

Café Opera
Text by Suzanne Hudson

Quodlibet is the title of one of Edgar Bryan's recent canvases that stars a musical instrument—a treacly Germanic piano that evokes Matisse by way of the Madonna Inn—and by extension allegorizes compositional issues of rehearsal and process. This is a tall painting, the looming verticality of which the piano grounds. It is fronted by an evergreen chair turned flush to the picture plane, its caned seat conspicuously offering a still life with a skull and violin. A traditional vanitas, coupling symbols of ephemerality and transience, it is not the only image within the image. Hanging on the wall above, a framed portrait of a grinning lilac satyr mocks the centering ponderousness of mortality. And then: From the piano's recesses a limb emerges, throwing off the lid and toppling a decorative vase; now askew, its still erect contents mirror the more angular lines of that bent arm, which reaches down to finger the blocky keys below. Taken together, the scene of the mad-cap player piano and its incipient narrative pose the cinematic sight gag of an errant causal chain. No longer operated with a pneumatic mechanism, the animating prosthetic is distinctly and unnervingly human, figuring forth from the black chasm of what cannot but appear as a coffin for the campy un-dead.

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Bucatini Fugue likewise features an arm from the pictorial beyond. Its seemingly abrupt lifting of the piano lid again kicks over a vessel, spilling long-stemmed saffron flowers. A purple piano bench tips up, the better to stage a Chez Panisse cookbook opened to the illustrated title page and a can of Italian tomatoes repurposed as a studio prop. As in *Quodlibet*, sheet music resting on the instrument is rendered in such fine detail that individual notes are legible, and can be performed as written. In this, Bryan summons the Renaissance tradition of incorporating musical notation into illuminated manuscripts and panels of other subjects. (This habit finds its most deliriously perverted expression in Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1500), which includes one sinner, face down and ass up, emblazoned with a song for the damned.) The fugue in particular introduces a short melody or phrase, which is successively interwoven by others. Perhaps not incidentally, in psychiatry the term characterizes a disillusion of the sanctity of self. Here, the visual acuity of the notation, and its functionalizing of the work, makes the music another instance of art set within the encompassing representational order. Bryan describes this relative to the design principle of Russian tea dolls, in addition to the recursive logic of computer programming (where the insertion of a command within a command is known as "nesting"). It also somewhat differently recalls the new age lifestyle engineering of Werner Erhard, who gleefully spoke of peeling back the layers of consciousness like an onion until only emptiness remained.

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In *Opera (un)Populaire*, a seated figure might be an alter-ego for Bryan (especially given that he models those disembodied arms on his own, and sees them as versions of self-portraits). Bryan's earlier self-portrait, *The Ledge* (2004), conjures the moment when the

thing that the painter depicts—a potted plant that consumes him in its spindly branches as he paints them—exceeds the bounds of its realization. The harp player, too, remains absorbed in his activity, eyes downcast or maybe closed. His fingers yarn threaded atop the paint, materializing the tactility of the harp strings before the illusionism that literally underpins it. Unaware of an audience that might assemble before him, he nevertheless exists for it. Entranced in his song, neither does he notice a scene-stealing clique of brightly colored, bug-eyed frogs clinging to the strings and climbing atop the upper slope of the harmonic curve. They are loosely inspired by the singing and dancing amphibian protagonist in the Technicolor animated musical short, *One Froggy Evening* (1955), in addition to their operatic cartoon brethren. Still, they appear to be issuing in this instance ever more directly from the player than some other source—a latter-day version of a Pygmalion-like coming into being through the aesthetic act.

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Café Opera is a full-scale floral still life, and thus a companion to the bouquets in the music paintings. A few fallen leaves dot the table under the bloom-filled pitcher, registering a familiar conceit whereby painting invokes without succumbing to the vicissitudes of time and death. A thin painted margin around the top and sides further frames the painting from within. Its edging seals off the self-conscious markings of surface (paint become petal inextricable from paint), but it also manages the physical transition from painting to wall. Nearby, smaller-sized paintings of harps embroidered with string as in *Opera (un)Populaire* form diptychs with canvases shown in the reverse; their exposed backs—open fields of negative space—are traced with stitches that contribute to designs facing the wall as radicalized instances of what we know exists but cannot grasp. In its traditional parallax-driven formulation, the famous duck and rabbit gestalt only allows one possibility to come into focus at a time. Bryan gives us an obdurate version of visual play, stilled in its current configuration.

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Meanwhile, across the room, *Quodlibet* offers a heuristic of another sort. The title refers to a musical game where folk tunes were combined into a single composition. It originated in 15th-century Europe and was popularized thereafter; by the 19th century the logic of citation took precedence, regularly exacerbating the often-humorous dissonance between a source and its inflection in the new context. For this painting, Bryan appropriated the last variation of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (already a quodlibet), published in 1741, and paired it with the melodies of *This Land is Your Land* (1940), by Woody Guthrie. It is a simple song that grows more complex. Recursive, it is the same at the end as at the beginning.