



BRIAN KOKOSKA AND JONATHAN VANDYKE PHILADELPHIA

In an infamous 1960 happening, Jim Dine swallowed tomato juice that looked like paint, poured it over his head, wrote "I love what I'm doing. HELP!" on a canvas, and then dived through it. His uninhibited use of materials freely drew on the kind of gestural abstraction Jackson Pollock had pioneered, extending the material past the boundaries of the canvas and into everyday life. A 1961 paint gesture by Jasper Johns—at that time a closeted gay man—was by comparison rather timid. Johns left a bite mark in an encaustic piece that curiously resembles a flayed penis, then refused to show it for many years.

That work's title *Painting Bitten by a Man* provided the name and background for a recent exhibition by artists Brian Kokoska and Jonathan VanDyke [Vox Populi; June 1–July 1, 2012]. The two were quite forthright about expressing queer sexuality through paint, and by devoting its entire space to their work, Vox Populi amplified their statement. The gallery walls were festooned with bold canvases of fetish-masked figures, some engaged in explicit sex acts; photo montages featuring naked men; and constructions designed to ooze multicolored paint. The exhibition's focal point was VanDyke's performance titled *Cordoned Area*, 2012, in which two male dancers use their bodies as a paintbrush.

Masked figures engaging in gay sex is nothing new in art; neither is erotic performance. The difference was the work's exuberance and the inextricable link it drew between paint as a material and as an erotic outpouring. In the hands of these two artists, it became a bodily fluid. The participants in the performance, for example, did not merely apply paint using their bodies, but the pigment, which was cleverly affixed to their costumes using elastic bands, seemed to emanate from within. The mark left by the two after the performance was like the soil left after a sexual act.

The theme of painting as soil continued in several constructions by VanDyke that, through the run of the exhibition, released quantities of multicolored paint onto the floor or onto themselves. *The Insatiable Horizon*, 2009,

featured a horizontally-stretched tube with paint puddles below each dangling end. Another, *Painting #1*, 2011, consisted of a box-like construction of slanting MDF boards. A burlap sack covering the piece's top half was raised just enough to reveal a hole dripping paint.

VanDyke gave us more "fluids gone wild" in a nearby photo montage titled *Lavender Mist (Equivalent)*. Over a textbook reproduction of Jackson Pollock's *Lavender Mist: Number 1, 1950*, he slapped a snapshot of what appeared to be a naked college-age partier dousing himself with beer. This was one of a series of works in which the artist applied homoerotic materials to excerpts from recent art history.

Kokoska displayed large colorful canvases of masked figures (e.g., *Healing Hands*, 2012) alongside smaller paintings and sculptures of demonic-looking fetish objects. One painting, *Lily Liver*, 2012, showed a deep red colored cone with a diabolical smile; a blue clay sculpture *Conehead*, 2012, echoed the painting's form and had the same grin. The stitched-up mouths and squat cone shape of these figures resembled similarly-shaped clay representations of the Yoruba trickster deity Elegba, whose facial features are rendered with cowrie shells. These images seem to align gay sexuality with a spirit world that predates conventional morality.

One might argue that masking, covering, and coy juxtaposition of homoerotic photos with "straight" painting are signs of lingering shame around queer expressions in paint. But the out-of-control nature of these creations and the marriage of gay sexuality with primordial matter tell another story, that gay sentiments run deeper than civilization's suppressions of them.

—Edward Epstein

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Jonathan VanDyke, performance view of *Cordoned Area*, performed by David Rafael Botana and Bradley Teal Ellis, 2011–2012, durational performance for two men, three hours [courtesy of the artist]; Jonathan VanDyke, *The Insatiable Horizon*, 2009, cedar, jute, webbing, cast urethane tube, paint, 25 1/2 x 58 x 19 1/2 inches [courtesy of the artist]