "Cultivating a Subversive Palette," 229.