



»I COULD BE YOU«

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The term of “alter ego” was first used in the early 20th century to describe the imaginary identities of schizophrenic patients. It was modern medicine’s task to dispel these “wrong selves” so that a single ego, certified by biography and culture, could prevail.

Around the same time, possibilities of expanding the “I” were being explored by writers such as Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust. The main characters of these modernist novels, Belaqua in *Dream of Fair to Middling Woman*, Stephen Daedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and in *Ulysses*, and Marcel in *A la recherche du temps perdu* resemble the writers themselves, and function as second selves. But at that time, these second selves seemed to be literary monstrosities, embodied by fractured as well as fluid voices inconsistent with traditional narrative form. It was the attempt to construct an authentic self, proper to an alienated urban consciousness. This strategy is at work in Keren Cytter’s *Dreamtalk*. Her characters re-enact the drama of a reality TV show, with overlapping voices and topical diversions. But they are more real than the characters they mirror, who we imagine displaying all the conventional narratives of reality TV. They are more true in their abstraction, than the empty clichés of the “real” characters on TV. Cytter forces us to see the artifice of her characters as well, by stranding them in a blackout at the end.

At the same time as developments in modernist literature, Superman was created (1938), and with him a new idea was introduced: that of the superhero with a secret identity. The authenticity of the self was questioned in him: while the idealized courage and strength of Superman was an abstraction, so was the meekness and invisibility of Clark Kent. Who is the true self: the fantastic alien from outer space, or the faceless, cookie-cutter citizen? This conflict between the fantastic and the mundane is reflected in Isabell Spengler’s *Permanent Residents*, in which the characters are conspicuously different as they perform everyday acts, such as washing clothes. The title refers to the term for legal immigrants in America: people with some citizen’s rights, but standing outside dominant culture. In their fabulousness, Spengler’s characters externalize their cultural difference. One imagines Superman, trying his best to be invisible, but never forgetting that under his office shirt is the alien body, illegible in its alterity.

The alter ego, then, can condense cultural themes into a performing body. This is the strategy in both Shana Moulton’s and Laura Parnes’ work, in which specific historical-political issues are enacted in a fictional individual. In *Whispering Pines #5*, Shana Moulton plays a character whose emotional needs describe those of American culture at large. She is desperate for a quick-fix to melancholic helplessness, but glorified clichés cannot bring her to this ideal of inner peace. Likewise, there is an America seeking meaning and comfort, who cannot resolve this need with the cultural tools it has at hand. In Parnes’ *Blood & Guts in High School*, the dialogue of the main character, Janie, is simplified to the point of abstraction: in this way her function as historical allegory is emphasized. She embodies a historical moment: punk resistance in the late 1970s/early 1980s. But this period also becomes a mirror for contemporary culture and politics. Janie’s simplicity raises the idea that resistance could be simple, in a time when many believe resistance to be too complicated, or impossible. However, true to her allegory in history, her resistance is desperate, and tinged by failure.

The body and resistance were some of the main themes in 1980s to 1990s identity politics, closely related to postmodernist dialectics of the constructed self (Donna Haraway’s cyborg). Along this line, Elodie Pong’s *Je suis une bombe* presents two opposing constructions of the female. Both are complicated: the cute panda is perverse, and the goddess is desperate. Therefore, the authenticity of both is partial. We wonder whether the “true self” is the merging of the two, or neither. That is, in fact, if the “true self” exists at all, and we are something more than the performance of various imperfect tropes. In Kate Gilmore’s *Down, Smiling*, Gilmore performs Fragonard’s female on the swing, surrounded by a cloud of pink cloth, carefree and decadent. His painting crystallizes a classic female ideal, which Gilmore turns on its head. Her lady, despite the pink dress and inviting smile, wants out: sawing away at the rope keeping her up in her perch. This art historical ideal is no longer complicit, she escapes from the picture frame.

In the 1990s the art world’s gaze turned to another object: the superstar artist, embodied in the YBA. In Alex Bag’s *The Artist’s Mind*, we see a two-part satire: of the YBA, and of the “American”. Her brother, Damien Bag, plays an aspiring artist whose work echoes that of a much more famous Damien, Damien Hirst. While this figure mocks the grandiose pretensions of Hirst, with his overblown titles and discourse, it also mocks American redneck culture, in its dumb drunkenness.