



Kahn & Selesnick

REFLECTIONS ON A POSTPONED PAAM RETROSPECTIVE

By Maura Coughlin and Mark Adams

AS THE CORONAVIRUS quarantine took hold of our lives in March, it became clear that the Kahn & Selesnick retrospective would not happen at PAAM as planned. The collaborative duo was to have had three concurrent major exhibitions this spring, in Denver, Encinitas (Southern California), and Provincetown. As public exhibitions and events were cancelled or postponed and moved to hybrid online forms, Nicholas Kahn, Richard Selesnick, and Mark Adams (my co-curator) discussed their recent project, “The Carnival at the End of the World,” in virtual exhibitions and webinars on Zoom (sponsored by the Lux Art Institute in Encinitas). We found that this body of artwork, its imagery and ecological themes had become more prescient and relevant just at the time as it was materially withdrawn from the public.

In this series, a troupe of absurdist actors, ‘Truppe Fledermaus’ (from the German vaudeville farce, *Die Fledermaus* or ‘revenge of the bat’)

enacts a theatre of crisis, spiritual performances for what remains in a world strangely removed from modern culture. They work through the grief of our catastrophic loss of biodiversity, our viral entanglement with endangered non-human animals like bats and pangolins, and the devastatingly transformative, rising waters of climate change.

Ever since the late 1980s, Kahn & Selesnick have staged their photographs in the fragile ecosystems of the Outer Cape; over the years, their ever-more-pointed environmental and political ethics drew energy and inspiration from landscapes of wetland, marsh and dune. These marginal places share a neither-this-nor-that protean status: psychologically, these are liminal spaces of dream, transformation and loss. Ecologically, they are fertile zones of biodiversity, fluidity, absorption, rot, and sequestration.

Carnival historically culminated in Mardi Gras, and was a festive interval that temporarily

suspended or inverted everyday hierarchies. Functioning as a public safety valve for the release of tension and anxiety, it sanctioned the free flow and mingling of hierarchies and categories such as gender, class, and biological taxonomy, and it encouraged the profanation of the sacred. At times, the critical message of Carnival became so subversively dissident as to be banned. What Carnival shares with marginal ecological spaces is its potential as a transformational space where concurrent or even violently contradictory differences overlap or are accommodated. The carnivalesque absurdity permeating Kahn & Selesnick’s work has often been a vehicle for dystopian political allegory, whether in 16th-century Shrovetide spectacle, the paintings of Pieter Bruegel, or the imagery of Dada and Surrealism.

During this interval of quarantine, we are weathering a singular ritual of crisis and transformation: at present a window is narrowly



open to a possible world of lowered consumption, multi-species flourishing, and very gradual re-wilding of the natural world, but only if we commit to nourishing it. Kahn & Selesnick’s *Carnival* is a ritual space that permits us to imagine more fully communing with the ecological

disaster that surrounds us and to one day returning to the everyday, but differently. We hope to come together (perhaps transformed) for the postponed exhibition this coming fall at PAAM.

—Maura Coughlin





LOOKING BACK FROM the 400th anniversary of this Protestant Colonial Adventure, the voices of Bradford and Mourt's Relation sound apocalyptic in their moment of drama and end-times. The refugee Pilgrims viewed harsh New England with trepidation, seeing redemption in their will to tame nature for the greater good of religious destiny. That project has been ending for some time.

Multimedia artists Kahn and Selesnick envision a masquerade at the end of the world, telling us to grasp nature (a man in the shape of green foliage) by the hand, to fill a pocket with over-ripe summer fruit and drift on a crowded raft as the waters rise. It's a lark, and also a dire memento in the current setting of real environmental threats: greenhouse warming, flooding coastal cities, increased release of toxins, and the global reach of viruses. In Kahn and Selesnick's visual stories, masked protagonists tow their wagons to the brink of empty tidal flats, intrepid but unprepared.

For a moment this spring, lucky Cape Codders could ponder the global turmoil from an

empty beach, the sunset burnishing the last storm clouds. As in "One Hundred Views of a Drowning World," our own Book of Hours is full of seasonal blooming and deadfall, each day an almanac of what we are losing as our lives become circumscribed. We are joined by other fortunates, seasonal Cape Codders whose usual holidays have now become extended retreats. This environment is our luxury—miles of conservation land for distancing, local harvests, no crowded elevators or subways or urban commutes. The majority of urban dwellers have no such option. There is a vast economic class for whom the pandemic, climate tipping points, and the current national retreat from public health standards are in dire collision. Even the Cape depends on those who serve—essential workers pumping gas and stocking groceries receiving no hazard pay. In our safety bubbles we wrap and glove ourselves in plastic and disposable bags. Under cover of a crowded news cycle of actuarial death tables, the EPA relaxes its grip on Mercury and coal effluent and auto CAFE standards. Nature is

getting no break from consumption and deliveries. UPS trucks idle at curbside. We heal ourselves while nature's stresses are compounded.

With the future coming so soon, writing this now is risky—the future is a daily surprise. Trump's own flock of leather-winged bats swarm with havoc. It's so easy to see this unhinged president in the Fledermaus mask, but the demons of corporatization, the narrowing of voting rights and the denial of health care to the needy were long in the works from Republican oligarchs and their petro-finance masters. While all this tricked-out villainy occupies the stage, decades of effective environmental laws are being rescinded: vehicle exhaust, coal particulates and mercury, wetland dumping.

Half the country plus one agreed to this. In late April, the Georgia governor urged businesses to reopen—better the risk of disease than bankruptcy. Everywhere, minimum-wage workers were bearing the front-line risks, going to work with minimal protections and stripped-down health care plans. Georgia reported that 80% of those diagnosed with the COVID-19



virus are black. Low-income populations make up an outsized proportion of the death rate. You can trace the compounded risk factors to avoidable health conditions, poverty and environmental hazards.

In the traveling comedies of K&S, festooned chimeras in circus carts and floral death trains cross tidal flats just as we now unpack our urban lives into the corners of nature, the ritual fortnight of holidays now extended, our "Pilgrims' return." Though not a manifesto, Kahn & Selesnick's "Floating World" smacks of a medieval plague chronicle: buttoned skeletons, pools of decapitated blossoms, a suitable accompaniment to the current mood. Amid the parody and play, the theme is somber—the sky darkening in concert with the news of disrupted nature, perhaps the failure of the seasons; a tide that engulfs and may never recede. I peer at you, dear reader, at this writing (a cold April night in Truro lockdown) and wonder at the new world you inhabit. The traveling oracles of Kahn & Selesnick will be with you.

—Mark Adams



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