

## NEOLITHIC GLAMOUR: THE DRAWINGS OF JASON FOX

BY RACHEL KUSHNER

Obsolescence and entropy, as Jason Fox interprets these concepts, seem neither dead nor dispersed. Creep and decrepitude abound in Fox's drawings, radiating provocation, humor, and even elegance. Robert Smithson wrote of a meeting point between the remote future and the remote past, and in Philip K. Dick's 1969 novel *Ubik*, time runs backward and the world's supply of cigarettes is always already stale. Fox, interested in both Smithson and Dick, draws humanoids that are sometimes pathetic, sometimes menacing, and most often both. He places them in unlikely settings: in a putrid rec room; behind a chain-link fence; in a net being lowered through a clear blue sky. In this last, a gelatinous mass of monster hovers as though it's being dropped on a loading dock. These mutated beings, like the double-sided sci-fi softcovers popular in the 1950s, are fusions of two archetypal figures: the caveman and the cyborg. Cyborgs transcend human weakness, and cavemen, the anthropologists tell us, had a much better life than we do, with more leisure and a more fluid and pragmatic social structure: free love and communal parenting in their original form. With this mixture of the future and the forgotten, Fox's cave-borgs are the ultimate miscegenation—which seems partly a romanticized idea and partly a wry joke about romanticized ideas. (Instead of attempting, as Philip Guston did, to "paint like a caveman," Fox simply paints the caveman.)

*Planet Drix* (1992), a vast Dionysian gathering of friendly brown-skinned creatures, is a prototype for Fox's feel-good ethos. The Drix have vaguely simian features, but they're fully, unapologetically bipedal and sport natty halos of kinked hair. Stylistically, *Planet Drix* evokes R. Crumb, the 1968 film *Planet of the Apes*, and '70s-era wide-lens rock-concert photography. The benevolent Drix, cartoonishly rendered in their birthday suits (all toes, nipples, and belly buttons), seem like send-ups of the native in triplicate: contented, "pure," and unself-consciously vulgar. Are they waiting for an event? At an event? Or is the "event" simply their hairy, happy, and endlessly proliferating existence? Above the crowd, a lavender wash (or should I say purple haze—"Drix" here refers to Hendrix) feathers the sky. A female perched on a pair of shoulders with her arms extended heavenward might be giving the trans-species sign for "encore," but symbolically she's hope incarnate, though whether secular hope or faith in a god is unclear and perhaps irrelevant. It's the possibility of hope and its attendant grace that seems significant, and not the nature and trappings of its repository.

Other drawings feature more dystopian phylogenies. A beastly face leers from behind a wood lattice—a parodic transfiguration of the modernist grid into something that induces not order but chaos and uncertainty, making whatever lurks behind it seem all the more eerie and absurd. A pensive cyborg in a clown mask

hangs his head, a futuristic Krusty lifted from his antagonist's role on *The Simpsons* and transported to a spotlighted moment of private gloom. Fox's monsters wear knee-high, shearling-trimmed Santa boots, recline on zebra-skin throws, and overall convey a casual, Neolithic glamour. Despite some pointed 1970s details, Fox orients us not in a particular time frame, but in a realm where the rules are flexible and rendering strategies come in a variety of inessential bling. Instead of drawing a simple line to ground his figures, for instance, Fox anchors them on a ridiculous, decade-specific floor covering. Settings are simultaneously pragmatic and decadent, with overloaded signifiers (mis)guiding us through space. Ultimately, these drawings' object-crammed interiors seem as dubious and fittingly realistic as P. K. Dick's salvation in a spray can.

Reminiscent of van Gogh's ink drawings, the red and blue whorls in Fox's early works are reincarnated from image to image—their samsaric hues employed in the creation of claustrophobic, spooky, and exquisitely rendered worlds. The effects of all-over patterning and an intricacy of detail are decorative but inadvertently so. As could be argued of Matisse's style, Fox's is decorative because he depicts decorated objects. *Basketballer* (1997) shows the quintessential two-tone superhero, dressed in reds and blues—"Samson entombed in a Pepsi can," as Fox describes him, as if in his own version of the parable, a thirsty Samson appeals to a false god (a multinational conglomerate), with tragic consequences. The central object in *Untitled* (1997) is a van, its side door ajar, out of which spills an abstracted maelstrom. Windowless vans tend to signify evil (if of a depressingly human sort), but Fox's vehicle, with its flush-front grille and oversize tires, seems to suggest not so much roving serial killers as the stylized face of nihilism, which mutates with each decade.

Fox is influenced by the Florentine Mannerist Pontorno, and in the spirit of Pontorno, he applies linear grace to agitated, eccentric subject matter and dense, disjunctive spatialities. The resulting hallucinatory effect seems heightened in his recent drawings, which take on politics and li'l Bush (who isn't merely in "short pants" but entirely *sans culottes*). In homage to both Jasper Johns and late-'60s psychedelia, the red and blue of the American flag transmute to orange and green, electric and complementary. Bush, a crusader in undies and a supercape, has six-packs dangling from his fingers and star-punched holes for eyes. What at first glance seemed like the president's obscene double, a kind of prurient avatar of free-world darkness, now, in 2006, looks like caricature rooted in realism, à la Daumier. Fox's fantastical imagery and warping of patriotic signifiers are utilized here in the name of accuracy, not of escapism. He plies a wrenched reality, maybe more unreal than surreal: its referents are our world, not our unconscious. Like mortar between the frangible bricks of a socially constructed sphere, the extreme and kaleidoscopic nature of life—with all of its violence, beauty, and contradiction—oozes through.