"MR. RABBIT, MR. RABBIT"


Esther Raucher

"Mr. Rabbit, Mr. Rabbit
What makes your ears so long?
Yes, by God, they're put on wrong.
Every little soul must shine, shine.
Every little soul must shine."

Children's song

Many artists use dreams as inspiration or as subject matter, but Jonathan Borofsky's installation I Dreamed a Dog Was Walking a Tightrope At 2,715,346 centers on dreams as an endangered natural resource.

Whether one uses a Freudian or Jungian model, whether one believes that dreams are disguised or distorted by the conscious mind or that dreams are aided, abetted and enriched by reason directly in the dream state, there is an underlying assumption that dreams reveal the unconscious or what is universally instinctive in the natural human being. It is for this reason that many artists have been interested in dreams, particularly in the 20th century.

Yet in the second half of our century dreams have become increasingly dominated by images of the city and pretty much cut off from what was once called "nature"—animals, earth, trees and sky. In fact, for most people today nature is the given—a densely populated, media informed, indoor urban environment, and our dreams reflect the change. This transformation of the natural and primitive into the urban and technological is the central issue of Borofsky's installation.

The first thing I saw when I walked into Borofsky's dream environment was a large flat wooden freestanding rabbit head with target eyes, as in a shooting arcade. He had already been blasted, "spaced out." The rabbit had a human face drawn on it and in his innocence he was the instinctive child in all of us, particularly the artist.

The next thing that captured my attention was a television set. Though smaller than other objects or drawings in the room, it was in color and its images moved quickly, catching one's peripheral vision. The only other colored object in the room was the ping pong table, painted the traditional green and functioning as an ironic reminder of outdoor games. On the TV, a cartoon dog was drawn in the simplest style jerked on a wire as it received electric shocks shown in easily readable cartoon dashes. The action was repeated on a loop, portraying Borofsky's nightmare of an
animal perpetually walking a tightrope in a perpetual state of shock. Below the wire each jolt was counted off in numbers, which were part of a numerical series that appeared around the room as an endless tabulation of all of Borofsky's work and that even occurred in the title of the piece. Seeing digital numbers amidst all of this apparent primitivism was rather a shock; but since we are now quite used to everything being numbered, it was almost reassuring to have the disturbing images accounted for. It implied that someone in control was keeping the tally—like statistics of traffic fatalities on holiday weekends or body counts in war.

The background setting of the TV image was also comforting, for it contained the iconography of the traditional American landscape—the majestic mountains, the flat plains, and the long road of “manifest destiny” leading up to the horizon and infinity. But a new icon was added to our collective visual language and foregrounded by Borofsky's design—two poles supporting a wire suspended over the road. Today it is hard to go anywhere without seeing wires overhead; photography has even given them a formal beauty, incorporating them into the natural design. For urban dwellers who feel pressured by institutional authority, these wires (like TV) do not simply represent communication and progress through electricity and telephones. They also can be experienced as a constraint—our inability to escape the network of man-made structures. If we look up, the wires interfere with an open view of the sky.

Borofsky's images of the rabbit and the dog introduce the main ideas about man's instinctive nature, which are also developed in the various human forms drawn on the walls throughout the room. Because of his wild outdoor instincts, the dog is often used in the hunt to help the master catch his prey—the rabbit. As "man's best friend," the dog is also the most domesticated animal who can come indoors and behave. Capable of living in both worlds, the dog is a bit like the artist, who is most valued for keeping in touch with his senses, his instincts and nature (or at least with an expansive viewpoint), but who also can be domesticated by coming indoors to learn how to master his tools, to display his works and to communicate with other adults. Some artists adapt better than others; some live entirely in studio. Others are accused of being eccentric wild men. They cannot forget jumping and running freely like a child or a rabbit and find it difficult to behave indoors with outdoor body demands; natural things slip out at openings or with collectors. They must learn to restrain themselves if they want their art to be seen. The negative response to such a slip is as direct and immediate as an electric jolt. Like the dog, the artist tries to walk the tightrope. Either he performs an electrifying high wire act, or he represses the artist-child-dog entirely.

On another wall, looming almost too tall for the room, was a crude figure of a man. Flat and gray and made of wood with the studs and supports showing, the man was painted a solid dark color; one arm was raised and lowered by a very visible little mechanism on his body. Stenciled across one side of his body was the word Strike; on the other side appeared the number 27,1483—another in the series of Borofsky's works or dreams. Though his size made him ominous, something in his pose—the slightly bowed head, the shortness of the mechanical gesture, or the sense that he was only a stage set—made him seem powerless. Was this the image of the Master? The word strike clearly implied violence, but its associations with labor suggested that this figure might be numbered along with the dog and the rabbit among the oppressed.

On the bright white walls and covering an exit door were large black gestural drawings, with words and numbers in the artist's handwriting. They suggested an
illustrated dream journal, in which the longest statement revealed the artist's mood, if not his intentions.

I dreamed that some Hitler-type person was not allowing everyone to rollerskate in public places. I decided to assassinate him but I was informed by my friend that Hitler had been dead a long time and if I wanted to champion anything, I should go into politics. This seemed like a good idea since I was tired of making art and was wondering what to do with the last half of my life.

For all the half-hearted feeling of this dream statement, Borofsky did succeed in walking the tightrope. He has definitely made both "art" and a powerful political environment. It is to the credit of the curator that it is done in a museum. The overall title of the exhibit, "The Museum as Site," enhances the perception that Borofsky's piece is a collection or history of dreams, just as the Los Angeles Museum is a history or collection of art.

Faced with the problems of our civilization—the lack of control over a powerful and often fearful environment. Out of a similar need, we too will unite art, religion and the body politic. Our natural setting is now being acculturated by a threatening man-made environment. On Borofsky's walls the hunter and the prey are one: man doppelganger man, with the statistics of Soviet and American weapons. The walls say they are the same—"all are one."

One part of the wall is drawn in a fragmentary, almost surrealist style while other sections contain graffiti and the quicky-Xerox mode. In one area a man with a fish for a head is surrounded by animals, including a horse head with the inscription: "The most powerful thing in the world is your mind' R. Lockhart." But haven't our minds put us in this situation? We must not be deluded by the familiarity and romance of fascist images. The state is set for a no-win situation with a long list of numbers. The viewer is invited to play ping pong—recalling the famous game between China and the U.S. This media hype gave us only a score, another comforting number, but it had no effect on the larger game plan. Unlike the Surrealists, Borofsky did not translate his dreams into another reality. There is no mystical metaphor here. The structure is addition, an accumulation of violence that becomes banal. Many of us are having mundane nightmares, city dreams in black and white.

Many believe that our last natural resource beyond the control of governments and mega-corporations is the human mind—particularly our dreams. Some even hope that dreams lie beyond the control of the rational mind, which may be untrustworthy. In dreams the animal body and the transcendant mind could be rejoined and revived by dipping down into the untampered, primary river of archetypes. Yet, like the mind and like art, dreams are shaped by the lives we are leading. They are influenced by external events of history, as much as coming from the internal mythology or the art made out of them. With the proliferation of media
imagery, external images have vastly enlarged the archetypal collection. Who is in control of this media image banks—television, newspapers, film, photography and the fine arts? Are we in Plato’s cave as well as in Lascaux—watching figures loom up in silhouette by fire light, trapped in the human condition, unable to see the absolute reality whose existence depends on our ability to perceive it? Is Borofsky giving us another dose of fatalism? Or is the hand that controls the media switch and the image bank a human hand, like the clenched fist of the policeman who strikes the back of the roller skater?

The energy of the gestural strokes in this installation, its primitivism, is not inconsistent with the videotape or the carefully numbered accumulation of Borofsky’s works within a plastic box. The piece implies we will need to call on all our faculties; our most complex, sophisticated ideas must be rooted in instinctual feelings. The call is not for us, as individuals and as a culture, to become primitives, but rather to become pluralistic. Though now an accepted style in the art world, primitivism has always been suspect because it denies elitism—it implies that “even your child could make that!” Mixed in with the many messages on the walls of Borofsky’s dream space was the suggestion of a democratic art form, cheap and available to Everyman. After all, everyone is a dreamer, and the word Xerox is clearly visible on the door under the “Exit” sign.

The rollerskater is the perfect image of primitive/acculturated man—a city dweller on man-made skates rolling along the cement sidewalk, experiencing that old primitive pleasure of movement, as if through open space. As the wind swirls around his body, he might come to think that he should experience this exhilarating animal joy more often. There is still hope in that body memory, that vitality, even if it is so removed as in a dream. It is this kind of memory that makes Borofsky write, “If I wanted to champion anything, I should go into politics.” “Tired of making art,” he might as well champion the dog and the rabbit, before the bomb brings the final relief.

“Mr. Rabbit, Mr. Rabbit
What makes your eyes so red?
Yes, by God, I'm almost dead.
Every little soul must shine, shine
Every little soul must shine.

I dreamed a Dog Was Walking a Tightrope at 2,715,346, 1981, Jonathan Borofsky. Photos by Robbert Flick, courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA.