

Anthony Haden-Guest

Scooter LaForge

Your opening impression in a space given over to the work of Scooter LaForge – and I was in three such spaces in a single day – is likely to be the cheerfully feral, in-your-face rawness of what you see. And that's okay, given that the pictorial vocabulary LaForge has developed, what you might call his comic militia, includes his one-eyed bear, Cyclops; a bevy of not-particularly-threatening demons; and various characters with bright red clown noses. Add that his work-spaces are rich with such jaunty props as paint-spattered mannequin heads, soft toys, and a joke-shop charred cigar, this last - a gift from the anarchic maximalist, Bjarne Melgaard – being stuck to a completed canvas.

Soon enough though, you will pick up that LaForge's paintings and sculptures by no means conform to the aesthetic of what has become the overly-well-trodden Post-Pop playground. It cannot, for instance, be bracketed with LowBrow or Pop Surrealism (which I am not dissing, by the way.) Nor does he have anything in common with the merry pranksters ripping off Warhol, Haring and Basquiat on the streets of SoHo and in the storefronts of West Broadway (whom, yes, I am dissing).

Scooter LaForge was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico, but this afforded him no protection from Pop. "My mother gave me *Andy Warhol's Diaries* when I was eight. I read it from cover to cover," he says. He left home, first for San Francisco, then New York, arriving with an admirable touch of bravado the month after 9/11. He had been drawing since he was six, but first put bread on the table by working in design at Barney's and Marc Jacobs. He was increasingly making his own fashion pieces on the side as well, and got a fellowship to Cooper Union. Patricia Field, the fashion perennial, laid eyes on a LaForge tee-shirt at Spank, the dance party in Bushwick, five years ago. He was shortly producing one-off's for her, and they are terrific. You won't take my word for this? Consult Dr. Google!

LaForge's career in art-making was also taking off, and the connection between his art and his fashion work strikes me as entirely positive. This is a rarer phenomenon in the art world than you might imagine. Warhol had been a hugely successful commercial

artist, but this was held against him for many years both by many artists and by the art world generally. The appetites of the art world are perhaps more omnivorous now.

Hanging in the first LaForge art space I visited was a dark blue garment upon which he had painted a vivid abstraction. It turned out to be a high-end Armani suit he had just been given by Patricia Field.

"I got it at about nine o'clock," he said. "I painted it while I was waiting for you."

In the second La Forge space, a row of canvases was leaning against a wall, the one on the left-hand end being a shimmery abstraction. Next to it was a canvas with a burst of figuration. This vortex of figuration then grew from canvas to canvas, like a life-form in a lab.

I indicated the abstraction to the far left.

"Is that the beginning or the end?" I asked.

"This is the end," he said.

"So it ends in abstraction?"

"It begins in abstraction, and then it ends in abstraction," he said.

LaForge employs a parallel strategy compactly within a single composition, one which takes off from Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*. His variation is a big, fluent canvas upon which the proportionate relationship of abstraction-to-figuration differs greatly from individual to individual in his treatment of the group clustered around the ultra-comic-strippy corpse.

He indicated an area of the canvas. "I'm right-handed, and I painted this with my left hand," he said. "I decided that I was painting too well with my right." He pointed at one of the heads, adding: "And I painted this with my eyes shut." It so happened that this particular head was the most realistically executed in the group. I noted that it looked as if it were itching to crash the group of surgeons in the original Rembrandt in The Hague.

We are touching on here what might be described as the strategies of *conceptual* art. This is usually

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kind of a no-go zone for those working in a Post-Pop landscape, as of course are abstraction. But Scooter LaForge plays with a full hand.

Images on another large canvas include a road, two furry bunnies and several of his clown-characters with red noses. I wondered what the narrative was. LaForge asked if I was familiar with the techniques of “bibliomancy.”

“Uh, no.”

He explained that it means opening a book at random, putting your finger on a passage, and then using whatever it is that chance has dealt you.

So it had been with this canvas.

“One page had the road,” he said. “Another page had these two bunnies ... another had the clowns ... “

“But you paint a lot of clowns,” I said. And he does, including wry self-portraits, with bulbous red noses.

“I have a whole book full of clowns,” agreed Scooter LaForge, blithely.

“Chance, plus chance-management, an excellent art-making strategy,” I think to myself.