

Tropical Burnout

One hot urban afternoon, my friend whisked me off to Jones Beach. She had a mischievous glint in her eye answered only by the scene awaiting us, where a clique of extreme tanners were chatting it up in full reveal.

"How's Barbara?" one said, sipping at a drink.

"She's enjoying retirement—she's taken up gardening!"

No sooner than I could point out we were in the nudist section, she had already planted the umbrella.

They say one person's utopia is another's nightmare. But in retrospect, it was hard to look away. The nudists' bodies held plenty of visual interest, most of all in the expanse of toasted skin interrupted only by the sudden angle of a plastic martini glass...and laughter...

Tropical Burnout, Eric Fertman's recent exhibition at Susan Inglett Gallery, recalls those insouciant beach bums in all of their existential havoc. In his own primal theater of burnout, Fertman provides us a compelling cast of abstracted creatures. They have been charred, suspended in animation, and imaginatively assembled of many promiscuous parts, ping-ponging us between eros and the death drive. All jokes aside, one of the noblest qualities of Fertman's sculpture is how it takes pleasure and interest in exhausted objects and injects them with a humorous, at times libidinal second wind.

And we can stare if we want to.

Fertman's recent sculptures, some of which were first shown in Miami, play on the tropes of the tropical landscape, mimicking the rounds of coconuts, the zigzag of a pineapple and other sordid summer paraphernalia. *Planter X*, 2015, displays a bird of paradise flower emerging from a totem of shapes including two flaccid phalluses, two tooth-edged rectangular blocks, and two upturned cones at the base that resemble Madonna's bra from her *Blond Ambition* world tour. The flower, combined with the wooden totem, is an unexpected element, and has been modified with a black rubber hose pulled over its stem, giving it a vaguely kinky feel. Like the nudists, the sculpture is at once sexual, graphic, and anti-erotic.

In this group of work, Fertman stacks lines and curves, balances anthropomorphic, vegetal and geometric shapes. Many of the shape hybrids can pass as human, botanicals, or animal bodies. Fertman de-naturalizes familiar forms and disarms cliché with his combinatory and mimetic facility that forms a special kind of object-based humor.

Caricature is an important vehicle, allowing us to revel in anti-heroic figures and in sculptural wit. Fertman's recent work conjures cartoon violence. Yet knowing that the damage is not real provides comic relief and possibly even feelings of affection towards these faux-tortured bodies.

We can stare if we want to, but it's not a mean stare.

The comic attitude of Fertman's sculptures start in the motifs he seizes from the grips of common association. He gives specific forms multivalent options for how they can perform. There are phallic limbs in many of the sculpture, which, depending on their arrangement, become arms or palm fronds, or just cocks.¹ His sculptures can be interpreted as 3-D extrusions of cartoons on paper, as decorative motifs decked up high, or as visual puns.

¹ Originally, the ancient Greek roots of comedy began with Dionysian phallic processions and fertility festivals where bawdy songs were sung; the erotic and the comic are bedfellows.

In the realm of material, (like the realm of comedy), the artist cannot escape that which is base or practical, but he's not slave to it either. Many of Fertman's motifs emerge first in drawings made of line work and black filled-in shapes. On paper, forms don't appear buildable or even intended to be built. The drawings offer stylized possibilities for abstract sculpture, exercising the epic tumble and extravagance of a Rube Goldberg contraption without any of the engineering. Parts are freed of their functional fixedness: a given shape will transform from a base, to a limb, to a connector, to a topper. Shapes change roles and become lexical units for form-play. Ziggurats, shnozzes, knobs and clubfeet are but a few. One recurrent meme in 2008 was a soft-serve ice cream swirl. It was eventually spun out in wood and sandwiched together with a pair of sculpted eyeglasses, evoking the 1950s. Currently, some of his choice motifs are the palm frond, the ribcage, and the stomach.

Once these forms are conceived on paper, the drawings quickly dare the artist to work from something with little practical reference to wood. Working in wood presents its own specific demands and opportunities to address scale, surface, mass, form and balance. Fertman uses the manifold options of the material to build, carve and finish it. He often stains the wood to either play up or diminish what it is. Trickster, shape-shifting forms and finishes let his chosen materials masquerade as other than what they are, even though we know full well what they are made of.

Often, as Fertman's sculpture rearranges and deranges familiar objects, he is making commentary on the medium and its history. His wit emerges from an engagement with the inescapable structural needs and conventions of sculpture to negotiate gravity, while failing the expectation that it may achieve material transcendence. To challenge the aspiration, Fertman periodically riffs on the iconic sculpture of Constantin Brancusi, who appropriated the use of a pedestal by narrowing or eliminating the difference between a sculpture and its base. Fertman has paid homage to Brancusi's *Endless Column*, 1918-38, a vertical ridged spire, originally rendered in wood and later built in stone outdoors as a monument. In the show, *Eric Fertman: A Comic Turn*, which I organized last year, Fertman stretched his rendition of *Endless Column* to the upper reaches of the gallery loft. Fertman's 25-foot high iteration of the column is tall but far from endless. Unlike Brancusi, who proposed that we infer infinity from the module, Fertman's column, made of painted plywood, admits the absolute finitude and non-transcendence of sculpture. Adapting the piece to our current material culture, Fertman's wooden column is outfitted with handle cutouts along the sides and evokes IKEA. It's homage paid, but most definitely in the anti-heroic register.

Which is to say, Fertman's humor resides mainly in how he describes, adapts or satirizes iconic forms rather than stopping at the recognition of what a thing is or in the naming of a thing. He turns recognition sideways.

Still, the titles he assigns to his sculptures can heighten a comic appreciation of object. Take *Detonated Palm*. One of his recent botanical spoofs made in 2014, it's a lovingly finished oak sculpture where one side of a palm plant appears to have exploded. The illusion is obviously manufactured by cutting out a jagged edge. The literalism of the title overstates the case, but in the redundancy of showing *and* telling it, we can appreciate the way the object is made all the more. Fertman leverages the title against the physicality of the object, which is always more satisfying to look at than to verbalize or name.

The palm tree crown in *Torched Palm* bends submissively, with frayed edges. A couplet of blackened triangles then carry the eye all the way to the floor. It is notable that Fertman uses wood to describe vegetal forms, if only to point out how notions of the organic or the feral are hemmed in by sculptural artifice. The wood grain sneaks back up to the black-gloss surface. Whatever is natural about the material of wood and the plant he's describing is only allowed to

re-emerge as a decorative finish. Elsewhere in this faux tropical aftermath, we see *Potted Palm*, 2014, the leaves of which are finally intact. But the plant stem pitches forward from an aggressive saw tooth-edge base and midsection. These angled trunks, bases, and stalks, evoke the violent defenses of plants—the spikes, needles and burrs rather than their gentler flowers or fruit.

And if Fertman's use of wood as a cloaked organic material was not tricky enough, he has embedded elaborate tropical flowers (fake, of course—but a very convincing fake) that further bastardize the natural and the artificial. We see a round burst of floral buds poke from the limb of a sculpture in *Boutonniere*. *Juju* is an ominous small black triangular sculpture with a floral-phallic protuberance on its front and a more literal bird of paradise stem growing from its side.

Alongside the plants and floral assemblages, Fertman's tropical scene plays out the violence of burnout on anthropomorphic forms. *Hungry Ghost*, which is stained to a scorching black, and the more acidic yellow of *Broken Man* and *After Life* combine organs and vertebral skeletons with more abstract structural bottoms. The shards of once-intact human bodies rise out of the zigurat bases, often at sharp angles. A purple-black puddle pools at the foot of *Broken Man* and *After Life*; they have clearly suffered spillage. Fertman offsets the grotesque morbidity of the bodies by the bright yellows, the cartoonish names, and the sprinkling of flowers that hold some small gesture of hope towards regeneration. Increasingly, this scene blooms with the sinister mood of a war-torn tropic – Vietnam or perhaps the nuclear test site in the South Pacific?

In an earlier iteration of these cadavers, Fertman harnessed the discomfort of a bystander who is presented with virtual violence enacted through form-play by titling the works with relational pronouns "it," "them" and "us." *It*, *Them*, and *Us* are a trio of freestanding bodies once again sporting stepped bases and with parts that have been blackened by stain and splintered by Fertman's jigsaw. A toothy spinal column, jagged like the foliage of *Detonated Palm*, borrows that same curved shape that was once the palm leaf and is now a broken rib. The body of *It* is equally incomplete, where two lung or socket shapes tee into a ridged throat with an Adam's apple. The remnants are anatomically off-kilter. All three of these anthropomorphic abstractions ask us to complete the bodies from fragments. We do this through our body, while attempting to hold any threat of identification at bay between *It*, *Them*, *Us* and us. Fertman forces us to negotiate our distance from these torched, severed, and internally exposed subjects, while knowing full well they are only playful specters of death, partially rebounding with life.

And let's not forget the black cat, a bad-luck omen whose midriff is torn open to reveal the joining of bones. The lithe curve of its hind leg and its snapped off tail (another piece of rubber hose) is also elegant. This cat is another clever appropriation, this time of an Alberto Giacometti sculpture, *The Cat*, 1954, a rough-hewn bronze cat skeleton, reeking of post-World War II catastrophe. Fertman has stalked and snatched the cat from the annals of Modern art and now the feline zombie is bounding through his burnt out jungle.

It's an all around anti-heroic scene: the electrified skeletons, the stand of brightly colored palms, a summerscape that is charred, splintered and spent on the inside... a vacation that left the nude sunbather in a hallucinatory state after too many cocktails with little umbrellas ...heatstroke....

Whatever story comes to mind, what impresses is how Eric Fertman's sculptures reroute referential meaning and break familiar forms to bits and pieces. Once fractured and severed from their source of meaning, recognizable parts of bodies are carefully reconstituted. In the rubble you can spot flowers sprouting like booby traps.

-Cora Fisher