

Superstars

By Lisa Radon

Romeo Castle and Dakota Redwing would be fabulous screen names for porn stars but are actually the names of high-yield thermonuclear weapon design tests. They are also titles of two of the pieces from visual artist Edward Lightner's most recent series of paintings, *Superstars*. *Superstars* are highly abstracted images of both nuclear explosions and porn stars, but you might never know it. Lightner crops and enlarges the images then removes the gradations of color. It's a technique reminiscent of both punk zine culture—the photocopied image reduced to ultra-high contrast—and the separations for a Warholian silkscreen. Lightner's process renders these images as three-dimensional topographical maps of limited and artificial palette on star-shaped grounds. Unlike the images from earlier Lightner series (the progression of increasing abstraction from the *Circle* series and *Heavenly Bodies* series through *Fluffy* and now *Superstars*) the source images in *Superstars* are unrecognizable, reading only as liquid shapes of flat color layered in topo relief.

Lightner's inspiration for the series was Michael Light's book *100 Suns*. The book gathers terribly beautiful (or beautifully terrible) archival photographic images of nuclear weapons tests dating from the time when such tests were conducted visibly or atmospherically, from 1949 to 1962 (before the signing of 1963's Limited Test Ban Treaty).

Lightner is concerned possibly more than the next artist with mortality. The fact that he is HIV+ has figured into his work for some time, often revealing itself in the telling titles he applies to his otherwise visually blithe work located firmly in the Pop lineage. But whereas the late David Wojnarowicz' work railed angrily and directly against diagnosis and more importantly against society's passivity in the face of the AIDS crisis, Lightner's work bears witness in a less confrontational way, with a degree of resignation that manifests as equal measures of gravity and irony.

As much as he appreciated the strength of the images in *100 Suns*, Lightner was drawn to the anthropomorphic names of the explosions: each with a surname (the test series) and a given name (for each specific test). And yes, many of the names ironically said, "porn star." Why not juxtapose a Dakota Redwing with a Nick Savage or a Steve Pierce? Tracing the dotted line from *le petit mort* to *grand*, Lightner embraced the stars of dubious and seedy celebrity side-by-side with the explosions as bright as our very own star, both slamming across the screen with some striking visual parallels (don't pretend you can't see some of the more interesting parts of the male anatomy in those mushroom clouds!).

On the edge of each *Superstar*, Lightner has inscribed a Biblical quotation from Revelations. By attaching the quotations to images derived from nuclear weapons tests and gay porn Lightner recontextualizes the apocalyptic imagery, bending it into an interrogation of the power and horror of nuclear weaponry and our ability (and unfortunately, national will) to wage a modern war as well as the insidious power and horror of the AIDS epidemic. Some of the quotes, like that assigned to the piece titled after the Priscilla Plumbbob nuclear test, "Men will desire to die, and death will flee from them," can be applied equally to the slow deaths we've witnessed of victims of radiation poisoning of the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and in the more recent past, of AIDS sufferers.

Interestingly, until the recent rumors about Iran and before that, Iraq and North Korea attempting to produce weapons grade nuclear materials, the nuclear threat as a national preoccupation had moved to the back burner (in contrast to its front-and-center Cold War era prominence). The End of the World threats come and go.

Similarly in America, the threat of AIDS has subsided as a front-page story with the advent of antiretroviral drug cocktails for treatment and a reduced number of new diagnoses after the peak in 1996.

Neither threat has gone away, we just don't hear about them as much in the United States, except in an international context (the ballooning of AIDS cases in Africa, for example). When politicians and pundits cease to address what are still very real threats, it's left to the artist to continue the conversation. And for the artist confronting his own diagnosis, the need to witness, to remind, to engage, to process the gravity of the threat can be both inspiration and *raison d'être*.

On the front page of Lightner's website are the words, "die now, live later." Yes, they are the title of a KMFDM song, and Lightner will tell you that a soundtrack of industrial music (by Coil especially, and KFMDM and Brighter Death Now) fuels his work. But nihilism takes on a different shine when you're living at threat level orange. Whether it's school shootings, terrorist attacks, or an HIV diagnosis, mortality is a bitch of a muse even as it drives the need to create now while you can.

To quote the Bible further, Ecclesiastes "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die," is the lite version of "die now, live later." And it's in this spirit that Lightner mischievously and with ironic glee applies other quotations from one of the Biblical chapters beloved by conservative Christians to the elevation and glorification of the poster children for hedonism, gay porn stars. For the piece titled, "Matt Sizemore," the quote reads, "He even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth." Quotes applied to others of the porn-based *Superstars* include, "Twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped Him," and, "Behold, a white horse... & he went out conquering & to conquer." Indeed.

This is not the first time that Lightner has incorporated words and especially titles directly into the pieces. Lightner's titles have long functioned as another layer in the *parfait* of meanings inherent in the works. As Lightner puts it, it amuses him to, "connect the phantom dots." This time out, the titles form a particularly coherent poem that dances back and forth between poles of power and (self-) destruction, death and a life fully lived.

This is also not Lightner's first experiment with this kind of abstraction. The *Circle* (2002) series presaged the *Superstars* as an earlier experiment in the reduction of a porn image to a graphic element. *Circle* images are extreme close-ups cocks and asses that appear to have been run through the copier until detail and grey scale are a thing of the past, leaving only the ultra-high contrast remains. In the *Circle* series, the titles are as much a part of the piece as the image, with messages "i'm alive," "but he stood 10' tall with that knife," "digging fresh graves," "see only what you want to see," that are at turns witty, coy, affirming, and devastatingly self-aware.

Of all of Lightner's work employing porn imagery, the *Heavenly Bodies* (2004) series is the least abstract, with cropped images lifted from porn, primarily of naked torsos. Rendered in acrylic, there is greater detail in the contours, a wider (if still limited) palette of colorized images: "Gannymede" is a yellow figure on blue ground, "Pluto" a grey figure on blue ground.

Fluffy (2004) is a culmination of this earlier work, with vibrant horizontally striped grounds above which the three-dimensional contoured images hover. The ground in all its modern stripey glory was inspired by the movement in Chuck Jones' Warner Brothers cartoons from the 50s when the cartoon character begins to run and the background dissolves into streaming horizontal lines. Lightner's reference to the cute ("fluffy") and cartoon-y is offset by the content: cheerfully colorful, abstracted images from gay porn and the ever-important titles that in Lightner's characteristic push-me-pull-you fashion juxtapose metaphoric light and dark. The series included "Death Is Not Real," "There Is No Catharsis," "I Am The Devil," "Point Of Disease," "The Future," "Learn To Expect Nothing," "Now, Always, Forever," "A Beautiful Thing Taking Me Away."

Notable too about *Fluffy*, the rendering of the image not on flat canvas, but in relief on layers of foam core, creates depth and shadow that increase its complexity. Here, Lightner pushes the Pop silkscreened aesthetic an extra yard by building dimensionality into an image that has traveled from 3-D to artificially flat (photo), to flatter still (abstracted color-mapped image) and back again. It's a direction that opens up a number of possible future explorations.

"Pay your respects to the vultures," is the first half of a line from a Coil song ("Amethyst Deceivers"). The second half of the line is, "...for they are your future." In a(n) (art)world that is all too ready to consume and profit from the output of artists who live with HIV or have lived with and/or died from AIDS, the show title is biting, if Lightner's work is ultimately as playfully skewering as it is barbed. Lightner's continued mining of identity in post-confrontational ways (confrontation played itself out so long ago) allows him to continue the conversation rather than spewing diatribes, all the while giving all the pretty vultures plenty on which to chew.

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