

POST-IDENTITY GARDEN OF FAILURE

BY ALPESH KANTILAL PATEL

In the Western art world, a curious alliance has formed between those that are sympathetic to identity politics and those that have always been suspect of aesthetic judgment being tied to any notion of identity: both groups agree that we are in a ‘post-identity’ era. The former does so purportedly to distinguish between different waves of artistic production concerned with primarily racial, gendered, and sexual difference, but seems to fall back on conceptualizing identity as positional or fixed; while the latter suggests that we are post or over identity, but only to return artistic value back to a dis-embodied art object.¹ Mette Tommerup’s works make a timely intervention in these debates by suggesting a much more complex understanding of artistic meaning and identity formation.

¹ These points are exaggerated for the sake of polemics.

From Identity to Post-Identity

Before launching into a full-fledged discussion of the exhibition, I animate my points above by mapping out briefly the ideological shift from identity to post-identity in the contemporary Western art world. A useful point of departure is the 1993 Whitney Biennial exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. A watershed moment in the debates on identity, the exhibition received a “maelstrom of negative criticism” for tackling issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality, as Biennial curator Elisabeth Sussman notes.² For instance, art historian Rosalind Krauss bemoaned what she claimed was the tendency in the exhibition to ignore the forms of the artwork—the materials used and the compositional arrangement—and to conflate the meaning of the artworks with the politics of the artists’ perceived identification (racial, sexual, gendered, etc.).³ She claimed that the true meaning of the artwork transcended the identification of the artists—a position characteristic of modernist formalists.

By the late 1990s, rhetoric about globalization often cited the proliferation of

² Elisabeth Sussman, “Then and Now: Whitney Biennial 1993,” *Art Journal* 62: 1 (Spring 2005): 74-79.

³ Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Silvia Kolbowski, Rosalind Krauss, and Miwon Kwon, “The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial,” *October* 66 (Fall 1993): 3-27.

international art biennials to infer that the margin had become indistinguishable from and seamlessly enfolded within the center. In addition, a plethora of discourses emerged declaring identity as being “post,” or in some sense irrelevant, in the art world, as well as in academia and the general press.⁴ For example, one of the curators of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Thelma Golden, described the artworks of emerging African-American artists in the 2001 “Freestyle” exhibition she organized as “post-black.”⁵ Associate Curator of “Freestyle” Christine Kim explained that artworks in the exhibition were suggestive of an incipient aesthetic sensibility that was distinct from the generation of African-American artists—such as Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker, and Lorna Simpson—who had become well-known during the heyday of identity politics in the early 1990s.⁶ She implied that the coining of the term “post-black” was not meant to suggest that racial identity was no

⁴ See, for instance, the emergence of the term, “post-straight,” perhaps the most surprising use of the “post” label: Chris Nutter, “Post-Straight: How Gay Men Are Remodeling Regular Guys,” *Village Voice*, 8-14 August 2001, accessed October 3, 2011, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2001-08-07/news/post-straight/>.

⁵ Thelma Golden, Christine Y. Kim, Hamza Walker, et al., *Freestyle*, exhibition catalogue, (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.

⁶ Jori Finkel, “A Reluctant Fraternity, Thinking Post-Black,” *New York Times*, 10 June 2007, accessed October 3, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/10/arts/design/10fink.html?pagewanted>.

longer relevant for a new generation of African-American artists.

As art historian Amelia Jones notes, however, “post-black” was taken up zealously by conservative art critics who leapt to posit that Golden’s exhibition is axiomatic, or proof, that we are “beyond” identity.⁷ For instance, the *New Yorker*’s Peter Schjeldahl wrote that “the ordeal of race in America may be verging on an upbeat phase that is without precedent” in his review of the exhibition.⁸ His comment, however, seems unduly optimistic and myopic in the context of those by *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter, who considered with incredulity the term “post-identity” within broader socio-historical issues present in the United States in 2001:

...when affirmative action is in retreat; when poverty is a constant; when prisons continue to be holding pens for minority men; when American culture persists in reminding minorities, in ways large and small, that they are a problem... a wholesale rejection of identity-based art at the behest of a white-dominated art market and critical establishment would seem, to say the least, short-sighted.⁹

⁷ Amelia Jones, “Post Black Bomb,” *Tema Celeste* (March/April 2002): 52-55.

⁸ Peter Schjeldahl, “Breaking Away: A Flowering of Young African-American Artists,” *New Yorker*, 11 June 2001, accessed October 3, 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/06/11/010611craw_artworld.

⁹ Holland Cotter, “Beyond Multiculturalism, Freedom?,” *New York Times*, 29 July 2001, accessed October 3, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/29/arts/art-architecture-beyond-multiculturalism->

Cotter's statement is written just a little more than two months before 9/11—a sobering reminder of what is at stake in facile claims such as post-identity.

Schjeldahl also wrote that “as a prominent curator at the Whitney throughout the nineties, Golden was a doyenne of multiculturalism, pushing agendas that she has now magnanimously set aside.”¹⁰ In other words, Schjeldahl embraces post-black as an aesthetic precisely because he believes it is devoid of the identity politics that rendered artworks created by artists of color in the 1990s less palatable, or less reconcilable with his implicit interpretation of classical aesthetic theory as suppressing the corporeal body (in this case, that of the author's as “black”) in its value judgements. His comment that Golden “swore loyalty to high-art values” when she “pronounced the obsolescence of ‘a Black History Month label’ [Golden's words in an interview for the *Village Voice*] in the presentation of African-American art” is especially illuminating, and disconcerting, in its stark separation of the status of high art from artworks concerned with identity.¹¹

freedom.html?scp=1&sq=%22Beyond%20Multiculturalism,%20Freedom?%22&st=cse.

¹⁰ Schjeldahl, “Breaking Away.”

¹¹ Ibid and Thelma Golden, “The Golden Age: Interview with Studio Museum's Thelma Golden” by Greg Tate, *Village Voice*, 15 May 2001, accessed October 8, 2011,

To underscore the confusion about how identity does or does not fit into aesthetic judgment, it is instructive to consider the advertisement for art historian Robert Hobbs's lecture, provocatively titled “Form Revisited,” that recently took place at the de la Cruz Collection Contemporary Art Space in Miami. Given the lecture title, its description reads predictably as if he were a conservative art historian unsympathetic to notions of difference:

At a time when issues of form have been deemphasized because of the postmodern emphasis on open-ended readings, form continues to be important. The lecture will look in particular at Kant's, Mallarme's, and the Russian Formalists' uses of form and will demonstrate why they continue to be timely.¹²

However, according to his biography on the same advertisement for the event, his

<http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0120,tate,24753,1.html>.

¹² “Lecture: Form Revisited with Dr. Robert Hobbs,” de la Cruz Collection Contemporary Art Space, accessed October 8, 2011, http://www.delacruzcollection.org/calendar/2011_robert_hobbs/2011-robert-hobbs.html. I should note that I was not able to attend the lecture, which took place on October 6, 2011. I am here merely interested in exploring how at the least the premise of the talk is somewhat problematic. For instance, the advertisement (of which I presume Hobbs approved) notes “that issues of form have been deemphasized because of the postmodern emphasis on open-ended readings.” As Amelia Jones notes, however, dominant modes of theorizing postmodernist allegory, pastiche, montage, and appropriation in the 1980s did focus on *formal* production, and thereby remained largely “stripped of its corporeal politics.” See Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 29 and 30.

scholarship at least partially “relies on feminist and postcolonial theory” and he has written on the works of Kara Walker, Kehinde Wiley, and Yinka Shonibare—all of whose artworks explore black identity although in vastly different ways. The disconnect between the latter and what appears to be his interest in a return to form (without a mention of identity) encapsulates the contradictory impulses embedded within the concept of a “post-identity.” Though identity politics and aesthetics were perhaps never neatly contained as separate, non-overlapping enterprises, they increasingly have become blurred.

Post-Identity Garden of Failure

Mette Tommerup’s exhibition begins to allow for a more nuanced understanding of artistic meaning as well as the function of identity within it. The exhibition title “Full Salute” sets the serio-comic tone that underpins all of the work: it is a double entendre that refers both to a textual sign of deference—the long-held military form of respect and honor—and irreverence—a fully erect penis.

Tommerup’s works function as puns, too, but visual ones. For instance, her paintings of vegetables—an aubergine, a bell pepper, tomatoes, and turnips—begin to look phallic, sexual, and even gendered. Tommerup’s inspirations for these works are images on the

internet that have gone viral, such as one she found of two tomatoes strategically positioned to resemble an anthropomorphic sexual encounter. She astutely notes in the interview that accompanies this essay, when even “innocent” vegetables cannot escape from become subjectified, “[i]s post-identity possible?” Indeed, even describing vegetables as innocent anthropomorphizes them indicating the futility of attempting to cleave the subject/object relationship as modernist formalists are wont to do. In the mid-twentieth century, Merleau-Ponty destabilized oppositional terms such as subject/object, mind/body, and thinking/feeling by indicating they are inseparable.¹³ In this way, the sub-title of this exhibition, “Subject or Object?” is as much a ruse as the whole concept of post-identity. Tommerup’s post-identity garden, of sorts, in which “no object is spared” from subjectification is a startling affront to the notion that we are, or can ever be, over identity.

She arranges a single vegetable or a pair of them onto a spare white background in which perspective is all but destroyed—a style similar to that of the Italian still life painter Giorgio Morandi, well known for his ability to

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining: the Chiasm,” in *The Visible and the Invisible*, edited by Claude Lefort, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968 [1964]).

transform everyday objects that might appear in one's kitchen cupboard into subjects in their own right. Morandi utilized muted colors and his work often has a matte appearance. In contrast, Tommerup employs bright colors—deep purples, crisp reds, and vibrant greens; her build-up of paint and lush brushstrokes emphasize the fleshiness of her vegetables in a manner reminiscent of American artist Wayne Thiebaud's ability to hone in on the affective properties of paint.¹⁴ Unlike his work, however, her work complicates the interestedness it elicits from its viewers. That is, given the ability of her aubergine to double as an erect penis, for instance, what initially draws the viewer into the work becomes decidedly unclear and confused, ultimately foreclosing the possibility of a stable reading. In addition to the colors and textures, the modest size of Tommerup's canvases invites viewers to come closer and in so doing engenders an immediate, intimate engagement. In this way, her works make explicitly *felt* the complicity of the viewer in meaning-making. Merleau-Ponty's theorization of the inseparability of the world, mind, and the body indicates that representational images are

¹⁴ It is worth noting that the Museo Morandi recently exhibited Wayne Thiebaud's work to draw out the affinities between his and Morandi's work. See "Wayne Thiebaud at Museo Morandi," Museo Morandi, accessed October 8, 2011, <http://www.mambo-bologna.org/en/museomorandi/mostre/mostra-80/>.

inseparably bound with the subjects who view and imbue them with meaning.¹⁵ Even the "urban dictionary" in its definition of "full salute" indicates that it implies an audience.¹⁶

Tommerup's paintings of vegetables are accompanied by those of garden gnomes, who like the former appear against a white background. Each gnome is painted singly and from angles that ultimately reveal only parts of its facial features. The semi-abstract manner in which the gnomes are rendered gives them an even more enigmatic quality. As the viewer moves forward to take a closer look, the representation actually becomes more rather than less indistinct. For instance, the brownish hue of one of the gnome's faces invites thoughts (at least for this viewer) such as: is this an ethnic gnome or has this gnome just been playing around in the mud too long while naughtily arranging the vegetables we see in the exhibition?¹⁷ That is, the gnome begins to take on anthropomorphic characteristics—racial ones rather than sexual or gendered ones

¹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996 [French original, 1945]), 408.

¹⁶ Urban Dictionary, s.v. "Full Salute," accessed October 8, 2011, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=full%20salute>.

¹⁷ Gnomes feature prominently in European folklore; they are good luck charms, known to be mischievous, and not surprisingly "white" given they are of European origin (and perhaps because they are known to spend lots of time in hiding underground).

in the case of the vegetables; and therefore, like the latter, resists stable categorization.

Misfires

The inspiration for the gnome paintings was Tommerup's accidental discovery of an unusual object in her research for her previous body of work: a 4" Obama garden gnome on sale on Amazon. (As of the writing of this essay, it is priced at \$10.95.)¹⁸ Indeed, the title of the above work, *Obama Garden Gnome (¾ rear View)*, undoubtedly sets off a range of specifically political readings, all of which only to seem confirm the notion that artistic meaning is highly subjective and that meaning-making is a complex process that involves the viewing subject's preconceptions about what he or she is viewing. The reviews of customers who have purchased the gnome indicate the broad manner in which Tommerup's painting might be received. One individual seems to indicate boundless joy mixed with naiveté upon her purchase of one of the Obama gnomes, which she refers to as a "little gem" without malice apparently:

Another reason I like this gnome is that he doesn't have "things" sticking off in different directions like some of the other Gnomes do. This little gem can survive quit well in my purse without

me having to worry about him. I couldn't be more pleased with this product!

Another review is brimming with satiric glee:

I suppose one could take offense [o]ver the flag missing the stars and not having enough stripes. Otherwise I think this is a fine work of political satire...Get yours today to put next to your Jimmy Carter, Warren Harding, James Buchanan and Franklin Pierce gnomes in that section of your yard where nothing will grow—the Garden of Failure.

Tommerup's own "Garden of Failure," if you will, is full of paintings—not only of vegetables and gnomes, but weapons—that refuse easy classification and fail to signify unequivocally. The weapons, in particular, upon closer inspection are not always operational. Indeed, one might say, much like the other works in the exhibition, they purposefully misfire, literally in some cases, or fail to perform the function we expect of them. Some of the broken arrows could double as flaccid penises, deflating and emasculating the power ascribed to them. Central to Merleau Ponty's theory of sense perception is a preoccupation not of exploring the relationship between a perceiver and environment as an unbroken circuit, but instead the failure of the two to ever match up.

¹⁸ "Obama Garden Gnome 4", amazon.com, accessed October 8, 2011, <http://www.amazon.com/GardenGnomeWorld-com-Obama-Garden-Gnome-4/dp/B0045SS3K2>.

Misfires can be opportunities for re-directions in meanings.¹⁹ Indeed, in the appropriately titled *Portable gun case with green foam*, the negative impressions of the gun, holster, and bullets in the foam create Mark Rothko-like rectangular fields of dark green that float on a larger expanse of light green. In this way, Tommerup attempts to meld both the representation of the gun with the abstraction of color and in the process implicitly challenges the classical notion of color-field paintings as advocated by Clement Greenberg as non-representational and understood through only a disembodied opticality.²⁰

Tommerup's re-imagining of Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* also misfires and in the process re-directs a range of issues concerning aesthetics and identity. At first glance, this work feels out of place in her garden of failure. One obvious formal link between this work and the others in the exhibition is the fruit bowl, which in Picasso's

¹⁹ I am implicitly referencing linguist J.L. Austin's conceptualization of "misfires" in language [see his *How to do things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962)], but whether it is completely analogous to visuality requires more theorizing than is possible here.

²⁰ See Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, edited by John O'Brian, 85-94, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993 [recorded, 1960; broadcasted, 1961]).

work seems to underscore the women as objects. It is, however, the positioning of band members of the Village People wearing African masks and a pair of otherwise rugged men of color holding hands—all in the poses of the women of this infamous classic—that seems to make the work fit right in with the motley crew she has assembled. Through the pastiche of queer, gendered, raced, and non-Western signifiers she hints at the impossibility of ever delivering a definitively inclusive painting. French philosopher Jacques Derrida refers to that which always already escapes signification as the supplement which "adds itself [...and] is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude [...]. But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace," and is therefore never fully able to deliver on its promise of inclusivity.²¹ That is, Tommerup's work hints at the illimitable "etc." that haunts any exploration of identity, or the supplementarity of visual identification. Significantly, Derrida notes that the supplement "is in reality *différance*," the simultaneous process of difference and deferral, which prevents the closure of any of her representations—from the re-worked

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 144-5.

prostitutes of Picasso to her weapons, gnomes, vegetables—as definitive visual signifiers.²²

Tommerup notes in the accompanying interview that she had always been disgusted and offended by *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*'s misogynistic and primitivist overtones; and by the fact that modernism effectively begins on the backs of the prostitutes (literally) Picasso depicts and the non-Western cultural artifacts he re-purposes. The work, though slightly larger than her other works on display, is much smaller than the original *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (which measures 8' x 7'8") and in this way deflates its pomposity, or its pride of place of being the birth of modernism.²³

Moreover, it is useful to note that Derrida in his brilliant deconstruction of Kantian aesthetics argues that aesthetics is ultimately an “ethnology” and that “the effects of aesthetic signs are determined only within a cultural system.” Therefore Kant’s model cannot claim *disinterestedness* so easily.²⁴ Tommerup’s work calls into the question the universality

and objectivity associated with modernist formalism’s conceptualization of aesthetic judgement. Her works underscore that artistic meaning is subjective and particular and thereby avoids the trap of post-identity rhetoric that either fails to account for form or ignores identity altogether.

²² Jacques Derrida, “Speech and Phenomena: Introduction to the Problem of Signs in Husserl’s Phenomenology,” in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, translated by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 88. [Originally published as *La Voix et le phénomène* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967).] See also xliii in the “Preface.”

²³ “The Collection: Pablo Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*,” Museum of Modern Art (NYC), accessed October 8, 2011, http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=79766.

²⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 206.



*Obama Garden Gnome
(3/4 Rear View)*
2011
Oil on Linen
16x12"



*Portable Gun Box
with Green Foam*
2011
Oil on Linen
16x12"



*Les Demoiselles
Stand-ins*
2011
Oil on Canvas
24x24"



Still Life Eggplant
2011
Oil on Linen
12x16"



Still Life Green Pepper
2011
Oil on Linen
12x16"



Still Life Tomatoes
2011
Oil on Linen
12x16"

INTERVIEW

with Mette Tommerup
by Alpesh Kantilal Patel

A: Can you talk about what you have been working on recently and how you became interested in making still life paintings?

M: I recently finished a body of work related to ideas of the sublime in the landscape based on the work of Casper David Friedrich. I updated signifiers from the romantic landscape tradition such as the moon. I turned the moon into the act of mooning in the landscape (and had my sister in Denmark moon the landscape on chalky cliffs, very similar to the ones found in Friedrich's work). In the process of researching consumer items that dealt with the idea of mooning and protest I came across a mooning garden gnome figurine, which I purchased online and then painted as a traditional still life.

A: We've talked a lot about identity and post-identity, how do the still lifes operate within those discussions?

M: The paintings of vegetables aim to go the core of the question: Is post- identity even possible? Innocent tomatoes and peppers become stand-ins for an exploration of gender, race and sexuality. In this bizarre post-feminist, post-black, post-gay, post-straight, post-post-colonial garden of vegetables and gnomes, no object is spared from being classified. In general, contemporary critical thinking systems seem to polarize discussions of identity into a subject/object dualism.

A: Most of the paintings in the show are direct still life paintings of objects. There is one exception which is a revised version of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Why did you include this piece in the exhibition? What are you offering in your revised version?

M: I have long found the use of the 5 prostitutes - two wearing African masks- wildly out of date and inappropriate, but it is mind-boggling that despite how offensive the work is, *Les Femmes d'Alger* continues to be situated outside of these concerns. For instance, here is art critic Jonathan Jones' description of *Les Femmes d'Alger* on its 100 year anniversary in the British newspaper *The Guardian* in 2007:

Picasso picked his subject matter precisely because it was a cliché: he wanted to show that originality in art does not lie in narrative, or morality, but in formal invention. This is why it's misguided to see *Les Femmes d'Alger* as a painting "about" brothels, prostitutes or colonialism. The great, lamentable tragedy of 18th- and 19th-century art, compared with the brilliance of a Michelangelo, had been to lose sight of the act of creation. That's what Picasso blasts away. Modernism in the arts meant exactly this victory of form over content.

It strikes me that if content is irrelevant, then why use forms that are still recognizable as woman and African masks?

A: Can you explain the process of creating your revised version of Picasso's *Les demoiselles D'Avignon* – and your work in general?

M: My process included taking the original Picasso painting and making a photomontage in which I kept the fruit, but then replaced the female objects with the band Village People and two African-American men holding hands. I tried a lot of different permutations of the latter before settling on one photomontage from which I made an oil painting.

Typically, my sources of imagery come from the internet (mostly images that have gone viral), photomontages I create from disparate sources, photos I take myself, as well as objects I buy and paint from life. When I use appropriated images as a starting point I usually put the source away while the work is being painted. These images are just points of departure. The editing and installation of my small paintings - a non linear, sometimes absurd juxtaposition of images - help unravel traditional readings of my work as a group of paintings.

A: Can you talk about how the paintings of weapons of various sorts fit into you thinking about post-identity?

M: Incredible new form was invented to support identity based work; and work described as formal was hardly disembodied. I'm thinking of the evocative color field paintings which Clement Greenberg somehow hijacked into his limiting theory of formalism. When I think of post-identity it points to the limitations of a subject/object discourse and the failure of the systems of analysis we have for discussing artworks. One of my still life paintings, *Portable gun case with green foam*, depicts a weapon in an open case where the negative impression of the gun can be seen in the foam in the lid. I was going for a color field looking painting within the box opposed to the gun. I wanted to do a painting that synthesized the themes that the exhibition title "Full Salute" brings to the fore.

The text of this essay and interview is included in a brochure that accompanies Mette Tommerup's exhibition Full Salute at Dorsch Gallery, Miami, FL published November 2011