

Essay by Naomi Vogt

Analysis, Toads, the Virgin, and Enjoyment

One.

It looks a little like a crime scene, but one in which the crime hasn't happened yet. The potent glow of three orange sodium lamps, hanging from the ceiling with abundant black wire as if they had been ripped out, shines on the brown of an old-fashioned tiled floor. Three humongous toads are lying on their backs. I say humongous – vertical, they would nearly reach my height, which is tall perhaps only for a toad but is still the size of an adult. In a corner of the room, the Virgin Mary (she too of human stature) is levitating as she gazes down on the recumbent amphibians. She is covered in dirt that is encrusted in the folds of her skin and clothes as though it had once been dripping slime. The toads are made of bio resin, in three different milky shades of pink, dark blue, and sea green. Exact replicas except for their color, the animals are holding their bellies with the spread-out toes of their forelegs. When I first lean over one, I assume it is caught in an uncontrollable fit of laughter, which makes me smile. This is key, but to the second part of this text only.

Because the more I look at the toads, the more the possibility dawns on me that they might be suffering. Their stomachs are covered in shiny metal-leaf flakes, each creature sprinkled in a different metal: one silver, one copper, and one brass. The fairy-tale flavors of this detail and the animals' cartoonish traits somehow only accentuate the hypothesis of a death scene. Their pose could be about gluttony and painful digestion, but the contrast between their glimmering skins and the room's murky environment suddenly tells a story of succumbing, perhaps to excessive greed. I am witnessing a collapse from overabundance, a pathetic last attempt to clasp crumbs of luxury onto oneself before the advent of punishment.

This is an exhibition. One that invites witnessing and the inhabitation of an image. The image is made up of seven sculptural elements, three toads made by Denis Savary, three hanging lamp pieces and a Virgin Mary made by Chloé Delarue. In the back of the resin and polyurethane-foam Virgin, a small, neon-tube turquoise cone is hidden. As the sun begins to set outside the room's large windows, the image becomes increasingly bathed in orange, to the point that the toads' colors are drowned, and it feels as if we have entered a different kind of world. The room, the art space Mayday, used to be part of a shipping company and now feels like it floats alone in the industrial area of Basel's Hafenquartier, a neighborhood that, at least by Swiss standards, is run-down and remote.

When the two artists began work on this image, which is also an environment, installation, scene, and show, another image crystallized their collaboration: *The Madonna Enthroned with Saint Ambrose and Saint Michael*, painted by Bartolomeo Suardi, known as Bramantino. The painting likely dates from the late 1510s. At the center of this unusual image, the Virgin enthroned holds baby Jesus with one hand, while her other seems to present a palm to Saint Ambrose, identifiable by the miter. He is being rewarded for his theological combat against Arianism, a doctrine according to which Jesus was simply the son of God, born and made rather than pre-existent and made

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incarnate. At Ambrose's feet lies the lifeless body of Arius, the originator of the heretic doctrine. At the right of the panel is the Archangel Saint Michael, identifiable by the scales and sword. He is holding a tiny, eerie body with greying skin like that of poor Arius, here a symbol of a dead soul, for which somber-looking baby Jesus reaches out irresistibly. Finally, most strikingly in the symmetric composition is the corpse at Michael's feet. Mirroring Arius and depicted in the same extreme foreshortening that brings dead heads face to face with the viewers is a humongous, greying-green, supine toad.

Bramantino's toad, like ours earlier, is shown with his back legs sprawled out and his protuberant eyeballs making uncomfortable-to-see contact with the floor. Unlike our belly-clenching toads, however, this one's forelegs have fallen to each side, suggesting no life and complete exposure. The animal is said to represent malignity defeated. But the painting is the object of much interpretative bickering. In fact, its strangeness has even taken the bickering beyond the confines of art history. First, there are those who minimize the iconographic oddity by starting with the claim that the dead giant is a frog and that frogs are no strangers to the bible. They are one of the plagues brought down on Egypt to help free the Jews from their captivity under Pharaoh. Moreover, Saint Michael is expected to defeat Satan, and Satan is sometimes depicted as a green or reptilian hybrid figure. So why not a frog? And let us not forget that, a few years before Bramantino, Hieronymus Bosch had started depicting frogs as demonic beings. The issue is that it's unlikely Bramantino would have ever seen Bosch's work. Then again iconographic invention, however perplexing, is manifestly one of the joys of life, especially when an icon seems to be in the air. And that is where frogs often are, if Pepe the Frog has demonstrated anything.

But the plot thickens. Other authors like to speak of this painting as an enigma. Maybe the palm isn't a palm after all, and Ambrose isn't himself either. There are issues around two angels added later and the fact the panel was once part of a triptych. Spatial mysteries in the painting abound and suspense remains around the odd octagonal church in the background (the work is also known as the *Madonna of the Towers*) as well as confusing demarcations between physical and metaphysical space. Details get juicier around the Virgin's face, which is quite masculine: does it not even feature a serious hint of stubble? Various facts could clarify this, such as the potential influence of 'Black Madonna' icons and their darker (not bearded) skin, or the idea that her androgyny allows her to also represent the church, with which her body fuses in the composition.

Sometimes the interpretation becomes just as famous as the interpreted, especially when the interpreter is a bit of rockstar. In 1980, Jacques Lacan, at a conference in Caracas, brought up Bramantino's painting. Discussing the human incapacity to know what to do with the Other's body, the psychoanalyst reflected on how much better other creatures fare in this field – frogs, for example. For Lacan, this painting – which lived rent-free in his head as we'd say today – vouches well for 'the regret that a woman is not a frog'. Rather than a sexist quip, he was referring to how much harder things are for us human lovers, who must handle the bodies of *parlêtres*, namely subjects whose existence is anchored in speech. Lacan then moved on to the painting's most striking aspect: the Virgin's resemblance to the traditional portrayal of her son as an adult.

Mercifully, Lacan did not then use this convincing observation to abruptly surmise new historical meaning for the painting – unlike, say, Freud's rather disastrous interpretations of Leonardo. Yet the temptation to analyze seems one of the most irrepressible. It also feels increasingly ubiquitous. An alien scrolling through the comments section of any image or video on social media might induce that the communication of our species relies primarily on interpretative interjections. As Erwin Panofsky and Aby Warburg taught us, figurative art requires iconology, namely 'iconography turned interpretative'. Delarue and Savary's installation is not without knowing echoes of Warburg, for that matter, based as it is on what the latter called *Nachleben*: the survival, in the form of an afterlife, of past motifs. Yes, symbols exist; they are import-

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ant and sometimes thrilling. But what's with the obsession with pinpointing 'the message' in every visual production, with deciphering the meaning of every performance, movie, meme?

There is ample appetite for uncovering the secrets of a composition, for decoding covert symbols, in other words, for translating form into verb. And the deliciousness of analysis can make one forget about (partial) untranslatability. In a special issue of a Lacanian bulletin, an author writes a text that builds thoughtfully – if somewhat literally to my taste as regards art history – on Lacan's brief comments about *Madonna Enthroned*. In an aside, the bulletin's zealous translator explains that she was inspired to investigate further. Her corrective postscript convincingly argues, against the author, that Saint Ambrose in the painting is indeed Saint Ambrose. Less convincingly, she contends that Lacan was a better zoologist than her author, because the dead creature is definitively not a toad but indeed a frog. What a ride! (My mild disagreement with the last point is based only on my short dive into *The Encyclopedia of Animals*, and my acceptance that Renaissance animals can be approximate, to say the least). We love collecting signs as symptoms, and there is joy in the detective, and slightly paranoid, gaze. Surely there are nastier vices than playing inspector.

Perhaps there is paradox though, and waste, in these fantasy versions of precision. Back at Mayday, when I walk toward the mournful, dirtied Virgin with her glitching body – traces of digital conception – and the neon cone in her back (maybe an ironic mini Christmas tree or the engine helping her to levitate), I am no doubt getting closer with the aim to investigate. Towering over those impotent toads in that swamp-like room, how sad is she really? In her corner, falsely discreet while so geometrically dominant, she must be loving this little scene. Fishy. Meanwhile, the agitation around the other Virgin, Bramantino's, recalls less subtle analyses of androgyny in religious painting. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* hinges on the feminine traits of the figure next to Jesus in Leonardo's *Last Supper* (a painting which Bramantino is known to have copied a few years after its completion). The novel's hero, who occupies the telling, crazy position of Harvard's best 'symbolist', discovers that this figure, instead of the disciple John, was Mary Magdalene, with whom Jesus was secretly married and making babies: the book's other heroine happens to be their descendant.

This is probably an unfair, easy target, although the book and then the film's massive following did create mobs of aspiring conspiratorial art symbol detectives. Many art historians since have presented, patiently and with almost no detectable sneer, the reasons why Brown's alluring conspiracy theories (which he did not invent) fail to hold – key reasons being that Mary Magdalene wasn't at the Last Supper; that painting her there at Leonardo's time would have been blasphemy; and that Leonardo was known for painting effeminate men. Some of the analytical roads of detective work take us far from what is right in front of our eyes. It's in this sense, I would suggest, that the labor of precision, or rather what looks like it, can lead to the grotesque. The reverse path might be a valuable variation.

Two.

It looks a little like a farce, if a farce were an installation, and the installation's puzzling sculpture, lighting, and iconography could muster the flair required of humor (they can). If you enter the exhibition space through its internal staircase, as your eyes reach floor level they land on the smooth crotch of the pink toad. Quite the prelude. A second or two later the rest of the scene appears, of course, in its orange oddity, with the plasticky Virgin Mary farthest away, looking from here like a toy that tried to take itself seriously. This installation doesn't deal in actual shock, in illusionism or, therefore, in the uncanny. It is excessive, genuinely unfamiliar, as baffling as it is absurd; it is funny. In Lacan's enthusiasm for Bramantino's own baffling image, the pictorial observations are quickly connected with *jouissance*, namely an excessive vitality, or a transgression of sorts in the 4 regulation of pleasure. I must admit

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that I don't fully understand the connection, or not in a way that I could paraphrase, but the intuition resonates with my experience at Mayday. Theorist Todd McGowan uses a notion that owes to *jouissance* but works a little differently: enjoyment. In his definition, if pleasure is eating an ice cream, enjoyment is eating it even after you're full. You still want it, but the experience of having it will be both more ambivalent and stronger. Other examples might be exerting oneself, madly dancing against the doctor's orders like Giselle in her titular ballet, or getting romantically enmeshed with someone all while saying to yourself 'oh boy, now this is a mistake'. One of McGowan's examples of enjoyment is ecstatic religious experience.

At the heart of this unreasonable version of pleasure is an unreconcilable contradiction. Two (or more) things don't fit together and yet you don't separate them. They grate against each other, and you let them. Maybe you even listen to the friction for the first time, and that new sound is the enjoyment. In these scenarios, a limit, however thin, is overstepped, and in that transgression lies a small liberation. A similar mechanism is at play in many forms of humor. And it's at play in these artworks. Ambivalence is the condition for all these situations, in which unmixed feelings never last long.

The display at Mayday is called *Octogone* (French for octagon). The title feels arbitrary, it could be forgotten almost right away. There is the odd church of course, behind the Virgin, which seems to be octagonal, but then that's Bramantino's Virgin rather than Delarue's, so a quasi-inside story only. An octagon is also the equivalent of a boxing ring but for mixed martial arts. The shape gives more opportunities than a square for fighters to push each other against the fence offering the audience exciting perspectives. In French slang, 'octogone' is even becoming shorthand for a planned fight. Not a spontaneous brawl in a bar, but something with a form. *Octogone* is the arena for the unreconcilable contradiction. Incidentally the Freudian metaphor for the psyche is that of a battle, too. This exhibition at once invites investigation and frustrates it; its scene is a nod to the psychological scene of interpretation, in which the mind is in constant conflict with itself.

So, I propose that the toads are at once dead, dying, cheekily asleep awaiting princesses' kisses having mixed up their fairy-tale plots, laughing hysterically, and struggling to digest beyond-pleasure ice creams. As Savary pointed out to me, the people who believe in the swamp theory of life (the theory of evolution) are usually incompatible in conversation with those who believe we're all here thanks to the Virgin's son. And as Delarue's work points out, in our era – the 'purgatory of quantum computing' era – it's hard to know what counts as heresy, but trying to find out is worthwhile.

When describing their collaborative process to find which pieces would go together, they used the term 'rub' rather than work or fit. When things rub, they are sometimes grotesque together, but rubbing is also about precision. *Octogone* is but the first installment of a potential series of scenes into which one can walk, created through the friction of encounters between artists and the figures with which they populate spaces. Future iterations may not feature a melancholic yet dominating Virgin Mary, they may not be bathed in an unforgettable color, and they might be, God forbid, toad-less. In the meantime, how delightful to suspect I'll forever associate a specific shade of orange with a sequence of mixed feelings. How delightful to get to be disgusted by silver leaf on a belly and to know that enjoyment was had in the form of worrying about having laughed with a possibly dead toad made of resin.