Post-Identity Garden of Failure
By Alpesh Kantilal Patel

An essay accompanying **Mette Tommerup's** *Full Salute*

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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]

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 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.

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.

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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 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 auberjine 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 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 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 quite well in my purse without me having to worry about him. I couldn't be more pleased with this product!*

'This little gem can survive quite well in my purse without me having to worry about him.'

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.

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 Demoiselles d'Avignon* 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 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 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 mysoginistic 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.

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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, 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.

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]).

14 It is worth noting that the Museo Morandi recently exhibited Wayne Thieubaud'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/.

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).

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

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]).

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

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 Univérsitaires 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.