

M + B

ART PAPERS

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JOSH MANNIS

Thomas Solomon Gallery, Los Angeles

Thanks to the Internet, every homeless person, suburban mom, police officer, and middle school bully exists in a post-pornography world. Fetish has slowly seeped into the public conversation and is almost ordinary: our collective awareness of the variety and existence of other people's kinks dissolves obsession of its objectivity. Taking its title from the first part of Henry Miller's *The Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy, *Sexus* (May 31–July 12, 2014), the final show at Los Angeles' Thomas Solomon was, however, not about a universal erotic pluralism. Josh Mannis' pen instead leads us to become complicit in the voyeurism of his characters and scenes, and addresses the terms of our desire in the contemporary moment.

This present and palpable eroticism delimits Mannis' realm of looking. His figures' doll-like, glazed faces reveal a leisure class hovering in various states of arousal, and offer little insight into any psychological complexities beyond a blasé bliss. What is complicated in this body of work is located in these figures' interactions with their environments, and Mannis' provision of devolved textual accompaniments for the viewer. *You Handyman* (2014) features a notepad with the monosyllabic, labial-stop utterances "yup" and "nope"; these lazy particles steer us into a Margaret Keane-eyed, passive-aggressive masturbation scene. The drawings direct our gaze to decisive moments in his sexual narratives. The images contrast the banality of eroticism with a sinister and apotropaic negative sun—a tolerated violence in visual culture. That sun's glare casts equally nostalgic light on a previous time of erotic subversion, avoiding the 21st century's relative frankness, an effect perhaps enhanced by some of the characters' Gatsbyesque haircuts and styling.

Mannis constructs his characters in a sort of mosaic manner, giving expression to faces through repeated lines and small points. Their similarly treated environments allow the figures to blend in, camouflaged, in essence, by means of texture. As the sexuality is simultaneously becoming both more liberated and more commonplace, it too relies less on tools for hiding. Sexuality and eroticism fade into the background, vacating love to become part of the everyday environment, lusty in name

only. Simply looking at Mannis' leisurely nudes forces us to confront our own comforts and judgments about what we choose to keep in and out of the bedroom and the public sphere, and whether we are possibly conflating both spaces. His protagonists are often somewhere outdoors, on picnic blankets or in the woods, at times in the vein of Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863). Yet Mannis' characters are not in repose, nor are they defiantly opposing the mores of their day. Rather, his eroticized figures are intentionally prosaic, ready to fill Charles Barsotti's *New Yorker* pages. We look at them and marvel at their complacency—and by extension, our own.

Mannis deftly manipulates negative space and shadow. With ink and paper, light and dark, foreground and background, subject and object, line and shape, and surface and depth, he recognizes faces drawing's fundamental characteristic as an instrument to manipulate binary systems. He uses his blacks, reds, and blues as positive shadows. In *A Toast* (2014) and *Song of the Self* (2014), the faces of the foregrounded characters are totally gross, abstracted ink shapes barely resembling human features, but which instead are consummate shadows. By means of an aggressive chiaroscuro, these

works successfully extract aggression and passion from dusk's unavoidable abstraction. Both images feature similar beacons of negative space, radiating lines that fill up the drawings' backgrounds. Their white, inkless spots dictate how the ink is to be used. Both images additionally feature secondary figures passing judgment at active ones—a sort of metacommentary on duality. That is to say, these are drawings both about drawing, and about drawing stares.

Mannis' characters' emptied vitality is simply his stylus. His brush composes scenes that duel with what we regard as positive value and socially acceptable. His sun burns us with our own knowing, as we march toward shadows populated by heat.

—William J. Gass



ABOVE: Josh Mannis, *Boyfriend and Girlfriend*, 2014, ink on paper, 25 x 22.5 inches [courtesy of Thomas Solomon Gallery]