

More than Black Meat Joy
A Night Out with Peter Dayton's Doppelgangbanger
By John McWhinnie

Peter Dayton's art is serious. Deadly serious. So serious you should scratch your head and consult a battered guide to heavy subjects in life and art when viewing it. When I stand in front of a Dayton original I make sure I have my trusty, dog-eared edition of Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, and Thought* and Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* to consult. I also like to bring along Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull* and Louis Safian's *2000 Insults for all Occasions*. You might want to bone up on Sidney Sheldon's *The Other Side of the Mountain*, or at least watch the movie, before you take in an exhibition. The work is that heavy.

When you get the meaning of Dayton's art it'll kill you. And not in the way those townsfolk went insane when they were told the meaning of life in "Need to Know", the Sidney Sheldon written episode of *The New Twilight Zone*. They were fortunate; their demise was over within seconds - from sanity to crazed before the first commercial. Dayton's art will kill you like a joke you don't get at first, only to break down later when its meaning hits you. I'm not kidding. You'll die laughing six hours or six months later, at dinner, while polishing off a bottle Chateau Petrus and engaging in thoughtful conversation about the death of the theater, just like in the Simon and Garfunkel song, *Dangling Conversations*.

Dayton's work is as deep as nail polish and that's what I find provocative, because it's all on the hi-gloss surface, posing as art as frivolous and meaningful as a good manicure. His subject matter - flowers, celebrity portraits, models with sparkly stickers affixed to them, announcing how sassy they are, or how available - are cast right out of mail order catalogues, supermarket check-out lines and tabloid television. The art starts low-fi, cut and paste, but is remade seamlessly with the skill worthy of the highest paid plastic surgeon. In terms of talent, Peter Dayton is Dr. Rudy Wells from *The Six Million Dollar Man*. He can rebuild anything to look better and his art is proof. He's created the perfect art Frankenstein, except beauty is his freak-of-nature creature. Taken collectively, Dayton's work suggests the near perfection of a patchwork of successive facelifts, Botox injections and tummy tucks. It goes deep enough to scratch, but not break, the fragile surface of beauty's image and intimates we are all haunted by ghosts of facelifts past, not merely Joan Rivers and David Gest.

Dayton has channeled into his art the American freakshow that begins with sugar and spice and everything nice, toy guns and roughhousing on the playground, and ends with the *Real Housewives of Orange County*, arena football and *American Idol*. That's what Peter Dayton's art is made of. It's frightening and grotesque, and hilariously funny that nobody gets it. Or if they get it, they appreciate it like the painful pleasure of hemorrhoids. You can't stand the burning but the itching isn't so bad, especially when you scratch it, even if the relief is temporary. In other words, they endure it like a modest malady sufferable for years until the flare-ups become so painful they need to undergo radical surgery to remove it.

Dayton's art is all in the finessed delivery of his aesthetic one-liners. For instance, take his flower portraits... please. They'll lull you to sleep thinking everything is right with the world. But don't be fooled by the sheen of those polished surfaces and overall prettiness. Those roses, camellias and tulips - all colored and suggesting the perfection of airbrushing on the outside - are garish and cloying when you stick around long enough to let your eyes linger on the picture plane. Their slick beauty is sickening because it's too easy, and you want to want them over your sofa, hating yourself for that, and hating those not self-aware enough to catch the whiff of rotting petals that lingers around every piece.

To compound the fetid smell that assaults the mind's nose, Dayton multiplies its unnaturalness, making one tulip ten or one hundred times, lined up in rows of Stepford styled unreality. Stepford flowers for Stepford Wives: if you don't get the point of the art, visit Wal-Mart and walk down the aisles. You'll encounter rows of laundry detergent, immaculate in their bright boxes and molded plastic containers. Warhol found such arrangements of consumer products beautiful and his art suggests as much. He believed, after all, in the Tab Nation. Today Tab has been replaced by Diet Coke, another Warholian subject, and it's safe to say we now live in a Warhol nation. Though he didn't quite foresee this turn of events, Warhol would be pleased.

Dayton is caught in a more complex rapport with the world he surveys. As an outsider guide through our visual culture he's remained stubbornly ambiguous about his relationship to the images he plucks and replants in his work. His art revels in the ambiguity, suggesting both a love and loathing of our sullied image empire. Ultimately Dayton's art resides in the demilitarized zone between homage and critique, crossing borders with impunity but paying the price in bribes. One detects the split personality in all of his art: suffering and enjoying the cultural debasement, from popular media representations right down to sexualized images of young models in the advertising sections of the New York Times.

It's a "look but don't touch" type of consumption: if you act on the erotic desire that underlies these images the same culture jails you. The dirty secret is that they want desire to push you right to the edge of legality and over into your wallet, but no further than debtor's prison. In Dayton's empire of light and darkness even the artificially altered images of flowers on seed packets amounts to pornography. From seed packets, within the pages of Cosmopolitan and the covers of Vogue, beauty has become its opposite, an ugly excess. The tragedy is no one has told beauty. Even more disturbing is that very few people seem to care.

Not that I'm against beauty in all its distortions. I love it. I want it as much as the next guy and girl. I'm a slave to it when I see it in movies, television, ads, shop displays, and on the streets, especially when it's walking in front of me in tight jeans. I'm just against beauty in art when it kisses a collector's ass and does little else. That's a danger art risks when it uses the sensual effects of beautiful things. People are prone to miss the point and linger on the surface, satisfied that the pleasures the eye experiences constitute the piece's meaning. Not only do they often fail to grasp the point, reading art like they read the arts

issue of *W Magazine*, they purchase it to put it out of their mind, but in full view of their social peers, hanging it in well appointed living rooms, chic apartments and newly designed lobbies. There's nothing terribly wrong with that either. More art in the world is, on the whole, a good thing, even if it's bad art. But, I'm a traditionalist when it comes to consciousness and I choose Socrates over his fellow Athenians every time: critical self-awareness is a better thing, when doing philosophy, living ethically, scoring drugs and especially buying art.

Dayton's flower paintings are feted by the public, but in fact they are wretched creatures ignorant of their true state, which is to be pampered by stylists, photographed by divas, laid out by designers and touched up by editors. Their beauty comes from without, given to them after the fact by trained professionals. Dayton mimics these professional fixers by placing his flowers in a new flat space. He genetically alters their appearance through an aesthetic equivalent of hybridization, straightens out faults with epoxy, and provides a spit coat of resin for extra shine. Finally he sends them out to seduce a new type of image-savvy consumer, the art collector.

Collectors eat Dayton's poisonous flowers up and demand more. If they were attuned to the blooming malice the demand would be masochistic. The amped-up colors and designer drug enhanced bulbs should give nightmares. Instead, like gentle sheep they lead into the oblivion of sleep. It's not surprising: in a culture awash with altered imagery, these steroid shaped flowers are just one more element of the image glut of unachievable perfection surrounding us. No one blinks an eye, especially when our cultural ambient volume is now set to braying. Far from perceiving the brashness of these pushy upstart flowers, the public encounters them with soporific cues: for instance, in New York's Chanel boutique, Dayton's elevator installation of camellias, Coco Chanel's favorite, is accompanied by piped-in emo musak. You can take the elevator to the sixth floor and slip into a slinky number - or a sleek pod and drift asleep for eternity...

As an antidote to all this, I like to think Peter Dayton hates the world he makes art for, that his flowers are toxic and his nice guy veneer masks an angry white male punk rocker. These aren't bad qualities to possess as an artist. In fact they are admirable. Dayton has been a punk, fronted a band, soared high enough to launch a solo album, and plummeted back to earth as a visual artist. He has flirted with fame in music and art his entire life and should be better known. Is he angry? Dayton's too detached to be certain. But I am pissed off just thinking about some of the no-talents celebrated in today's artworld while Dayton hovers on the fringes. If I were Dayton I'd be ready to torch the place and torpedo the ship. If I wasn't so busy being a suck-up I might even join him on a spiteful lifeboat. He wouldn't have to look like Kate Winslet to convince me. Together we'd ignore the cries of the guilty stranded in the water pleading for their lives and tend to the garden of bile in our stomachs. Dayton would transform his bile into ambergris.

But Dayton's really a nice guy too. Someone you'd trust not to rock the boat if it came down to just the two of you and a sea full of sharks. To make him angry you really have to work him up. So for his latest endeavor, minimal black paintings that double as Frank Stella inspired surfboards and hijacked images of feminist artists posed as escort hotties,

Dayton had to channel his doppelgangbanger. This angry motherfucker has been shadowing Dayton for years, tweaking the flowers and pushing him to make his art tough.

He's so cocky and snarling in this guise that there is no mistaking how tough the art really is, and how darkly humorous. Aesthetically ingratiating flowers have been shoved aside for black paintings on wood cast as surfboard sectionals. These monoliths riff-on and rip-off Stella's famous series of black paintings executed in the late fifties and early sixties. The surfboards continue a series Dayton introduced in a show titled, "Surfboards by Clement Greenburg." The title is a provocation. Greenburg, one of last century's most influential art critics, believed art possessed a definite nature, different for each medium, and championed a style of painting purged of everything inessential to it. True artists, he argued, discover the nature of their chosen medium and dedicate themselves to its revelation.

Greenburg lobbied for painting's autonomy, indicting any reference to narrative, cultural context, or figure as a betrayal of the medium's nature. He advocated for a complete separation of the sphere of art from politics, commerce and popular entertainment. As one of the most powerful sheriffs, Greenburg helped put Jackson Pollock on the map. By the sixties he had moved from Barnett Newman to post-painterly abstractionists like Stella and Kenneth Noland. Greenburg was attracted to the abstract nature of their work, their exploration of the inherent flatness of painting's surface, and the lack of reference to popular culture. At the same time he was a strident critic of pop art, excoriating it for giving art a popular image makeover at the counter of Bloomingdales.

Dayton's surfboard paintings stand as a rebuttal of Greenburg's proposed antipathy between art and popular culture, suggesting instead that the worlds of art, commerce and entertainment are inextricably linked. This lesson, a platitude after pop art, doesn't need Dayton to make it again, despite the fact that many artists treat it as their unique historical discovery. If that is all Dayton accomplishes with his surfboards then they'd merely be pretty to look at. The work suggests a subtler lesson: each cultural sphere, high and low, exists for the other. They are not only historically joined, they are co-related terms, necessary to each other's existence. Their separation by an elite is a political act of an established regime of aesthetic and cultural power. A power Greenburg possessed "in spades."

Looked at in this way, Dayton's work encourages a reading of minimalist painting through popular culture, specifically surf culture, and raises some important questions. Why scorn vertically arranged painted stringers as mere decoration on surfboards but celebrate their equivalent in Gene Davis and Barnett Newman? How is it that in surf culture they become mere design but in painting they are symbolic of the highest human striving? And who gets to make this call, denigrating one activity and elevating the other?

At the very least Dayton's boards reveal the questionable nature of this "order of things": an order sanctioning our aesthetic judgments about high and low, profound and banal, important and trivial. They provoke a moment of critical detachment from actuality, the

spirit that claims this is the way things “just are”, to raise the question of their conditions of possibility. And in this critical gesture’s wake, the aesthetic categories begin to look a little shaky: more like products of social and historical convention than natural entities. More dramatically, the literate and the lowbrow distinction reveal the signs of a bitter struggle, one waged between special interests in pursuit of power: cultural, economic, political and so on. The story of their separation and valorization is a tale of cultural warfare waged beneath the surface of the highbrow/lowbrow division.

Everything about Dayton’s boards suggests a clever awareness of this sublimated cultural struggle. Unlike the earlier flower collages, the boards are hand-painted. The handiwork, however, recalls house painting and wood staining as much as the tradition of the fine artist. By linking house painter, surfboard maker, and heroic artist, Dayton’s humor shines blacker than the boards themselves, embracing all the lower fields of artistic activity that Greenburg denigrated. Maybe he would have lightened up on his aesthetic fascism if he had just caught a wave in Malibu.

Better still, the paintings, especially the smaller ones, have a certain tchotchke quality, like kitsch encountered at a roadside gift shop. Greenburg loathed kitsch, contrasting it with the superior avant-garde and excoriating it as a cultural virus. If Dayton’s boards do anything, they mix the distinction up: they may even invert the terms in a dialectical reversal worthy of Hegel. In this aesthetic cut-back, you glimpse the lowest urges of our most vaunted cultural artifacts and the quixotic reach of the most banal. It’s another move in the chess game against Greenburg and the cultural authorities that still buy into the serious/frivolous mythology.

Artistically, the last generation to believe in their own self-mythology was the abstract expressionists. Greenburg wrote their advertising copy, perpetuating the myth of the existential painter. Together they spawned a movement that, while tied to them, struggled to go beyond: post painterly abstraction. It is this group - the Stellas, Davis’, Noland, Louis’ and Frankenthalers, with Greenburg as *eminent grise* - Dayton celebrates and lampoons. The boards are the cartoon equivalent of their work. It’s like Einstein for dummies, or scoring Bugs Bunny to Beethoven, an odd-couple pairing for the over-sixty set but as natural as a pizza and Coke to Dayton and his peers. Dayton’s generation was the first to get their initial exposure to classical music through Walt Disney - and it shows. The surfboards are Disney’s bastard children.

Dayton’s most recent works, “White Women”, tease out the sexual politics insinuated by the black surfboards. Those oblique phalluses, well-hung and hanging-ten, are sleek and silent, packing their obdurate reality in popular culture dress. By contrast, Dayton’s latest work, collaged painting of white women staged as escorts, is about as subtle as a cold sore. To underscore the point, they are paired with black escorts, hanging opposite the black boards in an artistic version of the sexual standoff between boys and girls at an integrated school dance. The color, all various shades of black, grey and white, with garishly made stickers, might as well be black and blue. Suggestive? Of course. Intended? You bet. It’s just a matter of who is going to be on top - and how vocal.

The line-up of white women reads like a Who's Who of early feminist sacred art cows, including Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann, Linda Benglis and Cindy Sherman. The images Dayton has chosen to display are ones the female artists created themselves - but for decidedly different purposes. They sought to contest the male hegemonic power that objectified, oppressed, and exploited women. Dayton's strategy is to contest that contestation by returning them into the field of the male gaze. And not just any gaze but the dreaded white male heterosexual one. The very one that is so fixed in extended adolescence that any word that includes "butt", "head", "cum" (as in "cumquats"), and "anus" (as in "Uranus") gets a pornographic chuckle.

By switching contexts, Dayton uses the images against their creators, putting them into the visual tropes of escort services and sex trades: In this graphic language they jump straight out of male fantasy and into bed - a male-governed art casting couch for a movie in which female artists remain dramatically underrepresented in galleries and museums. It is the last place they want to find themselves, a dark alley of white male revenge. These artists posed themselves as a rude slap at male power; it was a way of taking back the night. Dayton repossesses them and forces them into a vernacular they dare not speak. And while their art spoke against this male gaze, Dayton forces them to pose for it. The result is art that is cheeky and cheesecake. You want to spank it and eat it too.

But is it symbolic rape? I think not, nor do I think Dayton is making a facile point about misogyny (nor is he a misogynist, but that's a judgment made from knowing him personally). There is certainly a reversal of meaning at work here. But, the meaning of the work depends much upon the sex, gender, ethnicity and race of the viewer. That's not a trivial point to bear in mind. It will certainly be deemed offensive by some. Others will laugh at its clever play of image and text. But there is a larger point not to be missed. The work's tone speaks to an awareness of how savvy we've become at consuming images, especially sexualized representations designed to shock, shill or sell.

In an age where kids alter email and photoshop pictures to smear their enemies, ostracize their social competition, and generally misbehave, Dayton's work acts as a sassy equivalent. It's an empire where political operators trail opponents to film their gaffs on cell phones and bloggers alter candidates biographies on Wikipedia. Dayton holds up a mirror to our fast-and-loose use of covert and hostile social strategies. These tactics, once the domain of secret intelligence agencies, are now accessible to everyone with modest technical skill. We don't give these skills a second thought. Today they register on the cultural radar only when implicated in a school shooting.

"White Chicks" is undeniably framed by issues of sexual power. It's right there on the surface. The stickers that adorn the women's naked bodies can't conceal their arousing *lingua franca*. The irony is that the stickers are purchased by Dayton at a local kid's candy shop (the specter of the pedophile hovers outside the frame of each of these pictures): they speak to a coming-of-age ritual, an especially feminine one, that is as much about learning sexual roles as discovering "who you are". Dayton uses the stickers' double-entendre to suggest a perverse strip tease within a society sexualizing its children at increasingly younger ages. From *Bratz*, mini-skirts marketed by Gucci's kids' line, to

sexy sayings on stickers sold in a candy stores, kids today get the message behind the struggle for their heart, minds, and accessorized bodies. It's not clear, however, who'll win: strong-willed feminists or prostitutes. Both? Neither? Maybe it'll be men. Either way it'll most likely be Gucci that clothes them all. Are these pictures little girls dreaming of becoming strong, independent women or prostitutes with a heart of gold? Does it matter as long as they are famous? Conversely, they could be women secretly desiring to girls again - or loved carnally, by woman or man. The possibilities of interpretation splinter and multiply.

Even Dayton's method of construction is cleverly gendered, a nod to the female pioneers before him. He uses a mixture of the handicrafts historically associated with women. His technique, a mixture of decoupage and collage, has all the trademarks of the denigrated feminine domestic arts. Part of the program of feminist art was the valorization of these gendered skills. They were so successful that their association with women is a distant memory. Dayton is probably the only Over-50 white male artist working today using radical feminist practices and aware of it. He's probably not going to win any kudos from them, however.

The poet Paul Eluard famously quipped, "Everything is transmutable into everything else." Perhaps it is fitting to quote this male surrealist poet in this essay. After all, the surrealists were a movement notoriously misogynistic and with a long history of exploiting women artists for artistic gain. His statement speaks to how anything can be recontextualized in a language that makes it appear as its antithesis. Dayton offers a contemporary re-staging. To make these women speak the very language of pornography - a scourge their work sought to expose and frustrate - is to show how there is nothing but context to reading pictures. It doesn't matter if those pictures were originally in *Ms.*; tomorrow they could turn up in *Playboy* in a compromising position. It is as easy as one culture's love being viewed by another as hate, our justice viewed as injustice, their freedom fighters as our terrorists.

Dayton adds his artistic voice to this new world order. Each series - the flowers, surfboards and white women - speak to the slippage of meaning. His reconditioned collages and paintings expose the hairline cracks behind every socially constructed identity, from beautiful people to ugly rumors, feminist pioneers and social poseurs. The fissures are cleverly concealed but in the open, right there on the finished surfaces. The palette is apocalyptic - garish and stark. Dayton's aesthetic world is like ours - segregated by color, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, race, class and nationality. It's a world of fists in the air and burning American effigies overseas. The whole world is in flames and we don't even smell it, pacified in front of our television screens, mesmerized by the flickering images. No matter how close we get to the t.v. to see the latest wildfire threatening L.A. the acrid smoke smells like clean plastic.

We live in Dayton's aesthetic version of hell and think its heaven. It is just beautiful enough to fool most of us all of the time but not the crazies who hear his work whisper its hidden meaning. These holy idiots live beyond the well manicured lawns and freshly planted gardens on the dark side of the moon and within a black hole sun. They are the

ones in the hills, armed and well-stocked, waiting for the coming plague, be it religious, political, ecological or biological. The rest of us might as well be in Plato's Cave posing for our own reality program.

Richard Prince, an artist famous for incurring feminist scorn, has been working on a piece "In My Movie" intermittently for the past 30 years. All text, its script combines his favorite subjects, celebrities, models, nurses, with the conventions of b-movie plots. Following his lead, I'd like to pitch my own version. My movie is part science fiction and part psychological thriller. I've cast Dayton's flowers in the lead role. In it the artistically enhanced flowers patiently wait for humans to sleep, just like the extraterrestrial plants in the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. One day an unfortunate collector experiences just how deadly Dayton's flowers are, how evacuated of life and drained of romantic meaning: their seriality takes them off the wall and into the world as aesthetic serial killers. And they aren't gallant like Jeff Daniel's character Tom in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. They are hungry for blood.

I end the film with the camera pulling back from the murder victims to reveal an apartment with no art on the walls. Just the dust shadows remain to suggest their long tenancy. The police are stumped and call it a botched art theft: but I know who the culprits are. I don't even have to see the crime scene. Even with this knowledge I don't talk. As far as I'm concerned the collectors had it coming to them. And in my movie they die with the word "rosebud" on their lips.

