



# Excavations

## A Feminist Resistance Artist Dialogues with Graham Gillmore's "Lov Sic"

by Karen Moe

*The errors have been repeated intentionally. The artist both ridicules and laughs at his own inescapable participation. The subject of this painting is Logos. The artist's muse is the erroneous Logos that constructs himself. What of lov? [sic]*

Painter and sculptor Graham Gillmore has been known for employing text in his paintings for decades. Like the appropriation of images and objects from popular culture in his figurative work, Gillmore's use of language is also an appropriation of the real. By recontextualizing well-worn phrases into the work he not only destabilizes the seemingly insignificant and unquestioned, but also ironically elevates the language of popular culture as logos, the word: the ultimate wisdom, order, knowledge discourse, indeed, reality itself. Any absolute is unceasingly in need of deconstruction. Gillmore's text-centric pieces like *Boo Fucking Hoo*, 2009–2010, and *Look at Me When I'm Speaking to You*, 2011, and the most recent *Girly Boyish*, 2014, feature phrases that colour our cultural psyche and animate our constant navigations of gendered relationships and realities. Within the dynamics of a playful twist, these phrases inform the psychology of a culture, and as such contribute to notions of truth.



2

1. Graham Billmore, *Lov Sic*, 2013, oil and enamel on panel, 80 x 80 inches. Photograph: Byron Dauncey. All images courtesy the artist, Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver and Division Gallery, Toronto and Montreal.

2. *KafKaesque*, 2008, oil and enamel on panel, 80 x 72 inches.

In "Lov Sic," a body of work shown at Monte Clark Gallery in Vancouver in 2013, the removal of the "e" from "love" is a cheeky blaspheming of the cultural mandate that insists that romantic love equals happiness. Indeed, the fatalistic lexical choice of 'love sick' posits the inevitability that, as excessively gendered creatures, our experience of love 'sickness' is guaranteed.

Beyond the surface and sentimentality of 'love sickness,' however, the play with sic as [sic] signifies that this pallid appropriation of "lov" is pure and has not been altered. "Lov" has been taken as is from the land of the real, replete with its erroneous disability. Then, the artist, spinning a helixical web of ambivalence, whisks us back only to be KerPlunked into a land where unquestioned gender construction and the corresponding new sexism is most certainly sick. I remind the reader: *feminism is a rigorous and unyielding dismantling of phallogocentric hierarchy*.

Does an artist have to be marginalized in order to have a deep comprehension of the politics and mechanics of power (and its abuse)? Can a white male heterosexual artist justifiably engage with phallogocentric hierarchy? Does an artist have to have been violated physically and/or emotionally in order to be intimate with the psychology of the violator and their lethal, fear-based violence?

Such acutely lived experiences often result in a prioritization of issues of power politics, and mobilize urgency in an artist's work in areas that indicate a pursuit of justice. Especially in the context of



21st-century gender politics and the current backlash against achieved gains in the 20th century, the white male voice is a crucial site of feminist excavation. Perhaps it is more significant if these critical gestures are not in the forefront of the male artist's motivations. They may even have appeared without his knowledge, subconsciously rising to surface in the work of art, in varying degrees of subtlety.

The paintings in Gillmore's "Lov Sic" are treasure troves of both conscious and unwitting gender play, awareness and discovery. The artist, however, seems to be relatively unaware of his art's transformational bounty as he half-laments: "As artists we try to find keys to locked doors, only to find another locked door." Unbeknownst to their creator, these paintings are indeed doors opening in varying degrees, some creaking like neglected tombs, some flung brazenly open, the breath and blood of the artist's bold self-reflexivity initiating a destabilization of the white, middle-class, heterosexual male in Western culture. He is ready to be excavated.

### Jokes and Tricks, 2013.

*Is that a board game or a farmer's field? Gillmore responds, "both." And, yes, indeed, both (and then some).*

"Lov Sic's" source was the history and fantasy of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Gillmore explains that from this inspiration grew a labyrinth of ideas and as the paintings coalesced one by one from an inaugural tangle, trajectories were formed; the artist, like a player in a board game, moved from painting to painting. From a predetermined choice of 'Go,' an autobiography of the artist's unleashed psyche evolved. *Tricks and Jokes* is an entrée into this fertile field and a board game of strategic and linear male implementation. However, the roads that the players must travel dwindle into shaky paths and are often sporadically washed out. The cultural linearity is moving into the past; the certainty that somewhere leads to somewhere is decomposing into the archaic. The uncontainable wilderness, so feared within patriarchal walls, is rising and claiming space within the male frame. In Western culture, the wilderness is the Woman/Other and as such has always been the disorderly threat and the something that must be kept out. Nevertheless, despite centuries of systemic discipline, in this painting, the she is getting in.

1. *Jokes and Tricks (second version)*, 2013, oil on canvas, 60 x 80 inches.

2. *Untitled*, 2013, acrylic and paper on canvas, 36 x 30 inches. Photograph: Byron Dauncey.





In *Tricks and Jokes*, the whimsical pictures were appropriated from the backs of Gillmore's childhood comic books. The viewer is offered such titillating ineffables as X-ray-vision goggles and Magic Monkeys, sneezing powder and dribble glasses. Gillmore explained how the anticipation of receiving such morsels of promised joy was so intense that it guaranteed crushing disappointment when Magic Snakes in reality was a banal black tablet that merely approximated worm shapes. Such heady romance is immanently unrequited. Thus, the wide-eyed boy's fantasies are cruelly dashed as he plummets back into the doldrums of his history or, as Gillmore puts it, "the world of dirty socks." The un-exhumed fantasy is a hoodwink; the magic snakes and the maiden never do exist.

Despite this ideological disappointment within the anticipatory confines of the child, the painting is fecund with intriguing striations of infinite comings and goings. Pentimentoed depths both conceal and reveal history as a product of conquest and, within the psyche of both painted and painter, it is coming apart at the seams. The road, once so straight and certain, is starting to wobble and wane, the destination is thwarted by the artist's self-conscious cuts and the Cartesian construct is becoming more difficult to maintain. When you dig into this painted psyche there is language that has been proclaimed mere fantasy by its historical oppressors, concurrently decomposing and fertilizing in the depths of *Tricks and Jokes*, where it is being given voice. The board game floats tenuously upon the dimensions of lexical decay, and when you focus on the farthest fathom of the painting's flat board, there is vertigo.

### Abu Groovy, 2013

*A dog pile of stunned men smeared on top of the violence of the linear.*

A self-proclaimed sponge, Gillmore lifted the jolly little men featured in *Abu Groovy* from an adolescent boy's drawings that he found at a garage sale. The figures appeared naive, passive, almost egoless, Gillmore said. However, when cultural artifacts were placed within the panopticon of the painting, whipped by the knowledge that lies beneath the surface of the artist's readily accessible articulation, and then the completed work of art is stuck back into the social system of its birth, it is necessary to ask what happens to

these apparently innocent, one dimensional, jolly little men?

Gillmore explained how these found male figures "were drawn with a ballpoint pen on foolscap, then roughly cut out and glued onto a black board...very OCD." He drew and pasted these figures over and over again, the repetition synonymous with the way an ideology is maintained through its incessant and insidious iteration. Gillmore's distinctive use of tautology is hard at work in this appropriation; they could be the same man in different versions of the same clothes, different versions of the same expression, different versions of the same system, circling and trapped within the scrutinizing walls of the painting's frame—all differences residing in and re-perpetuating sameness. What appeared on the surface as a bunch of cartoon guys layered into a good humoured cake is actually a phallic stack of passive zombies, their expressions frozen in a glazed stun, their eyes paralyzed dead ahead: a claustrophobia of unquestioned containment.

As in any hierarchy, the guy on top is usually pretty happy about it and Gillmore's *Abu Groovy* assemblage is no exception. Priapic nose standing at full attention, this victor wears a predictably self-satisfied smile while his three cronies immediately below sport mouths stretched in sycophantic mirth. Mirroring the lethal brainwashing of soldiers,



2



their passivity lies in the absolute internalization of an ideology fueled by fear and power. There is no individuality here. They are moulded into the prioritization of the phallus. Who better to expose this for us than a self-reflexive artist whose own positioning locates him near the top of the stack, simultaneously inscribed by all he surveys and with one of the best seats in the house?

But another foolscap find comprises the background of *Abu Groovy*. Gillmore relates how he was drawn to the painstaking care its creator had put into the meticulously inscribed lexicon of calculations, schedules and technological diagrams. There is a beguiling softness in the rigid lines of exactitude. You can feel the premeditated intention of each letter, a brow's entrenched concentration, as a disciplined and steady hand lays down order and control. This is the terrain of science and rationalism. No mystery, no wilderness, no art will cross these lines or get past such impeccably crossed t's and punctiliously dotted i's. Like the rebar criss-crossed in a concrete slab, the lexicon, diagrams and foolscap lines of this found object enforce a seemingly impervious ground floor for the reality the painting is showing us.

Affixed to his practice of placing entities that are seemingly incongruous in the same frame, the artist slaps top and bottom together. Hegemony reigns in both layers; the top is a jurisdiction of jam and goo while the bottom is a desert of crumb-less toast. The sinister pun of the two-word title results in a cyclical smearing of the brutal with the innocent. Can one, in fact, exist without the other? This semantic play exposes the desensitization of the West in the face of the atrocities committed in other parts of the world—even if the crimes are at the hands of its own government. Can sociological desensitization and systemic violence exist, one without the other? *Abu Groovy* shows us that this construction is starting to crumble; awareness is rising. By stirring the master narrative, Gillmore dredges up the depths of our reality and slams it onto the surface of his painting. We can laugh and cry; our ideology is grounded in hierarchy's immanent violence, complicit in the Abu while we dance to a desensitizing swoon, in the Groovy.

1. *Pig Boy*, 2013, oil and enamel on panel, 60 x 80 inches.

2. *Pig Boy (Part 2)*, 2013, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 60 x 48 inches.  
Photograph: Byron Dauncey.





### Pig Boy, 2013

*The narrative is instigated by the suffocating apparition, a black and blue paint puddle that oozes across the left half of the diptych and threatens the right.*

The cobalt blue bleeding into a black puddle that dominates the diptych *Pig Boy* is a hunched and lurking male form. A looming father, the line of the back bends towards its next site of discipline; the suggestion of a bullish head materializes through cuts of brown and blue and has pushed beyond the painting's frame inciting the impending overlap into the next room. Imperious, its torso is twice the size of the delicately engraved *Pig Boy* whom he quite literally has swallowed up in his phantasmal paint. Gillmore wasn't conscious of this dark inky pool as a gendered male figure, he told me. I'm suggesting the painting birthed its own subjugating archetype and through the alchemical pathos of the artist's pouring, the *Pig Boy's* wide-eyed narrative is determined.

Within the maw of the insatiably carnivorous capitalist, a pig doesn't have a hope in hell. Along with their predetermined culinary annihilation, Gillmore's animals are found objects from the subterranean collage of his psyche. In the way a pig's flesh contains his or her imminent demise, so too does the already tenuous teetering of a child's innocence. Along with his porcine pals, Gillmore's *Pig Boy* simultaneously frolics and winces on the brink. All lines lead to *Paradise Lost*.

Gillmore notes that the inky paint puddle which is *Pig Boy* on the left side of the diptych "has been erased or consumed or forgotten, like a faded memory." However, it is in the erasure that the consumed boy-figure's lines become delineated and the figure is fully realized. Through its forgotten state, the memory has become super-saturated and outlined in black. In comparison to the dissolving and fragmented purity of his pre-ingested counterpart to the right, *Pig Boy blue* stands out. Still, the cookie-cutter boy holds his ground, both defiant and naïve as he is confronted by his impending conquest. *Pig Boy's* face is frozen

in a psychological drama of trust and betrayal, horror and wonderment. In true Gillmorian fashion, "the Dionysian pours to the Apollonian lines;" it is the painter's viscous pool of paint that enacts the ideology of containment. The paint is forever just about to advance, the artist keeps the viewer suspended, the painting is a held breath. Then, wielding his telltale tools of irony and play, Gillmore backgrounds his pre-subjugation *Pig Boy* with deceptive, albeit delicious, striations of sherbet. And everyone lives hegemonically ever after, smacking their lips for more.

### Pig Boy Part 2, 2013

*"Each informs the other— both calculated, intentional, in their own way. The concentric line paintings mimic the substance of the puddles."* (Gillmore)

In *Pig Boy Part 2*, the eye immediately slams onto the angry orange ape; he is the thrashing heart of the narrative, suspended on the concentric lines of stealth bomber green as a swooshing brushstroke rolls in from the painting's perimeter. As Gillmore explains, the system of these strokes is "like the ripples made from throwing a rock in water in reverse." Palpable tension is achieved as the ape throbs outwards and is constrained by the circuitous lines that originate externally. Both ape and artist are imprisoned by the painting.





The base coats are a cerulean blue. The Latin translation of cerulean is "heaven sky." However, there is no two-dimensional heaven here as the duck in the back is poised to stab his unwitting companion with his pointy beak and the pig still squirms in little Pig Boy's girlish arms. Gillmore's boy-child is the innocent protector of innocence; he stares apprehensively out of the painting, toward the horrors of Part 1, his legs braced in soft defiance.

Moving from left to right, *Pig Boy Part 2* is a Kafkaesque assembly line of social construction. Ironically, the raw material is already an overt construct. It is a found photograph of *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. Gillmore relates its finding: The photo in *Pig Boy 2* was a flea-market find. We gravitate toward images/objects for no apparent reason, then later see how it fits our trajectory of thought.

Using his dark and playful wit, *Pig Boy Part 2* performs an autopsy as Gillmore paints a frantic heart that bleeds a cartoon orange and it is none other than Mickey Mouse who holds the liberating knife. Mickey's teeth clench with the exertion of this heroic act; the ape does a double take. The painting is a tug-of-war of lethal ambivalence; conflict seethes on every plane. The artist's concentric linear motifs achieve a density and weight that build a three-dimensional crucifix of saturations. With a flourish of horror and humour, Gillmore's Mickey fights to cut the afflicted ape free and the artist muses, "the ape could be me." This is a beginning that is also an ending.

The little boy subdues his stuffed toys. Dressed as a pirate or a prince, he brandishes his sword; the submissive power of weapon over beast is sharply delineated in pure white, and the hand that holds the weapon is placed at the top-centre of the frame. The tip of the sword is the pinnacle of the painting, achieving the panel's uppermost edge, its entrenched line a current that surges through the boy-child's hand, down through the line of his arm and along the edge of the cloak to be grounded as a bold swath of history. The engraved expression on the child's face radiates opulence. The luxurious lines of his eyelids are those of a pampered prince, signifying a stance in which he is both exultant and weary. At the same time his downward gaze is fierce, piercing his subjects who sit devotedly at his feet. His other hand touches a second sword, ready to quell any potential disobedience, and with the flourish of another Gillmorian joke, "KEEP" is engraved squarely in the bottom right corner of the painting, in the traditional place of the artist's signature.

There is a departure from Postmodernism's dry disdain for the soul in Gillmore's "Lov Sic" that continues into his most recent exhibition, "Great Expectations" at Division Gallery in Toronto. With a most welcome sigh of relief, we can open again to the sensorial awareness that all good art contains an element of mysticism. In order to last, a work has to take on a life of its own beyond its creator. "What does the painting want to become?"

"As a child growing up in the Pacific Northwest," Gillmore said in *artUS* in 2008, "I would spend hours peering down through the dark, constantly moving ocean searching for mystery to emerge from the murky depths, and the flickering surface lights all had a profound influence on me. Consciousness slowly rising to the surface is in fact a metaphor to how I approach painting." This metaphor has become praxis. Through the cycles and tensions created by his active ambivalence, and by establishing a balance between elements that appear to be in opposition, Gillmore disturbs the 'real' and, more significantly, his own master narrative. He yanks his paintings in either direction, the tension tugs taut, and then he propels the painting back into itself again. Horror is painted in the most jovial shades and in the artist's words, "the work utilizes a dark sense of cynical humour as a tool to poke holes or dismantle the social apparatus." If the sediment of the male psyche is starting to shift from its historical bedrock and rise in pieces to the surface for scrutiny and awareness, this is perhaps a final frontier in the subversion of patriarchal hierarchy. The art of Graham Gillmore is amply ready to be excavated. ■

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