

geetha thurairajah is a troll (compliment), an almost-Platonically-ideal manifestation of humanity's latest iteration of the eternal trickster figure (this time, born in the aether of cyberspace). By troll, I am not referring here to its conception within the popular imaginary, a pissant shut-in, all Mountain Dew stains and rage. No, hers is a chimaeric figure whose composition is part critic, part comedian, part philosopher, and fully necessary. By "fully necessary", I am gesturing towards a couple things. Firstly, the trickster, as a constant figure within humanity's mythos, manifested again and again across various eras and geographies (Loki, Coyote, Puck, Sun Wukong etc.), suggests that this archetype is endemic to humanity's collective psyche and is thus of crucial structural importance. Secondly, the trickster is essential insofar it plays a socio-historical role. Akin to the carnival (in which social norms are briefly suspended and hierarchies come undone) the trickster mediates cultural (and political opposites) through cunning and humor. Able to play both sides, the trickster exploits cracks in the social armor, drawing attention to the artificial folly that constructs humanity's edifice. This term "both" is the crux here: no side is spared in the humorous act of the trickster's critique, as it guides us towards newfound resolutions. As the work at *Acid Haus* demonstrates, thurairajah employs an intoxicating mix of earnestness, true love, irony, punchlines, commitment, and critical analysis towards an incessant questioning of how culture writ large distillates itself into the object known as painting. In this way, thurairajah's work operates as a space in which seemingly opposing forces reconcile themselves towards a third path, a kind of dialectic *avant la lettre*.

In Scherben's gallery space, in the psychedelic love letter to painting titled *Acid Haus*, we are faced with a triad of works, networked, in dialogue, and inextricable from one another. The point of departure here is arguably the poster - a crudely graffitied image of Mike Kelley, the artist's first formal gesture that oscillates between irreverence and praise. The work is intensely juvenile (compliment), a seductive Trojan horse that eases you into the show's bent in which the differentiation between critique and praise is impossible to distinguish. It is a wink-wink-nudge-nudge to those whose interest in Kelly exceeds stuffed animal works and Sonic Youth through the inversion of Kelley's 1990 book *Reconstructed History*, in which the artist reproduced images from U.S history textbooks, before proceeding to deface them with phalluses, speech bubbles replete with insults, and all manner of physical disfigurements. As the artist stated, regarding the book:

"Heroic images thrive on subtraction. Idealization occurs as things move away from the physical concerns of man. Only then, after the body and desire are no longer in proximity to them, are things worthy of adoration... The photographs you see here are not truthful representations of the historical events they picture, nor are they meant to be. Like a printed word which gives up its graphic specificity to express a

concept so these pictures leave behind historical specificity to convey general American values. The reality of these past events is a confused and gruesome one anyway. One better off buried. Murder, war, the struggle for power, the desire for wealth, and the disruption of social order: all passions fired by the flesh, of no consequence today when peace and satisfaction are the rule. The past is where these things belong -- adored but not emulated."

What of idealization? What of heroes? What of their imaging? Here, thurairajah has approached these questions via multiple forking paths. One, is the act of the killing of idols. Around the gallery space are a series of demeure portraits (crystalline in their formal clarity, when compare *vis à vis* the large paintings in the room) of the artists who have played key roles in thurairajah's artistic formation; among them, Sigmar Polke, Monet and Albert Oehlen set in secondhand frames. When read as an individual series, they appear to be visual songs of praise- fan art - but when seen in the context of the total installation of *Acid Haus*, this angle comes undone. Through the act of placement, as nonsensical hierarchical totems that sit quietly in the spaces between large gestural paintings, a counter narrative arises, one that might appear to be an act of killing suffused with love.

On critique, Gayatri Spivak writes: "That's what de-construction is about, right? It's not just destruction. It's also construction. It's critical intimacy, not critical distance. So you actually speak from inside. That's deconstruction. My teacher Paul de Man once said to another very great critic, Fredric Jameson, Fred, you can only deconstruct what you love. Because you are doing it from the inside, with real intimacy."

Enter, paintings.

These are the grounds in which thurairajah, as troll, as trickster, mediates dualisms. A series of mixed media paintings on canvas form the fulcrum of the room or the "resolution" of tensions. Confused depths of field, the paintings are awash in a range of hallucinatory hues of turquoise, electric blue, purple, pondscum green, and light browns. Rapid gesturing suggests the presence of the artist's hand. In one work in particular, in which thurairajah re-employs her recurring leitmotif of H.R. from *Bad Brains* doing a backflip, a blackened portion in the upper portion of the canvases is broken up by a brush-like line executed in a streaky digital patterning. It is a kind of *trompe l'oeil* - although the form is a simulacrum of a spontaneous, looping stroke, the patterning indicates intentionality and spent time while doubling as a representation of stage lights. It is akin to Litchenstein's labored comicbook-esque images of the same gesture, the stroke indicates artistic presence, even if an illusion of the spontaneity. It indicates that "I made this." This series is an indication of

a painter's painter. At the level of abstraction, these canvases indicate the synthesis of decades of obsession towards something new as well as the synthesis of all the artist's influences towards a mannerism which is undoubtedly haunted by her heroes, and yet, these influences are obfuscated, simultaneously necessary to the structure and hiding in partial invisibility just below the surface - in a classic thurairajah sense, something equally funny and sublime.

Within thurairajah's work at the gallery we are confronted by some of her usual suspects, including the aforementioned H.R. from Bad Brains, a pouncing leopard, water lilies, and some new faces, like the cosmic Chinese dragon. Although these signs carry their own specific semantic baggage, what is at play here is the way in which these often generic images become screens for fantasy, a kind of nowhere zone in which various kinds of meaning can be attached. This is the role of the symbol within thurairajah's painting. If the abstract components function as a positive, or filled, space in which numerous currents of meaning, influence, and histories are materialized, the symbol's are a void - a place onto which future fantasies may couple themselves, and ideally, at some future point, come undone.

We can illustrate this by zooming in on the figure of H.R.

The repeated, dedicated reworking of H.R.'s body makes sense. On a purely socio-historical level, H.R. (as an extension of Bad Brains as whole), fundamentally changed the popular cultural imaginary regarding hardcore punk, substituting the seemingly necessary white, macho, performing body for one that is Black and sonically formed by influences outside of a narrow orthodox canon. This "substitution" is not an act of occlusion but rather an expansion of what is deemed possible. But the deployment of H.R.'s image points towards the symbolic vacuums in thurairajah's paintings I mentioned above, as well as the way in which she employs symbols that function particularly well as screens for fantasy. thurairajah grew up in the cultural null zone of suburbia (this one named Waterloo, Ontario). As a racialized person stuck in this contemporaneous form of earthly purgatory, you embody a kind of "fucked either way" position - neither "authentically" (whatever that means) embodying the culture of your progenitors, but sure as hell not a member of the locally dominant demographic.

You, in a sense, become an accretion of a dizzying array of cultures, and yet, belong to none. You look for material from elsewhere to anchor your subjectivity, and yet, by necessity, you must pull from culture from "out there". You *must* become the center.

It's *such* a burden to reify the ineffable.

Re-enter, H.R.

A text from the artist's brother in 2024, responding to an early version of the H.R. backflip painting reads: "imagine this is the painting that puts you on the map, a fucking Bad Brains painting. When I was a kid I used a picture of H.R. for a French project and said he was Dad." I think that this exchange gets at the core of how the symbol operates in thurairajah's oeuvre - an encounter with the way in which the sign can be endlessly (re) constructed, a space in which hierarchies are potentially reversed, and history re-written. It is also the arena in which we can flirt with conversations regarding identity, without reifying it, without *essentializing* it. Despite the vacuity of the sign, it is an (in)convenient, and necessary space with which to anchor the idea, lest we fray and spiral out of control.

-Leo Cocar

