

HOLIDAY 2014-2015

BILL BURNS: BEATRIX RUF PROTECT US:
A PROJECT ABOUT LONGING

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BILL BURNS: BEATRIX RUF PROTECT US: A PROJECT ABOUT LONGING

Curated by Jennifer Matotek, Director/Curator, Dunlop Art Gallery in collaboration with Stuart Reid, Director/Curator, Rodman Hall Art Centre

NOVEMBER 28, 2014 TO JANUARY 18, 2015

Artist Talk: Friday, November 28, 6:00 pm, RPL Film Theatre

Opening Reception: Friday, November 28, 7:00 pm

The Goat Milking performance: Saturday, November 29, 3:00 pm, Central Gallery

Exhibition Tours: Saturdays and Sundays, 2:00 pm

Service with a Smile and a Smirk: Bill Burns and the Brown-noser
by Dan Adler, Associate Professor, Department of Visual Art & Art History, York University

Hagiography is a literature describing the lives of saintly figures and miracles identified with their relics, tombs, icons, or statues. In today's world, such religious practice is often transferred to the adoration of celebrities. To some extent, we live in a polytheistic society, in which temples and monuments are built for famous folks the way Romans did for emperors, ancestors, and household gods. In this culture, the devout strive to achieve a sense of intimacy with chosen celebrities, sometimes by acquiring ritual

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objects and performing gestures of veneration or invocation. The objects in question may range from handcrafted talismans or articles of clothing and accessories. Those that manage to touch the gods hope for some transference of the power, in the form of protection or prosperity. Art world players like Serpentine Galleries Co-Director Hans Ulrich Obrist and gallerist Larry Gagosian are indeed subject to such worship. They attend events with heavy media coverage, cultivating false intimacies, while holding court for pilgrims, seeking to bask in their glow. Through this process, they may become better visible, better known, and blessed.

The exhibition *Beatrix Ruf Protect Us: A Project About Longing* is Bill Burns' account of his own varied trials and tribulations, tests of faith and resolve, to survive and get ahead as an artist. As a devotee of saintly art celebs—members of a trinity of curators, critics, and collectors—he employs a host of media and materials to perform rituals, and pay homage: hagiographic tomes, photos with incantatory qualities, sculptural fetishes, and watercolour drawings. But how devoutly devoted is Burns? I would suggest that his sincere and labourious efforts at veneration and appeasement are often injected with liberal doses of ironic doubt and satirical critique. Burns is not endowed with an infinite capacity for self-sacrifice and patience. He is not a saint.

The wood used for Burns' *Art World Celebrity Logs* was found on a conservation woodlot in Northern Ontario. Drawing from highly publicized lists such as *ArtReview's* Power 100, and *ARTnews's* Top 200 collectors, Burns engraves the name of an art world celebrity upon each lumber piece. Later, the logs are coated with milk and honey, making their surfaces durable. They become newly anointed liturgical props with staying power, and a biblical patina to boot. Displayed in a gallery, Burns has placed them in piles corresponding to those who have, and have not, reacted favourably to his overtures and prayers – names listed on the chalkboard works *Those Who Helped Me*, *Those Who Have Wronged Me*, *Those In Whom I still Hold Hope*. Similarly, Burns has fashioned *Bespoke Art World Celebrity Work Gloves*, with embroidered names. Consumers (or devotees) may choose between blue or natural cotton. The gloves are displayed variously, in a pile or in a small vitrine, like precious relics. Others are beneath a *Proving Machine*, a robotic contraption for testing the durability of the gloves—to ensure that they meet the doctrinal standards of the art gods.

When piling up the gloves and logs, Burns may be seen as emphasizing how these products can be produced on a large scale, allowing for other associations: the logs may be read as a combustible stack of professional fuel—or as a sign of excess, of having too many saints, preventing me from



distinguishing clearly between false deities and those destined to assist me. Yet, these objects seem fated to be collected, arranged, and rearranged. They need to be vigilantly tended and re-evaluated—to ensure that favours and miracles are granted, rather than denied. Irony arises on such inscribed objects in part because Burns' materials are ostensibly lacking in preciousness, but also because of the notion that they somehow become transfigured by receiving those very special words.

Burns' brand of comedy is always tied to the tragic cycle of the never-ending journey. This extends to an ongoing series of watercolour drawings illustrating Burns' life in the art world. An avid outdoorsman, the artist has frequently been called upon—by a host of curious curators, critics, and collectors—to play the romantic role of wilderness guide.¹ Combining visual vignettes of wildlife with short text statements, the works describe actual encounters and assorted (mis)adventures—mostly in northern woodland settings, but sometimes in tropical locales too—with some of the same people whose names are carved on the logs. But Burns does not name names here, and the unflattering qualities of figures are often only indirectly suggested, as none of the watercolours explicitly show people. However, it does seem that Burns' animal imagery is often meant to symbolize those mentioned in the texts. There is a longstanding satirical tradition that draws analogies, quite

literally, between animal and human behaviours, subverting or questioning civilized society's claims of a cultural sophistication, which supposedly separates them from savage beasts.² Burns' fragmented bits of narrative, despite their brevity, may strike tragic and absurd notes, exposing primitivist beliefs—or delusions—about where the wild things are.

Philosopher Simon Critchley points out that humour lies in the exploration of the divide between nature and culture—revealing that humans are not so much a species neatly set apart, but a perpetual negotiation between categories.³ To be human is to be engaged in a dynamic process, produced by a series of identifications and misidentifications with the natural world. Of course, it can be quite funny and absurd to reduce the human to the animal, or to elevate the animal to the human. Burns often accomplishes this in indirect and subtle ways. The hard-core satirist's goal is to deflate the pompous, and ridicule the seemingly august and noble, but Burns does help reveal some of our own ambivalences about what we are looking for in nature. As a humourist, he exposes how hopeless and incompetent urbane folks can be when thrown into the wilderness. As Critchley says, “The human being is a sick animal, a crap animal.”



Satirists are often at their best when revealing the essentially meaningless emergence of ideas from life, while questioning — although never dismissing — the nobility of human aspirations and intentions. Burns' brown-nosing persona is always compromised by egos, by frustrations, by interferences, distractions, odd forays, and failures. In the end, I cannot help but empathize with the narrator's feelings of anticipation, his own romantic dreams and desires. I am a sucker for stories about the underdog, especially when he is equipped with an inscribed log in hand, wearing embroidered work gloves.

This essay is adapted from Dan Adler's "Getting Spiritual: The Brown-noser's (Really) Respectful Rituals," which will be included in Hans Ulrich Obrist Hear Us, a monograph on the work of Bill Burns co-published by YYZBOOKS and Black Dog Publishing, with support from Rodman Hall Art Centre and Dunlop Art Gallery.

¹ The works also reflect the artist's childhood in Saskatchewan, and his extensive experience with animal rescue and relocation.

² It is notable in this regard that Cicero's Latin word for humour is *urbanitas*.

³ See Simon Critchley, "Satura Revartus: Living in the Woods with Bears," *Law and Literature* 17, 3 (Fall 2005), 433–441.

Artist Biography

Bill Burns was born in Regina, Saskatchewan and has lived and worked as an artist in Toronto, Canada, and London, England. His work has been exhibited in major museums and biennial exhibitions since the 1990s. Burns is represented by MKG127 in Toronto.

CREDITS

BILL BURNS, *Those Who Helped Me, Those Who Have Wronged Me, Those in Whom I Still Hold Hope*, 2014, porcelain coated chalk boards, mdf, chalk, chalk brushes

Photo: University of Regina Photography Department

BILL BURNS, *Beatrix Ruf Protect Us: A Project About Longing*, Installation View, 2014

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DUNLOP
ART
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Central Gallery & Mediatheque

2311 - 12th Avenue

HOURS

Monday through Thursday

9:30 am - 9:00 pm

Friday 9:30 am - 6:00 pm

Saturday 9:30 am - 5:00 pm

Sunday 12:00 pm - 5:00 pm

Closed statutory holidays

Sherwood Gallery

6121 Rochdale Boulevard

HOURS

Monday 9:30 am to 6:00 pm

Tuesday 9:30am to 9:00 pm

Wednesday 9:30am to 9:00 pm

Thursday 9:30 am to 6:00 pm

Friday 9:30 am to 6:00 pm

Saturday 9:30 am to 5:00 pm

Sunday 12:00 pm to 5:00 pm

Closed statutory holidays

Office

2311-12th Avenue

HOURS

Monday through Friday

Dunlop Art Gallery researches and presents a diverse range of contemporary artworks, and promotes visual literacy through activities that include exhibitions, programs, publishing and collecting. For more information, please visit our website, www.dunlopartgallery.org.

FREE ADMISSION

The Dunlop Art Gallery is wheelchair accessible.



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