

Celebrity Dread:
Angst, Fame and the End of Privacy in the Work of James Gilbert
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The artist James Gilbert fuses the quiet angst of dread to breathless longing of popular culture. Gilbert's plastic haute couture, monochromatic drawings, and color soaked paintings reflect contemporary mores: the collective obsession with stardom – its madness and beauty – in part derived from the culture of Los Angeles and in part the result of the mass dissemination of images through screens. Together, these two forces, the unease of existential questioning and wooziness of unending desire, constitute Gilbert's response to a world in which celebrities constitute a global pantheon. It is the upshot of an overwrought sense of publicity and the bastardization of the public brought on by the Internet, reality TV, paparazzi, and the artist's life lived on the celebrity front in Los Angeles. In coupling celebrity and dread, Gilbert raises the specter of existentialism and shoots it through the spectrum of technological spectacle in the new millennium. Though uniquely conceptualized by Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre, the great existentialist philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, existentialist dread is by and large the subtle anxiety that accompanies the confrontation of the emptiness, absurdity, and, by connection, boundless freedom of life. Inasmuch as fame is our sought after fortune, Los Angeles has become our world. In the age of the Internet and reality TV, Warhol's fifteen minutes have become truly timeless and fame has become boundless, a perverse attribute of democracy.

A clutch of Gilbert's intricately hand- and machine-sewn plastic dresses and suits hang from the ceiling. Made from industrial grade plastic, they are common yet refined, at once haute couture and grunge. Gilbert understands well that plastic is rich in symbolism. The word "plastic" means false and glitzy. Plastic surgery promises the return of youth and radiance from the deft hands of a surgeon. The handwork of Gilbert has tweaked the term yet again, giving rise to "plastic" as both glamorous and edgy: wearable form that is somewhere between hot-off-the-runway chic made by a *recherché* house of fashion and homeless wear made from a survivor's tarp after hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005.

Gilbert's figures gather together like so many light-refracting ghosts at an ersatz party. So delicately sewn, so carefully designed, it is the would be apparel of famous people attending a sophisticated affair. Yet in denying them bodies Gilbert has denied them full personhood. They are citizen-wraiths in American democracy circa 2008, where pizzazz and panache matter more than substance and knowledge. Celebrity in the

twenty first century is the right of everyone in a consumer-based democracy. It functions something like land and the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which ensures freedom of speech, press and religion. Gilbert's otherworldly figures are the culmination of a certain aspect of humanism – the manifest destiny that replaces territory with fame. Manifest destiny comes to fruition as celebrity, brought on ever so easily by real-time surveillance on the Internet and reality TV. While the right to land is overcome by the right to fame, the First Amendment is emptied of its fundamental democratic significance.

In Gilbert's work, existential emptiness – recognition of life's complexity and the unknowable even in the face of jolly Hollywood – comes in many forms. In the monochromatic drawings it arrives by way of sheer absence: human figures that lack faces. Their facelessness tells of a world in which the precision of identity gives way to mass anonymity and likeness. Though views onto varying scenarios, people alone and in groups, the drawings in "The Privacy of Underpants" elicit loneliness. They tell of being alone together, especially "Half and "Half." In this drawing viewers find a group people who are well nigh de-gendered. They could be men or women, tourists or business people, gathering at the foot of monumental architecture. Out in front of them there is a computer keyboard, connecting them by a wire like an umbilicus to the world. The two figures of "Before and After" pass one another in a hallway the indistinct quality of which is matched only by their lack of faces. The man in "Bag of Chips and a Movie" sits alone, tuned into to the Technicolor world he experiences through the window of his large flat-screen TV. The blankness of the oval rug on the floor corresponds to the blank screen of the TV on the dresser and the bare face of the man sidled up on the bed. Gilbert has said so much with so little, just a few black lines. The artist communicates not so much forlornness but a tabula rasa – the manner in which plugged-in life has triggered a cycle of self-invention and reinvention that makes one's identity but a blank face as it runs at light speed.

The absence of faces underscores a social economy of identity construction that is worked out on-line, in photographs, and through screens, in particular one's identification with and self-modeling after television and movie stars. In short, the publicity of one's private life creates an identity. As with Facebook, one creates a face for the public by turning the private inside out, making the public private. Gilbert's erased faces point to this process of identity creation. In his art, the absence of face symbolically disconnects volition from person. It takes no will to post a private life on-line, as information – pictures, home addresses, phone numbers, resumes – appear both willfully and without intention.

Gilbert's paintings similarly deploy existential emptiness by layering anonymous human figures atop bright, lucent fields of color. The figure in

each painting is a proverbial everyman – Willy Loman reconsidered for an age in which Hollywood has become a global empire. The painting “Vowed to Learn Blood Type After a Near Fatal Nosebleed” shows the silhouette of a man in pink and black paint. His shoulders are broad, reflecting once again fine apparel, perhaps a suit coat by Giorgio Armani or a Hugo Boss knock-off. Brown-black paint drips over his pink head and body in Abstract Expressionist splendor. The men of Gilbert’s paintings have not “lost face” in the sense of humiliation or disgrace. Rather, they have lost face in that their specificity, identity, and individuality have been erased.

In bringing together celebrity and dread, Gilbert has given body to a new sense of the existential. The ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and the seminal mid-twentieth-century work of Abstract Expressionist painters, such as Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Franz Kline, articulated existentialist dread in heroic fashion – through large canvases, abstraction, broad swathes of color, and the gesture of the drip. This dread was largely masculine, serious, and melodramatic in timbre and hue, far from the effeminate, trendy and ironic world of Pop art that would soon follow. Gilbert collides the lightness and femininity of celebrity popular culture into the darkness and *Weltschmerz* of dread, creating a body of work that is nimble and almost weightless in its aesthetic while heavy hitting and profound in implication.