

EL GATO CHIMNEY



DE RERUM NATURA

Pamela Grossman

Martin Wittfooth + Michela D'Acquisto

El Gato Chimney's Visual Alchemy
by Martin Wittfooth

El Gato Chimney's Bewilderbeasts

By Pam Grossman

El Gato Chimney: Art Out Of Necessity

by Michela D'Acquisto

Acknowledgements

cover: Speak The Truth 2014, 50 x 71cm, mixed media on cotton paper
opposite: Guide Me Home 2014, 40 x 44cm, mixed media on cotton paper

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Inside The Circle 2014, 100 x 71cm, mixed media on cotton paper

El Gato Chimney's Visual Alchemy

by Martin Wittfooth

El Gato Chimney's paintings are a kind of visual alchemy: a unique witch's brew or shaman's potion of mysticism, therianthropy, mythological and religious symbolism, and visionary fractals. These works echo the technique and compositions of the naturalist painter John James Audubon, while envisioning a psychedelic menagerie summoned on paper from the often-diabolical nether realms of Hieronymus Bosch. Crowned hydras, chimeras, masked birds and crucified crows inhabit a barren world, wherein sacred hearts, disembodied eyes, mysticist dice, skeleton keys and beehives float above or lie upon the landscape. El Gato Chimney's imagination implores us to contemplate our collective symbolical archive, while simultaneously offering alternative allegories and personal readings of these devices. We are invited to bear witness, to unlock the doors of insight, to be transported and to feel the tension of duality: the waltz of the beautiful with the grotesque, the sacred in bed with the profane, the profound hi-fiving the absurd. Humor meets horror, and one isn't often sure which of these emotional responses is appropriate, so the intuitive impulse is to contend with both reactions to the works simultaneously. It's in this complex presentation of the works that something beautiful happens, and why I feel that they are so successful. They don't offer up clear messages or emotional hooks to persuade us to think or feel along linear paths, but instead nudge us in the direction of the light-and-shadow realm of visionary shamanic trance.

El Gato Chimney's Bewilderbeasts

By Pam Grossman

In Lucretius' ancient poem, *De Rerum Natura* ("On the Nature of Things") there is an infamous passage that has stymied translators for centuries, and it occurs just when the poet-philosopher is discussing whether our lives are predetermined by the gods or subject to our own choices and happenstance. As Leland R. Monk elucidates in his book, *Standard Deviations: Chance and the Modern Novel*: "[I]t is not clear if the crucial word is voluptas (pleasure) or voluntas (will)." He goes on to explain the irony of this: "Voluptas/voluntas: a letter has by chance gone astray at the moment the Lucretian text is explicating the operations of chance." It's a cosmic joke, a trickster mystery, a linguistic glitch that obscures the very the secrets it purports to reveal.

Fitting, then, that El Gato Chimney has selected this title to be rubric under which his latest group of magically zoological paintings fall, squirrely creatures that they are.

Upon first glance at a work of his, one is greeted by a tapestry of animals and symbols that flirt with the viewer, batting esoteric eyelashes, inviting interpretation. Each piece looks like a page from a tome that's part alchemical manuscript, part bestiary, and their yellowed borders enhance the effect. Symbols from various mystic systems float in space. Scraps of Latin flutter in the foreground. These paintings are hieroglyphic. They beg to be read. And who wouldn't want to know their stories? Who wouldn't want to be regaled with tales about fauna festooned in ceremonial garb, in scarlet masks, perched on trees and mountain peaks? Who wouldn't want to hear the one about the burro in the boat, burdened with a back full of clay vessels and a hat that's a house on fire? Or the one where the decapitated rooster with a devil in his chest grips a key in its serpentine tongue?

The trouble is – the pleasure is – that as these images nuzzle our consciousness, they resist precise translation. When first confronted by El Gato Chimney's work, I approached them like some sort of rebus or visual riddle waiting to be cracked open, if only I had the right legend. Though familiar with some of the symbols already, I was determined to analyze the rest, to equip myself with research and references and knowledge of folkloric signifiers. To be a veritable Indiana Jones of imagery.

I refreshed my memory about animals as ciphers for chemical interactions that could allegedly turn lead into gold. I boned up on Masonic pictographs and Oddfellow iconography. Writings about Pythagorean solids and pantheism and theriomorphic deities all went into the critical stew. When in doubt, I emailed our artist. Did the paintings' proliferation of jingle bells have Christian intimations, I wondered? The response: "In Japan, the jingle bells symbolize the souls of the ancestors. You can interpret them yourself though, I know you are interested in these things, too."

And therein lies the key to El Gato Chimney's fabulist locks. To trust one's own reactions and build a castle of personal understanding upon a foundation of half-remembered fables and nebulous Jungian motifs. To blur the lines between solo dream and macro-story. It's an exercise in syncretism, and arguably the very same technique employed by the artist while crafting this paper caravan of dreams.

My Black Heart shows a cliff-dwelling corvid impaled by a frenzy of swords. A visual pun, it makes me think first and perhaps most obviously of the phrase "a murder of crows." It's also evocative of the tarot's Three of Swords, a card of immense pain and betrayal. This connection is further reinforced by the flaming heart – or Roman Catholic Sacred Heart – hanging in the sky, the divine love of The Son doubling as the sun itself. The word beneath, SOLUTIO, refers to the alchemical stage of dissolution, representative of cleansing, liquefying, or being otherwise subsumed into a

greater body of water. What does this all mean exactly? I don't know. But the feeling I get is one of immense sacrifice – yet not without the hope of healing and purification.

Another ornithological being is the subject of the painting, Inside the Circle. We see an owl adorned in an elaborate costume of leaves, a fanned crimson and gold collar piece, and a cluster of miniature birdhouses where a cape perhaps should be. A bell hovers in front of its face, and a lemniscate crowns its head, suggesting that this creature is a magician or spirit guide. Standing upon a tree stump, it looks like a character out of a yarn spun by AA Milne on mushrooms or Aesop on a sleep-deprivation tear. I'm reminded of the Greek belief that birds were psychopomps -escorts that oversaw the safe passage of souls to the underworld. This links me to the concept of shamans as not only being seers, but as those with the power to facilitate rituals of death and rebirth. The birdhouses in the painting suddenly shift from being a whimsical embellishment to a profound metaphor about our bodies being temporary shelters for our souls. Owl as watcher, wise(wo)man, gentle angel of death.

And so the free-associations unfurl further with each viewing, a reverie of reverberations and recollections. Bees, eyes, burning leaves. A demon-headed sparrow with a crown of thorns, a hydra with multiple unicorn horns, a Capricorn. Winks to art history: a Goya-style sabbat with a jolly sheep in lieu of Baphomet; a veiled duck à la Magritte's *The Lovers*; vague netherscapes reminiscent of Dali or Tanguy. And throughout it all, an omnipresent red thread, loosely weaving together each marker, perhaps warding off evil per Kabbalah traditions, or leading us back home like Ariadne's ball of yarn.

These works obfuscate as they illuminate, and therein lies their allure. We don't know their specific stories, but we know them to be true. El Gato Chimney's resplendent paintings allow for our voluntas to will them into meaning, and our voluptas to take immense pleasure as we do.



Revelation 2014, 50 x 71cm, watercolors on cotton paper



The Oracle 2015, 50 x 71cm, watercolors on cotton paper

El Gato Chimney: Art Out Of Necessity

by Michela D'Acquisto

The first time I tried to write a critical essay on El Gato Chimney, I attempted to differentiate between the person I share my daily life with, and El Gato Chimney, the artist, and to approach his activity in the same way I treat all the artists I deal with: methodically, researching and studying their work, and the work of all those from which they are inspired. It is an essay which helped me to examine in depth the themes into which El Gato Chimney sinks the roots of his artistic research: folklore, occultism, primary arts.

El Gato Chimney and I work in the same room. With different rhythms, with very diverse systems. I like to think that the concept of the artist as a profligate genius is now a thing of the past, but if it still survives in the unconscious of some nostalgia, El gato Chimney's life can only refuse it. Whereas I am easily excitable and even more easily discouraged, a victim of fleeting passions, he is determinate, meticulous, secure; I believe he never considered the idea of not succeeding in his intent. Intent, not dream, because the latter presumes a certain passiveness not typical of El Gato Chimney, pushed by the ancestral need to express himself in this way, only.

He works at the easel, with his back to me. I often turn to read to him something, and what I see from my privileged position is just a small part of the drawing, of the canvas: a portion of the sky, one of his mysterious animals on the verge of beginning its existence. I hold the firm belief that this partial vision of mine is strongly symbolic. As everybody else else looking at one of El Gato Chimney's oeuvres, I, too, would like immediate answers. The world he describes is inviting and dangerous at the same time, a fable that after a few lines turns into a story pervaded with a subtle feeling of disquiet, yet too captivating to be put down. In order to open the drawers and the doors of this parallel universe, keys are necessary: keys that, as the fairy tale's rule goes, are magical objects, rewards for having overcome all the provided ordeals.

I undoubtedly feel privileged to be able to witness this artistic creation, to be able to go near it, nearer than anyone else, but I am afraid that if I were to abuse my advantages, the magic would fail. I know I would stop seeing things out of the corner of my eye, I know the veil would get thicker.

I would be lying if I said that I never ask him questions.

His reaction is always to encourage me to continue my personal journey. **The answer is inside me, inside all of us, because El Gato Chimney's art is tied to the life cycle, to the phases of the moon, to the earth that feeds us and to the earth in which we decompose.** Giving up our beliefs, taking off our clothes, what are we, if not animals? Searching for the truth within oneself is an exhausting process. I often revert back to the time when, as a child, I found myself in front of a painting from early Italian Renaissance, my first contact with the history of the art: only shadows emerge from the thick of the wood, but the flowers are detailed, and incredibly vivid.

I am not comparing El Gato Chimney to the many creators whom were not allowed to pass down their life stories: I do not believe he is an unsung hero, and neither that he needs someone to speak on his behalf. On the contrary, I think his works are so eloquent they have developed their own voice, clear and unmistakable to the extent it has blurred the man behind the canvas. But I want to celebrate the man behind the canvas, because too often we peruse the use of color, we speculate about the influences. Too often we assume the origin of the work of art is immediate, the product of divine inspiration or innate talent, forgetting that for some there is no alternative to painting, to devote their lives to the act, painful and extraordinarily earthly, of creating.

A work of art is good if it has arisen out of necessity.
That is the only way one can judge it.

Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters To A Young Poet, 1929



Secret Pacts 2014, 100 x 71cm, mixed media on cotton paper



The Two Rivers 2014, 50 x 60cm, acrylic on canvas



My Black Heart 2014, 100 x 71 cm, mixed media on cotton paper



Aurora 2014, 56 x 70cm watercolors on cotton paper



The Assembly of 24th June 2014, 70 x 60cm, acrylic-on-canvas



Rebirth 2015, 100 x 71cm, watercolor on cotton paper



Hydra of the Apocalypse 2014, 100 x 71cm, watercolor on cotton paper



Lost In Thoughts 2014, 56 x 70cm, watercolor on cotton paper



The Charlatan 2015, 80 x 90cm acrylic on canvas

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Pam Grossman is an independent curator, writer, and teacher of magical practice and history. She is the creator of *Phantasmaphile*, a blog which specializes in art and culture with an esoteric bent, as well as the Associate Editor of *Abraxas International Journal of Esoteric Studies*, and the co-organizer of the Occult Humanities Conference at NYU. Her art shows and projects have been featured in *Artforum*, *Newsweek*, *New York Magazine*, *Boing Boing*, *Art & Antiques Magazine*, *Creative Time*, *Time Out New York*, *Juxtapoz*, and elsewhere.

Michela D'Acquisto is an Italian independent art curator and writer. Just graduated from the Brera Fine Arts Academy with a thesis focusing on art brut and outsider art, Michela's artistic mission is to narrate the other side of the history of the art.

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El Gato Chimney, 2015

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