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Installation view of "The Unreliable Narrator" at Mitchell-Innes & Nash



Collages by David Godbold at Mitchell-Innes & Nash



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HOLLOW LAUGHTER

by Ben Davis

David Godbold, "The Unreliable Narrator," Apr. 14-May 25, 2007, at Mitchell-Innes & Nash on 534 W. 26th St., New York, N.Y. 10011

Contemporary art is universally irreverent, but most often none too funny. This observation is particularly striking when one considers the fact that a lot of it, particularly that inspired by Big Daddy Marcel Duchamp, owes its very being to the tropes of comedy -- masquerade, mistaken identity, word play, sexual innuendo, bodily functions, and so on. Yet most often, these devices are presented with an air of chilly remove. The current show by Dublin-based David Godbold at Mitchell-Innes & Nash is not only a case in point -- it takes this mirthless mirth on as an existential condition to explore.

For Godbold, this show -- his second in the U.S., after an exhibition at Jack Hanley in San Francisco -- marks a homecoming of sorts. In addition to two large-scale wall drawings, it features a suite of collages in a style that the artist discovered during a residency at New York's own P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in 1999-2000.

The basic formula is simple. Godbold makes ink drawings on tracing paper, resembling etchings and usually featuring baroque religious imagery -- renderings of Mary and Jesus abound, along with various Saints, Church fathers, Biblical narratives and the like (and, every so often, a detective or cartoon mouse thrown in for variety).

These drawings are then mounted on top of found scraps of paper, thereby juxtaposing the religious images with a host of random content, from hastily scrawled notes and want ads to children's drawings, all of it hovering in the background through the hazy atmosphere of the translucent paper. Godbold accents his illustrations as well with typewritten captions, usually commenting ironically on the scene or inserting some random truism. He also pencils in notes in the margins, or adds cartoon thought balloons.

The result can suggest a kind of critique of the classical imagery he is quoting, as with a blue ink drawing of two female nudes, one cradling a skull and an hourglass, symbols of mortality. A thought balloon has the skull hitting on one of the two women, while a caption reads blankly, "Isn't it a great day to be alive." Juxtaposed behind the image is a list dated Oct. 26, 2004, cataloging a woman's waist, hips, bust, thigh and arm measurements, and the whole thing puts one in mind of *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger's critique of the baleful presence of the male gaze in classical art.

More often, the compositions have a naughty edge directed at debasing their religious subject matter, as in the purple ink drawing of a saint with a halo and a book, upon which are penciled the words "Teenage Sex-fest Monthly." The compositions also have a fair amount of snarky, insider art humor. One features a hunched, priestly figure, pouring himself a drink from a silver jug and grimly musing, "Fuck. . . here come the curators." Another is titled *Come to Mo[m]MA*.



David Godbold
A Great Day
 2007
 Mitchell-Innes & Nash

Some of the found scraps of paper are themselves quite funny, like the one that features a child's reflections: "Some Disastrous Consequences of Painting a Bathroom Blue," it begins, "1) Divorce, 2) Severe Angst, 3) Very Difficult to Repaint. . ." On the whole, however, these works are unlikely to induce hilarity, for the same reason that there doesn't seem to be much actual commentary going on -- antique religious iconography is kind of a soft target, and the sarcasm seems to come from all directions at once, eliminating any particular point of view (though to be fair, Godbold did get in trouble recently with some religious British Labour MPs about one of his works, so apparently this strategy does have the power to get under skin).

What saves it all is that it seems to be fully self-conscious of the inertia. The method Godbold has honed is purposely designed to neutralize personal feeling: His own drawings are indistinct quotations from artistic tradition, while his commentary on them is inserted via found notes by others. Likewise, the irreverence of putting snarky scribbles and subversive thought balloons on these Saints and sinners is somewhat voided by the fact that they represent the artist defacing his own creations.



David Godbold
Teenage Sex Priest
 2007
 Mitchell-Innes & Nash

For all the collages' gibbering randomness, the way they combine elements has a kind of automatic quality (acknowledging the formula, one work in the series features a Picasso-esque silhouette on yellow notebook paper and the caption, "I thought I'd do something different today.") Inspecting them is like inspecting the product of some kind of basic program for generating irreverence.

In the remainder of the gallery, Godbold's two wall drawings play up this machinic sense. Both are blown-up versions of drawings presented nearby in small, framed "studies" on a grid of penciled lines, thus indicating the process by which they have been transferred, near-exact, to the gallery wall. The first, titled *That's Not Right!*, is a St. Sebastian in red, with black arrows piercing his body. In a characteristic Godbold touch, thought balloons surround the figure, offering one "Fuck!" for every arrow.

As with the collages, the image features a caption, reading, "Popes stand to woods and bears stand to Catholics. *No, that's not right!*" In the study, the same caption is considerably more elaborated, reading, "~~History~~ Perception stands to ~~Imagination~~ Fiction. Imagination, as History stands to Fiction -- Popes stand to Woods as Bears stand to Catholics -- No, That's Not Right!"



David Godbold
Save Santa. . .
 2007
 Mitchell-Innes & Nash

This is a deliberately labored decomposition of a perfectly good anti-clerical quip ("Does the Pope shit in the woods?") It's not particularly funny itself; the point seems to be more that the process of muddled analogy mirrors Godbold's artistic formula with his collages -- finding correspondences between random, schizophrenically unlike elements. It is also a linguistic double for the process of moving the image from study to wall, transferring the same relationships from one surface to the next. The "joke" is that, of course, the "final," cleaned-up version of the phrase equally fails to nail down the right correspondence. Zippy spontaneity and clinical calculation bleed together, crossing one another out.

The second wall-drawing, *The Advance of Unreason*, depicts a vast, sublimely rugged landscape in black. Amidst the scenery, a tiny cross stands, a man crucified in the distance upon the hill. In the foreground on the left, there's a stag with a thought balloon hovering over his head, declaring, simply, "No Thoughts" -- an expression of expressionlessness, like the landscape itself, a blank statement of a disembodied theme.



David Godbold
Come to MoM[m]A
 2006
 Mitchell-Innes & Nash

In the corresponding study, there are a variety of penciled-in notes commenting on the scene. One arrow points to the cross, identifying it as "Hill-mounted glowing cross/radio mast (propaganda broadcast)." This comment -- both joke and jab at religion -- does not make it to the wall.

It's very difficult to parody something with any kind of authentic feeling when there is no clue that the work is sincerely invested in what it is parodying in the first place -- and here the religious referent seems, at best, a kind of ghost. Rather than the freedom of unfettered mirth, what Godbold points to is how the posture of not taking anything seriously means that everything is reduced to the same level of seriousness, yielding a kind of affectless emotional wasteland. *That* is the cross that the polymorphously perverse pomo ironist has to bare. It is this hollow laughter that Godbold's work spins out; his ludic stance is a kind of transparent screen stretched across a nihilistic void.

Elsewhere in the study for *The Advance of Unreason*, there's a second arrow, this one pointing to a craggy peak below the cross. "In an ideal world," it says, "this would be me." The tiny speck of a human figure can be identified. In the final version translated to the wall, this figure has been whited-out -- this near insignificant speck of a self, already almost unlocatable, is gone.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.



David Godbold
The Modernity Problem
 2007
 Mitchell-Innes & Nash



David Godbold
Things Go Dark
 2007
 Mitchell-Innes & Nash



That's Not Right! and Study for That's Not Right! at Mitchell-Innes & Nash



David Godbold
The Advance of Unreason
2007
Mitchell-Innes & Nash



David Godbold
The Advance of Unreason (detail)
2007
Mitchell-Innes & Nash