

## Touch Me I'm Sick

The end is nigh and Ryan Peter is making art jokes.<sup>1</sup>

Peter's work explores the relationship between photography and painting, playing with their respective yet interwoven histories. The strange germ and astronomical-like phenomena depicted suggest photographic technologies of bodily surveillance—specifically, the representational apparatus of the medical gaze and spy satellites, those patient, ever-watchful eyes in space. The rough surfaces and visual ambiguity of Peter's works create a link to Pictorialism, which sought to legitimize photography as an artistic medium by virtue of its formal similarities to painting.<sup>2</sup> The chemical reactions that occur between the acrylic paint and ink washes and the resists are also akin to darkroom processes.

The washes of paint and ink, while maintaining formal links to photographic verisimilitude, also exploit the unpredictable nature of paint. One of the most provocative elements of paint as a material is its physicality, its symbolic kinship to flesh. Here, the relationship between the flows and resists are analogous to the porous boundary of the flesh itself, which both takes in and keeps out. And, further, the push-pull of human relationships.

Bodies are funny things. They are unfixed and unfixable, yet embodiment, the lived reality of the constructs that make up identity, can act as a sort of shifting anchor in a time of liquid capital. It can be something to hold onto, however tenuous our grip. The vicissitudes of bodies and embodiment stand in stark contrast with the body as presented in advertising: concocted by the power that says YES to the voracious consumption of a version of implicitly sexual bodily pleasure, this body is employed to sell everything but what is actually needed. This body hawks the sexuality of numbers and numbness. Its transformational, subversive potential has been Photoshopped out.

It is the messy, inconstant body of sweaty palms, anxious laughter and unscripted desires that Peter seeks to represent by ambiguous allusion. Paint's relationship to the body is exaggerated by virtue the works' scale and portrait-like verticality.<sup>3</sup> The resists themselves are comprised of materials intended to police our filth, such as spray deodorant, hydrogen peroxide and laundry detergent. Yet the resulting surface texture has the contradictory effect of increasing the

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<sup>1</sup> He is not always at ease who laughs." Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* (XXVII, 5).

<sup>2</sup> And now a painter makes paintings like photography for legitimacy, because who really looks at paintings anymore?

<sup>3</sup> Aww, it thinks it's people!

perverse tactility of the works, our desire to touch reminding us that art, like our sick bodies, should be handled with Nitrile gloves.<sup>4</sup>

The dense field of art discourse through which these works navigate is complicated by the inclusion of text, but made accessible through their wry humour. Generally appropriated and edited from the flow of life, the texts create a disjointed, nonlinear narrative of failure, speaking of and to a world in crisis.<sup>5</sup>

Jokes—like art, like sex—aren't a solo affair. Simultaneously products of the unconscious and of a particular socio-historical context, jokes are a way organizing existence at the intersubjective level. Thus, they have the power to form new allegiances as resonant expressions of collective experience. Sometimes they are a scream of life for life, defiant in the face of quotidian limitations, monstrous economies and the incomprehensible terror of the Real. Big laughs and little deaths: both entail a cathartic release of libidinal energies.

A joke to make the heart break and the body shake, as if weeping. A joke made as a gift of tempered hope. Lay your hands on me and maybe the world won't end, after all.

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<sup>4</sup> Is this what Benjamin meant when he compared the painter to magician and the cameraman to surgeon?

<sup>5</sup> Even the tomatoes have turned on us.