

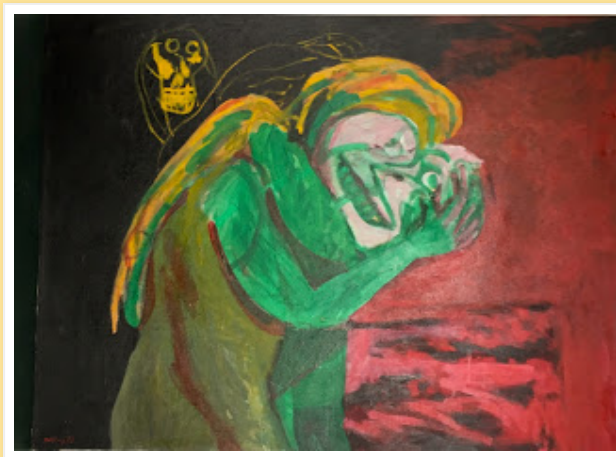
Virginia Billeaud Anderson *(BoudinandBourbon.com)*

Boudin, Bourbon and The Feast of the Assumption

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Wednesday, September 6, 2017

Earl Staley's "Two Lovers Surprised By Death" - Earl Staley - A Closer Look - Essay - Virginia Billeaud Anderson



Being in my twenties and fond of Jack Daniels and weed might account for my not remembering much about 1978. I do remember that despite legal challenges, Keith and Mick cranked out a beast of a song.

Ain't I rough enough? oh
Ain't I tough enough?
Ain't I rich enough, in love enough? Oh please!

Another sure thing about 1978 is Earl Staley was passionately entangled. Any nitwit who looks at his erotic, intensely biographical painting, "Two Lovers Surprised by Death" (1978), can see that. "Two Lovers Surprised by Death" is one of four paintings Staley will show in "Focus on the 70s and 80s: Houston Foundations II" at Deborah Colton Gallery, an exhibition of artworks by twenty-six artists who were making and exhibiting art in Houston during the 1970s and 1980s. Here's what I learned about Staley's painting.

"Two Lovers was about Suzanne and I and passion," Staley told me, "with Death surprising us. It is based on compositions from the late middle ages and the Renaissance, such as Durer's."

Essentially, Staley (b. 1938) was working within the European Dance of Death or dance macabre tradition in which artists pictorially portrayed lovers accompanied by a symbol of death. Handling of the theme varied, Durer in his 1498 engraving "Young Couple Threatened by Death (The Promenade)" allegorized death as an hourglass-holding skeleton hiding behind a tree, unnoticed by the gussied-up couple. Hans Burgkmair's woodcut "Lovers Surprised by Death" (1510) depicted death as a skull face winged demon who violently pins down the male lover with an ungodly throat clutch and foot on chest maneuver. Rembrandt's 1639 composition locates the lovers near their freshly dug grave, from which a skeletal death climbs out.

Art historian and curator Marcia Tucker found in Staley's painting a metaphor for uncontrolled passion. In her 1983 catalogue essay for the retrospective exhibition "Earl Staley: 1973-1983," Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Tucker intimated that the theme of love is a major one within Staley's oeuvre, he shows lovers "in every possible state of transport," and frequently juxtaposes sexuality with death. "The allusion," Tucker wrote, "is that sexuality is associated with loss of control, and loss of control is associated with death."

It's difficult to look at "Two Lovers" without thinking about the old hoochie-coochie man Picasso. Tucker made this comparison, and based it on the painting's autobiographical nature and the manner in which Staley distorted his figures to offer two perspectives to the viewer.

Though Staley's delineation of death as a skeletal goon with skinny arms borrows from medieval art, it draws on an additional source. By 1978 he had begun regularly traveling to Mexico where he encountered Day of the Dead celebrations and Mexican folk art. I asked Staley if he stylistically conflated a medieval iteration of death with iconography associated with Mexican religious rituals. "Yes," he said. "Mexico was influential. In 1976 I drove through Mexico, and began returning often to Oaxaca where I had found a place to stay courtesy of Lucas Johnson, and many other Houston artists followed. I remember being in Oaxaca in 1977 and seeing long lines of stalls with masks and sugar skulls, really good folk art, and I hauled some back to Houston. You know, I was born on Halloween, and have always been in tuned with the death images. Unfortunately, the great Mexican folk art tradition has ended. When I returned with Suzanne, it wasn't the same. Recently Mary Margaret and I were there, and could see all the stuff is mass produced."

There was an interesting aesthetic shift taking place at the time Staley painted "Two Lovers." Painting, which had come to be considered stale, sclerotic, and too academic in the post-minimalist age, was regaining popularity, but with fresh aberrance. Its reemergence was institutionally acknowledged by the Whitney Museum's 1978 landmark exhibition "New Image Painting," and by other shows, such as "Bad Painting" (1978) and "The 1970s: New American Painting" (1979) exhibitions at New Museum in New York. Staley was in the two New Museum shows. At the time of his participation he was categorized as a "new image" painter who by definition employed an unrefined or gross style.

It was inaccurate though to link him to a particular style, he uses many different styles. "Skull with Landscape" which he exhibited in the 1975 Whitney Museum Biennial Exhibition, and is now in the collection of Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, has a sparse linear style. Staley's elegant radiantly colored landscapes have a descriptive impressionistic style. We see a very different style in "Two Lovers." Versatility of style reeks of Picasso.

Quick word about that 1975 Whitney show. The artists who were chosen were believed to work independently of the New York art scene, which motivated a few mouthy critics to call them

“virgins.” Looking back on that in 1993, Roberta Smith said Staley was one of the virgins who had become “quite experienced.”

Not sure what to think about the obese dragon-tailed mermaids Staley presented in the 1978-1979 New Museum exhibitions. They are hellish. It is fun to imagine he devised those harpies to attract New York curators who were scavenging for audacious “bad” paintings they could announce were good, but I’ve spent enough time in Staley’s studio looking at old stuff to know he’s too independent to give a shit about what’s trendy. Linda Cathcart said precisely this when she organized "Earl Staley: Mythologies" at CAMH (1980). In her curatorial notes Cathcart wrote that Staley’s “personal expression has never seemed to mingle with current mainstream ideas or styles - either nationally or locally.”

It’s more likely the fat mermaids are grounded in mythology, myth-based images have major presence in Staley’s repertoire, particularly after he received the Prix de Rome and moved to the Villa Aurelia. The mermaids’ modeling and sharp tonal contrasts mirror those in a painting of a Triton and Mermaid, so you’ll understand my linking them to his narratives inspired by Greek and Roman classical myths. That Triton, by the way, I’ve seen him many times in the Piazza Navonna and the Piazza Barberini.

Here’s what you have to know about the show. "Focus on the 70s and 80s: Houston Foundations II" at Deborah Colton Gallery is September 9, 2017 to November 4, 2017. Included are John Alexander, Lee Benner, H.J. Bott, Bob Camblin, Mel Chin, Ibsen Espada, David P. Gray, Virgil Grotfeldt, Roberta Harris, Ann Harithas, Mike Hollis, Dorothy Hood, Perry House, Luis Jiminez, Lucas Johnson, Sharon Kopriva, Bert L. Long, Jr., Jesse Lott, Suzanne Manns, Basilios Poulos, Forrest Prince, Don Redman, Julian Schnabel, Earl Staley, James Surls, and Dick Wray. On Saturday September 9, there is Open House, exhibition viewing and visit with the artists from 2:00 to 2:30 pm, the Foundations Symposium Panel Discussion, Open Forum, questions and answers are 2:30 to 3:30 pm, and Opening Reception is 3:30 to 6:00 pm.

To those who are unimaginably young, born after the era documented in the exhibition, I encourage you to chat up H J Bott who is 84, or the old professor Earl Staley who is 78, or Perry House, or any of the others, and hear what they have to say about dedication and lifetime commitment, and pain. Don’t take too long. Seven of the artists have joined the shades.

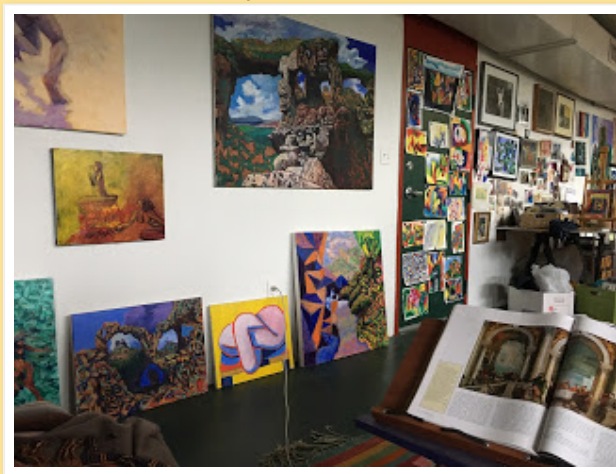


Image - Earl Staley, Two Lovers Surprised by Death, 1978, Acrylic on canvas, 37 x 48

Image - Earl Staley Studio 8-30-17. Sent by the artist to assure me he was safe during Hurricane Harvey.

Posted by Virginia Billeaud Anderson at 12:07 PM



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