

Redell Olsen, *Punk Faun: A Bar Rock Pastel*. Cambridge, MA: Subpress, 2012. 115pp. \$15

Redell Olsen's latest book, *Punk Faun*, puts the time-honored genre of pastoral on a sonic and semantic continuum with the urban modern art world. This implausible hybrid begins (or ends) with a fantastic story of official commission on the back cover:

This work was commissioned by Isabella d'Este for the walls of her *studiolo* after she attended a day long screening of Matthew Barney's *Crewmaster* [*sic*] at The Roxy in Brixton, London and a few weeks later stumbled upon an artist's talk by Raphael on Ed Ruscha's painting "THEY CALLED HER STYRENE." However, it was her experiences that same evening in a karaoke bar off Oxford Street that convinced her to go through with her planned idea and to approach a writer who could carry out her design for a bar rock pastel.

The story goes on in this vein. This is high camp marked by an arch attitude toward tradition—a "baroque pastoral" ("bar rock pastel") with the color palette of a rocker's wardrobe. *Punk Faun* is full of textual winks like the pun in its title. But Olsen makes it clear that a pastoral after styrene and punk rock is an altogether different animal—"Bambi saddled / for war," maybe, or "Girl-Satyr" that "go alight machine slots," or "the stag" driven "with a green marshmallow stick." If seventeenth-century pastoral always implied a beautiful relation between rich and poor, then the times in which the unity of society has frayed are ripe for mock-pastoral, the satirical treatment of pastoral themes exposing how glaringly *ugly* relations are between rich and poor. Beneath her artifice and humor Olsen also shows a serious Situationist urbanism that seeks to transform "passive spectacular consumption," as Guy Debord theorized, by gaining "control of all levels" of history. By mashing up materials from the pastoral tradition, contemporary art, and consumer culture, Olsen's poems create constructed situations that antagonize *la vie quotidienne*. The historical distance between her sources—from Ben Jonson and Milton to forklifts and DVDs—is collapsed, but in our struggle with the poems the distance reasserts itself and the false naturalness of our world is transformed into strangeness and contingency. In this sense, *Punk Faun* is part of an experimental tradition aiming to motivate consumer consciousness out of its sclerotic state, and to challenge artists, including its own, about what it means to make art within a world of commodities.

The poems capture language in snippets, curated and shaped into formal symmetry: "FEELING FLOODS / FLOODS / FEELING"; "Standard Gas Stations gestations"; "tromped / oils"; "in lair snare // wares beware";

“warm in swarm.” These ludic curatorial poems are the weakest in the book, in which Olsen’s fondness for chiasmus and anadiplosis can become as tedious as slogans and the puns and phonemic play are too heavy-handed. But Olsen has many modes, and most of the poems are carefully crafted semantic structures, and, though they aren’t closed structures, they drive us toward exegesis. Olsen’s poems settle into semantic orderliness, sometimes through the development of a skeletal narrative, as in “of ceilings”:

two breathe clouds across the sky to one another  
being scarred by birds they stand on wavy air  
push on neighbouring particles to make tunes I  
permanently bound into the stuff of naked walls  
slaked lime paste and coarse marble on canapés

The framework here, it would seem, is, as in the third movement of Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*, two shepherds dialoguing with their *ranz de vaches*, another staple pastoral theme. The tunes are figured as clouds that are “scarred” by birds flying through them and stand precariously on the “wavy air,” suggesting the falsity of the too-insistent Pythagorean harmony of man and the natural world that constitutes traditional pastoral. The physical literalness of song as pushing “on neighbouring particles” has already begun the inevitable repositioning of the pastoral theme into the Atomic Age; soon we are experiencing “the pain / in kick that is deployed as a mammal might be / in enemy waters where even dolphins have teeth / pulling away fast from what look like shells AWOL.” But this kind of provisional coherence is more often achieved by other means, as in “stars bid,” where an active reader must mine the poem’s language for traces of broader aesthetic and historical contexts before the connections begin to emerge. Here is the first tercet:

stars bid last orders long before  
gilded chrysler’s day cabs new  
alloy of fear the glory axel slays

In three lines, we find a dense collection of sources productively detoured and highly torqued. “Gilded chrysler’s day” evokes Matthew Barney’s film *Cremaster 3*, which centers on the construction of the Chrysler building. The Gilded Age, a time both of technological innovation when a “new alloy” made possible the construction of skyscrapers, and of economic consolidation when a new class of super-rich art patrons like Andrew Carnegie emerged, was followed closely by that infamous depression in which only “fear itself” was to be feared. “Cabs”: not taxis; look a bit further down in your OED to find the slang verb meaning “to pilfer, snatch dishonestly or meanly.”

This is a start, but what to do with the stars and the glory axel? Milton's *Comus* provides the key:

*Comus*. The star that bids the shepherd fold  
now the top of heaven doth hold;  
And the gilded car of day  
His glowing axle doth allay

Olsen's revisions juxtapose the classical hierarchy of pastoral (morning star/shepherd/flock), reflecting the political ideology of the age (God/King/populace), with the inverted capitalist hierarchy by calling our attention to the historical transformation of the words. "Stars" today are more often on the television than in the sky; "bid" and "orders" have taken commercial meanings. "Axel" names a figure skating move (modern figure skating is a product of the Gilded Age as well), and so the poem seems to replace Milton's image of the chariot of the sun setting in the East with that of a person being killed by the blade of an ice skate—a spectacular mirror of the violence propping up the society of the spectacle.

Olsen's poems share many of the characteristic features of the language of the Cambridge School: paucity of articles; extensive catechresis; juxtaposition of various registers of speech, from jargon and archaisms to demotic syntagms; ambiguity as to what modifies what; nominalization of verbs and verbalization of nouns. These technical maneuvers produce the jagged rhythms, clipped cadences, and often jarring dissonances that many of us have come to appreciate from the more experimental side of contemporary poetry in the United Kingdom. The poem "chorus of modular units" is characteristic. Composed of two unrhymed couplets per page, it begins

light of adhesive squint beyond the market in art toss  
yeah right or think other side the big capital P posed

by He who struts in grim mechanical feet presents  
cowboy heel as rich ornament or encloses placards

and continues on the adjacent page

MAKE IT YOUR WAY IN PREPARED MODULAR UNITS  
pre-fab come grammar or cannot imagine my suppose to

raises the perceived stakes stiff upper lip so brand indentikits  
great branches cluster orientated merchandise leaves to husk

Despite its surface complexity, Olsen's high artifice is neither honed for its own sake, nor offered as a sufficient response to political and ethical urgencies. Her more direct and deliberate response to these urgencies comes by way of a formal and stylistic arsenal bolstered by the Situationist vocabulary of cultural critique through citation and détournement, a vocabulary that her peers in the UK have largely abandoned to their US counterparts. *Punk Faun* is Olsen's best work to date and represents a substantial advance from *Secure Portable Space* (although everyone should read the humorous rewriting of a portion of Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*, called the "Minimaus Poems," in which she pours cold satirical water on the grand guru's flaming testosterone). These new poems are distinctively inventive—and rigorous. Beneath her several masks we discern an acute ethical sensibility that seeks to recover the past for the sake of the future of those for whom it seems bleakest.

Eric Powell

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Anne Waldman, *Jaguar Harmonics: Person Woven of Tesserae*.  
Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 2014. 54pp. \$18

Throughout Anne Waldman's *Jaguar Harmonics: Person Woven of Tesserae*, a small graphic recurs. Ambiguously animal in black brushstrokes on nearly every page, it is a pivot for the book's core questions. What is a person? And what is a person made of? Continuing in the tradition of previous works like *Structure of the World Compared to a Bubble* (2004), *Manatee/Humanity* (2009), and *Gossamurmur* (2013), Waldman seeks out alternative personae and phenomena for inhabitation, in and through which to grow her poetics. *Jaguar Harmonics* is particularly attentive to the ethics of such a practice, using it to ply a new music that attempts to cross the sonic registers of the human voice and animal noise.

The collection opens with an epigraph from Angel Dominguez depicting a mythic species of jaguars as "keepers of the cosmos" under the influence of the psychedelic vine Yagé. Dominguez's jaguars, "eyes wide seeing...beyond the galaxy," suggest something of the "harmonic" mode that Waldman is after in her poems: a mode of perception that is at once deeply embodied and out of body, simultaneously of the human brain and of a decentered multiverse. Even the jaguar, a predator at the apex of the food chain, takes time out from hunting to stargaze, which raises Waldman's central ethical question: how can we be better keepers of the cosmos? Still, Waldman's jaguar is not a mute seer; it speaks to the problem of cruelty that becomes a refrain in the book: "Person woven of cruelty / and then again, of cruelty."