NOTES AND COMMENTS

Court Theatre Debuts *Native Son*

Chicago's Court Theatre debuted Nambi E. Kelley's adaptation of Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* last fall, a production directed by Seret Scott. Kelley is an actor and playwright; her work has been produced by Steppenwolf and Lincoln Center as well as Court. In adapting *Native Son*, she has taken up a novel that Wright wrote as a response to two events. First, having taken a job at the South Side Boys' Club in 1934, Wright became disenchanted with the flimsy attempt at racial betterment advanced by this institution. Using the protagonist of *Native Son* as a metonym for Chicago's black male youth, he noted, "Here I felt for the first time that the rich folk who were paying my wages did not really give a good goddamn about Bigger, that their kindness was prompted at bottom by a selfish motive." Second, Wright was disillusioned by the reception of his previous work, a collection of short stories called *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938). Upon reading the reviews, he explained, "I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears." It was in this mode that Wright wrote *Native Son*, working against acceptance, against sympathy, and toward a "hardness" that would demand that his white readers in particular confront the inevitable effects of the structural racism that their actions—and cash—were supporting.

Kelley's adaptation retains the novel's high degree of psychological and political tension as well as the anguish of its central character. The energy of its staging maintains and reinforces the energy of Wright's anti-fascist and anti-racist critical animus. However, in eliding the novel's discursive third part in favor of the action of the first two, the play misses an opportunity to dramatize the complexity and nuance of Wright's critique of racist institutions, the prison system in particular. This critique, while historically grounded in its Jim Crow context, seems nonetheless one that might persist into our own context. Kelley attempts to recuperate the primary "flaw" of Wright's novel—the diminution of character study in favor of structural/institutional critique—but this recuperative emphasis on individual characterization flattens the narrative richness of the third-person voice and its bitter irony.

Court Theatre's realization of the play preserves the temporal and spatial locations of Wright's book, which is set in the South Side during 1939. Here is how the theatre's "Study Guide to *Native Son*" summarizes the plot:

> Bigger Thomas has dreams. Dreams of being a pilot and of being something more than what his circumstances as a young, Black man living on the South Side of Chicago in the late 1930s would allow. In order to help his struggling mother and siblings, he accepts a chauffer job in the home of a wealthy, White family in the Hyde Park area of Chicago. Bigger's dreams are suddenly cut short when he accidentally kills the daughter of the family and must go on the run from the police. This adaptation…tracks the societal circumstances that led to Bigger's fateful killing of Mary Dalton and his attempts to evade capture by the police.

Kelley's adaptation opens with this climactic scene, in which Bigger kills—accidentally—Mary Dalton. Mary Dalton is the rash only child of the Dalton family, which owns a great deal of property on the South Side of Chicago; she's also a communist sympathizer. The production maintains the discomfort that characterizes the relationship between her and Bigger; her persistent familiarity, her rich-girl hypocrisy, and her amplified sexual energy push him ever closer to his limits. After Mary spends the night drinking heavily, Bigger helps her into bed and then smothers her with a pillow while trying to quiet her. By presenting this scene at the very beginning of the play, the Court production amps up the dramatic tension from the outset. From this point forward, the production tends to favor short scenes, which accelerate the pacing of events and heighten the intensity of emotional expression but don't allow the dramatic tension to develop the complex web of causation that it might. From the outset the audience is attenuated to Bigger's guilt while simultaneously gaining only diminished access to the forces that lead to this initial climactic event. As a result of this dynamic, the staging necessarily emphasizes character, interiority, individual action—and the scene, which in the novel seems inexorable, determined entirely by Bigger's "fate"—loses its political bite.

This action sets off the inevitable-seeming rest of the novel and play, a fatalism operating through an interplay of voices, controlled ultimately by the third-person narrator. The complexity here poses challenges for the dramatist. Bigger, forced to burn Mary's body in the household furnace, makes up a narrative about her being kidnapped by Communists (the ransom note he contrives is signed, "Red") before the police discover evidence of her death in the form of an earring in the furnace. Scott stages the brutal action of Bigger's disposing of the body by building the furnace into the stage floor; it's a critically important moment for the audience to witness, and keeping the action on-stage is crucial. Bigger is accompanied in this scene, and for most of the play, by a figure called The Black Rat, a mirror-self of Bigger that personifies his interior monologue. The novel's polyphonics are necessarily difficult to duplicate on stage: Bigger's interior monologue intrudes on the dialogue, explaining his

actions and responses, in short ejaculations: "Should he try to get money from them now? Hell, yes! He would show that Britten bastard!" The Black Rat, the representation not of Bigger's Id but of the institutions that make his fate inevitable, redoubles this inevitability by serving as the voice of the novel's many rhetorical questions. Yet the novel also has a third-person narrator that answers the ambiguity and uncertainty of these questions by providing a very particular kind of existentialist commentary. In a scene in Book III of the novel, called "Fate," this narrator articulates Bigger's sense of fatedness: "An organic wish to cease to be, to stop living, seized him. Either he was too weak, or the world was too strong; he did not know which. Over and over he had tried to create a world to live in, and over and over he had failed." It is this voice, the closest one in the novel to Wright's own, that takes control in "Fate."

Kelley's adaptation pays conscientious attention to the novel's interplay of voices and tones, which it renders skillfully in the play's many dramatic tensions. But the play's staging neglects the voice of philosophical reflection and critical commentary that comes to the fore in "Fate," and it depicts the centerpiece of this section of the novel, Bigger's murder trial, only briefly. This scene is certainly difficult to stage, full of droning monologues on the part of Bigger's lawyer Max, a Communist working *pro bono*. But the trial is the scene of inevitability, where the reader comprehends the extent to which Bigger is less an agent than he is a "problem," in W. E. B. Du Bois's sense. The trial amplifies the political questions that the novel asks, particularly concerning Bigger's "guilt." The crimes for which Bigger is tried are the rape and murder of Mary Dalton. The crucial fact is that while Bigger may be guilty of manslaughter he is notably innocent of the first charge, the rape of Mary Dalton. The thrust of Wright's political critique hinges on the relevance of this charge despite its misapplication. Bigger is a murderer; he has killed both Mary Dalton as well as his girlfriend Bessie Mears. He is also a rapist, having brutalized Bessie in the novel's second book, "Flight." Bigger is, in fact, all of the things that the prison system calls him; he's just not guilty of the rape or premeditated murder of Mary, the *particular* crimes for which he is on trial. How can bankers' daughters weep for this profoundly guilty man, made into a political question? This is a question that Kelley's adaptation of the novel, because of the scenes it chooses not to stage, cannot adequately address. The viewer of the staging feels the injustice of Bigger's ultimate death by hanging, but the injustice is particularized, focusing on a flawed individual instead of a flawed institution. It seems that, for all the play's investment in the tensions and characterization that Wright articulates, it fails to follow through on the substance of its politics.

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National Veterans Art Museum, *Surrealism & War*

Surrealism & War, the major exhibition this past summer and fall at the National Veterans Art Museum in Chicago, presented visual art by nine veterans of America's most recent wars, asking viewers to interpret images produced out of personal trauma on the basis of an art-historical rubric that foregrounded Surrealism's celebration of liberatory potential in unconscious expression. In *Surrealism & War*, then, "surrealism" itself became double in meaning, encompassing both the psychological character of the veterans' artwork and the aesthetic genealogy built into the curators' framework. On the one hand, *Surrealism & War* represented an investigation of the psyche expanded on the terrain of war. On the other hand, the exhibition aimed to recontextualize the visual language of contemporary art practices in relation to the original Surrealist movement of the historical avant-garde.

These two facets of *Surrealism & War*, however, remained incommensurate, and the art-historical framing of the exhibition distracted to some extent from the real value of the artwork on display. The artists represented in *Surrealism & War* engage with the consequences and realities of warfare more directly than the tenets of art-historical Surrealism would suggest. Entering the museum, viewers were immediately confronted with the physicality of war, not just remnants of unconscious desires. Sculptures of agonized bodies, gruesome death masks, ephemera from combat, an altar built of pharmacological detritus used to treat war-induced mental illness—all reshaped the entire museum into a living space for laying bare the trials of war. The key to the exhibition was not an art-historical correlation but rather the relentlessly sobering depictions of the horrors of war and the affective consequences experienced by soldiers who bore witness to these events. Surrealism might be a good name for the visual language of this artwork and its basic operation of making manifest the latent content of repressed experiences, but another term is needed for artwork whose purpose is to work through and extirpate wartime trauma.

As Matthew Gale observes in his survey *Dada & Surrealism*, the rise of Surrealism around 1924 followed the intensely political Dadaist movement of the prior decade and quickly departed from Dadaism's emphasis on direct responses to the atrocities of World War I. Surrealism reflected the difficulties of navigating culture in a post-war period destabilized by numerous sociopolitical shifts in world power, as the German *Dolchstoßlegende* myth began fueling Nazism and philosophical nihilism, and as Lenin's death in 1924 deflated the hopes for world revolution harbored by the Third Communist International. Surrealism, then, was launched within a European society in which no standards could be assumed for simultaneous cultural and political

transgression, a situation made evident in the heterogeneous visual program of Fascism that promoted an efflorescent culture but bolstered oppressive regimes. Surrealism ultimately tried to sidestep culture altogether and find a utopian politics within the autonomy of unmediated psychic expression: in the *Surrealist Manifesto*, André Breton famously defined the movement's chief objective as a space of pure psychic automatism that would unleash the true functioning of thought "in the absence of any control exerted by reason, and outside all moral and aesthetic considerations."

In the artwork displayed in *Surrealism & War*, these war veterans are not, *pace* Breton, expressing thoughts that exist outside of moral and aesthetic considerations. Their artwork does suggest that war itself exists beyond the codes of life, their objects and images immersed in that which is unthinkable until it is lived. But for these veterans of foreign wars, the act of being in combat is not a practice exercised for creative release, or to lift bourgeois moral strictures: it is a pragmatic mission usually undertaken with great patriotic intentions that are cast into doubt only after the trauma of war. What they put into their art in the aftermath of trauma are not the contents of a liberated psyche but rather memories of wartime experiences that remain indelible yet infinitely incomprehensible. For an exhibition like *Surrealism & War*, then, the sponsoring museum carries the responsibility of honoring veterans by eliminating the conceptual gap between war itself and such mythologies of war as the necessity of uncritical patriotism or the possibility of living beyond moral norms.

Since its inception in 1981, the National Veterans Art Museum has functioned as such a space by opening a dialogue on the real impact of war. While exclusively featuring the work of veterans, many of whom are not formally trained or well-versed in any particular art-historical discourse, the institution has successfully managed to uphold a mission invested in pragmatic pedagogy. This mission has involved the creation of a public space where the display of visually arresting art is aimed at educating the civilian community about the psychic costs of war while addressing the cathartic needs of soldiers. In a statement on their educational mission, the museum stresses its commitment to "support learning that focuses on how art can be used as a tool to create dialog"—both within the veteran community and across the broader public—"about the complexity of war and the human experience with it."

Much of the work on view in *Surrealism & War* exemplified this pragmatic approach to art as a tool for expanding knowledge and understanding. It did so by registering and interpreting raw psychic data but with a dual pedagogic and therapeutic purpose missing from Surrealist methods. Take Jim Leedy's *The Earth Lies Screaming*, a realistic (and morbid) depiction of a riverbed filled with human and animal corpses that recreates a moment the artist encountered while swimming in seemingly tranquil waters during

the Korean War. The installation, measuring in at 12 feet high and 47 feet long, runs the entire length of a wall and is physically as well as emotionally overwhelming, towering over and enveloping the viewer completely. In the gallery guide, Leedy suggests a revealing connection between the image's verisimilitude and his understanding of its surreal power:

> There was a let-up in the war and I went swimming. The water was calm and you could see yourself in it.... All of a sudden I saw through my reflection and on the bottom of the lake was rotting bodies, corpses, just hundreds of them. It was a surreal experience I admit.... I felt like I was swimming in the rotting bodies. So that had a big impact on me and it was one of the things that I had nightmares about for years after I got out of the army. The making of that wall, and the skull head, emancipated me from my dreams and I never had a bad dream after that.... It was surrealism and emancipation from fear and horror.

By fabricating a physical replica of the environment surrounding this traumatic event, Leedy was able to rid himself of the compulsive need to return continually to the site of his distress. Previously, the source of this distress could be experienced only through the latent content of his dreams, but the deliberate act of "making" that Leedy emphasizes produced a form in which the event buried within his nightmares could be made manifest and worked through conceptually and aesthetically. Leedy describes both the episode behind the artwork and the liberatory effect that creating it had on his psyche—"emancipation from fear and horror"—as surreal, though his use of the term is perhaps more colloquial than technical.

Leedy's description certainly suggests some equivalence between the therapeutic emancipation from the fear and horror of war he won through his art and the liberatory potential of an unleashed unconscious promised by art-historical Surrealism, and this equivalence bolsters the curatorial framework of *Surrealism & War*. But in Leedy's work, as in all the veterans' artwork displayed in the exhibition, the act of experiencing the objects, both in production and viewership, is mediated through the processing of trauma. Unlike the Surrealists freely attempting to access the depths of their dreams and sound the bottom of those tenebrous waters, war-veteran artists working in a "surrealist" mode are compelled by psychic trauma to produce objects that materialize the event of the trauma itself; even when successfully sublimating the trauma through artistic creation, these art objects can never completely erase the inciting incident. As viewers, we can understand such objects only by regarding the process of their making as concomitant with trauma itself.

Willingly conjuring and ending one's nightmares is a luxury unknown to veterans. These differences entail objectives for Leedy's and the other veterans' artwork that remain distinct conceptually and aesthetically from the ambitions of art-historical Surrealism.

In a work by John McManus, the title of which is unknown, a blindfolded bust in marble is surrounded by a barbed-wire base, making the sculpture highly symbolic but realistic as a self-portrait of pain. Accompanying the work is a statement recollecting violent encounters of combat in Vietnam that still follow McManus to this day. For McManus, the blindfold demonstrates more than just an object of suffering; it goes beyond a singular imagination into a call for collective reasoning. The work calls for a continuity of human spirit that would extend outside the individual world of the mind and be coextensive with the common world of a universal humanity. This is a world, McManus himself suggests, that needs from art more opportunities for compassion and mutual understanding rather than the supersession of rational controls over individual thought. After all, as McManus puts it, "we are blindfolded on this planet; we are unable to see what we do to each other."

McManus's statement is one somber reflection on the cost of war. The mediation of psychic trauma and suffering in this artwork opens onto a social dimension that was not at the center of historical Surrealism. A new vocabulary for the work of veterans and others producing out of empathetic need is crucial: we need fresh terms for conceptualizing their practices as part of an experiential yet critical political imaginary. Finding the right aesthetic rubric for their practices and achievements would not be about securing a niche for war veteran artists within art-historical canons, but rather about giving cultural recognition to the visual language they have devised for communicating psychological and psychical harm on a large social scale. Such recognition, in turn, would open new channels for reintegrating soldiers into society and support efforts to erase the stigmas attached to all survivors of traumatic violence. We need not necessarily deny the potent resonances of Surrealism's aesthetic influence on some veterans' art, but we should properly contextualize, and in some instances bracket, the conceptual and ideological dimensions of any aesthetic movement that would hinder us from seeing the trauma of veterans' art just as clearly as the resulting art object. McManus's blindfold is an appropriate metaphor for the stakes of seeing fully the causes as well as the effects involved in the aesthetic orientation of veterans' art: it is an art *against* concealment, the deceptive act on which war thrives and depends.

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