

## Costa Dvoretzky's *Adam & Eve at the Engine Gallery*

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by Matthew Purvis

At first glance, there's something unusual about two iconic figures like Adam and Eve finding their way into the world of Costa Dvoretzky's paintings. But it's not that he hasn't made art historical references in his oeuvre before. Like those instances, there's a certain sardonic perversity to them. The couple who were banished from the pure visuality of God to the profane world of speech are presented separately, forming a kind of diptych, and accoutered with a few details. He has a book. She has an apple. These gestures to the symbols often accompanying the infamous duo do not distract from the way they are presented. There's something overwhelmingly banal about them. The viewer encounters them on a one to one basis. They stand at the most generic of heights, but their eyes do not lock with the viewer's; there's something vague and distancing in their glances. Although they gesture out to the viewer, standing in a mock contrapposto, there's a sense of uneasiness as the environment which surrounds them decomposes at the periphery.

Unlike many of the bodies which the painter renders, they do not seem physically strained. They don't struggle, bend or pull. While their upper bodies have muscle, their lower halves are corpulent. This heaviness makes them grounded, in no small part due to their stolid verticality. Such a stance is in stark contrast to a more common character of Dvoretzky's like the Salsa teacher he depicts, twisting on a mattress and losing all solidity as her body decomposes into the inanimate objects which surround her. His figures generally convulse, their fate is to be diagonally torn across the horizon. It's an infinite pull because it can never be finalized. Movement requires a stability of space and time which the surface of his canvas and its constant dissolving of planes suggests is implausible.

In general, his paintings depict a world of horizontals. Bodies are placed in ambiguous positions with their extremities lurching from the frame. Even if the figure is vertical, it stands under the threat of losing ground and being stretched apart. They are figures of suspension: figures who are always about to fall. But that's where Adam and Eve's symbolic importance begins to resonate. After all, this is the pair who fell from the heights and lost Perfection; they are the patron saints of banality. The use of these two figures is not an arbitrary reference. It is intimately tied to the way he renders the world via a subversion of this myth. The formal properties that Dvoretzky works with are completely inherent within the subject matter.

It's impossible to say if Paradise, like the Earth, is an infinite horizontal. The fact that the canvas for Adam displays broken circles carved into the paint hints at a disparity in the cyclical nature of these spaces. It is possible to suggest that the vertical thrust of these figures comes from their apparent falling and the breakdown of vertical supremacy. Pulling themselves from the mud, they stand erect, but stunted, as though gravity were about to crush them. Yet, it isn't gravitas that they possess. It's bathos, not pathos that wins out with his figures. His recent paintings verge on caricature, even when they are images of the artist himself or his wife.

The paintings are made of many layers, but the depth is purely illusory and constantly denuded. There's an extraordinary thinness to the surface of his canvases. This is accented further by how fat much of his brushwork is. The layering of the paint does not allow for a foreground and a background to be firmly established. As you follow each swath of paint, you realize that the plane it illustrates vanishes into another and then another. Such an ellipsoid patterning of elements creates a force of suspension which mirrors that of so many of the bodies that populate his work.

Within this kind of suspension, causality is absent. These could as easily be stationary bodies dissected by space as the other way around. There's nothing tragic about a world where everything is suspended. It's not a world where tragedy is possible. Instead, it is a black comedy for these lurching figures who never speak. Mouths rarely open in his paintings. It would be pointless for them to cry or laugh. The body takes on all sensations without judgment. For this reason, the heads seem to float. They aren't as often dissected by the layers on the canvas and retain a flatness and distortion which the rest of the body lacks. Garishly lit from multiple with the accents of a scarcely diluted yellow, the faces float.

Dvoretzky paints bodies in two distinct modes. First, they are a strict and distinct set of lines. The delineation of the boundaries of the body are close to the fluid boundary lines that one normally finds in a sketch. They immediately seem to seal the body within a tight envelope which binds the flesh. It is no coincidence in this regard that many of his earlier paintings played on imagery from sado-masochistic activity. Binding reveals the multiple faces of the flesh, which ripple through a set of mottled hues that shift the modeling of the body. While the erotic situation pushes this binding to a kind of parody, one can find the examination of this experience as a constant presence in his work. This strict determination of the body is quickly undermined by the second mode in which he renders flesh.

Rather than illustrating the distance between elements, the the density of the paint operates as a multi-layered skin. The edges of each variation appear like a scab. This sense of corporeality is echoed by the unique way that he cuts the canvas, making digs into the paint to create tension with lines of the grid. There's a convulsive quality to the bodies he paints. Their affective state, whether pleasurable or painful, is never determinable. Rather, the kinetic value which they display is an instance of sensation at its most innocent. It's in respect to the question of localizing sensation that one must turn to the kind of surface which he manufactures. Even shadows are rendered as the decomposition of bodily elements.

If there is a fetishism in his work, it is in the way he creates the flesh. It is a complicated kind of fetishism, one which is unique to certain painters and writers. As the French poet Joe Bousquet once said, "My wound existed before me, I was born to embody it. The surface of the body is created by making small patches of indeterminate matter. These synesthetic zones are given their intensity by the density of the paint which often thins to show the grain of the canvas beneath. The greatest tension is between the nudity of the canvas and the planes which the paint place on it. The most pronounced surface in his works are the areas of blankness. These are voids that occasionally puncture the stuttering between depths. Like the cuts he makes in the canvas, these are open wounds that deny the body its illusion of solidity.

Every area of the body contains a realm of possibilities and a variation of intensities. As a result, there is a constant spatial simultaneity in which the play of sensation is omnipresent and the visual circuit between these areas remains in constant motion. There are radical alterations of speed between one quotient of sensations and another. Movement stutters, stalls and speeds up again. Such a surface allows for a constant proliferation of details but never allows them to be accumulated. It's a profligate surface.

All of these procedures amount to the creation of an event, one which is made of a series of tactile traces that are repeated at varying speeds in superimposition so that no origin and no end is ever possible. This painting technique could have led to superimposition and blurring but instead results in a field where the ground is continually lost. There is no distance.

In spite of appearances, the paintings do not depict characters or stories – they depict events, those eccentric moments which precede and exceed the possibility of narrative. All of this takes us back to his subversion of the idea of the Fall. The Fall assumes the beginning of history, that is, of time. It also assumes the metaphysical significance of verticality and the loss of Perfection. By metamorphosing the Fall into the state of suspension, Dvoretzky escapes from both banality and Perfection to create a circuit of unremitting intensity.