

The Inexhaustible Variety of The Human Body Is Beautiful

Luca Dipierro in conversation with Zach Mueller

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It seems immediately clear to me that your work is very tactile—that the materials you work with seem ingrained into the stories that you’re telling. There’s some Adorno quote I remember about art’s power to reach people being somehow proportional to its willingness to reveal its own stitching. Some of the main pieces of animation look cut from old rubber placemats, or gauze, or fiberglass cast material—and balsa wood, cardboard. Tree bark...your animations wear their textures so beautifully. It’s almost as if you’re taking existing pieces of the world, shredding them into miniature lives, and saying “look what was there already—I found it”—and the animated stories seem to breathe real, autonomous life from their individual parts. Do you feel like material lends your storytelling a particular gravity that they couldn’t live without?

I like the word you use, gravity. It speaks of how the figures move and interact. My love for texture originates from a specific place: books. Almost all the materials that I use in my animations come from discarded book covers. My characters are literally dressed with book cloth. I have been fascinated by books as physical objects since childhood. Reading has always been as much about the tactile experience of holding a volume in my hands as about the characters or the language. Only by taking a book apart can you realize what a complex and delicate object it is. There are so many materials, so many layers: different kind of papers, thread, cardboard, cloth, gauze. I use book covers also as backdrops for my films. It’s a world both flat and three-dimensional. The figures project tiny shadows. I use a macro lens, which allows me to get as close as possible to the details. It builds intimacy with my characters, with their matter. And it’s an homage to the act of reading, of burying one’s face in a book.

So much of your work is available online in the form of animated shorts—and there’s a lot, in addition to your publications with Madcap and The Walk. How did you come by those particular places to trust your work with?

Like I said, it’s clear you’re a working artist—and much emphasis on ‘working’—it seems like you’re constantly making things—drawings, short films, animations for music videos, graphics for various purposes. What are you working on now? Do you concentrate on a single project at a time, or do you distribute your energies towards several pieces at once?

A lot of my work is online because, as for many artists, it’s an easy way to make it available. But my animations are meant to be seen on a big screen, in a darkened room. There is nothing like that. A part of me really doesn’t like the idea that everything has to be available everywhere, anytime. Screenings are not easy to get for my type of work, and limited to festivals or galleries. I am fine with it. It makes the showings unique. A few years ago, at an Italian art festival, they projected my animations on the façade of the Church of Saint Onofrio, in Lugo. It was like an epiphany, as if the work of years had only come to life in that moment.

To answer your question about being a “working” artist: I live around my work. The prospect of making things allows me to get out of bed in the morning. Since my son was born, on Halloween 2012, time to work has become tighter, but there’s a different kind of urgency to it. I love it. I love that pressure, the need of creating things. I tend to dabble with many projects at the same time, but I usually get to a point when one of these projects demands all my energy and I can’t think of or do anything else.

Right now I am working on an illustrated book with poet Edward Mullany. It’s tentatively called *The Bodies Were Long Gone*. We have been working on it for the past two years. Still figuring out where we are going with it. And then there’s this new animation I started, *They Saw Glad They Way*. I’ve already made a few characters, and the story line is pretty much sketched out. I also have another illustrated book in the works, in collaboration with writer Eugene Lim. So far the project is called *Photographs*.

How do you decide who to collaborate with, and what does that process look like? Particularly with the single-sentence collaborations, how much are you working with the sentence create story? Or do text and animation function independently and meet halfway? Do you work with the sentence or the collaborator directly?

Collaborations just happen. It's an affinity, a convergence of intents. In my animations, it's always more a starting point, a constraint, than an actual exchange. In the case of the single-sentence animations, I was contacted by Electric Literature, and had no dealings with the writers. I was free to do whatever I wanted. I love the idea of working on a sentence taken out of context, to absorb it and make it mine. Illustration is more collaborative, because text and images both draw a trajectory. I like it when there's friction between the two. Collaborating on something made of text and image requires more exchange along the way.

Even in the breadth of your work, do you see a central purpose in your storytelling?

I am interested in the rhythm, in the cadence of storytelling rather than in the story itself. I am interested in exploring an emotional space. My stories don't lead anywhere. They're often about somebody inside something, in the woods, in a room, in a coffin.

There are certainly recurring images and features—but every piece seems so highly individualized. It's almost like you're playing dress-up with your characters—bowler hats, greaser hairdos, crutches, ties, eyeliner, lipstick—with some infinite closet of your imagination. Where do this gigantic collection of images come from?

All my images come from other images: illustrations, children's book, *ex-voto*, record covers, movie posters, engravings, doodles, everything really. It's a personal encyclopedia of the visible world that I collect day by day. Certain images grow in me and keep showing up in what I make. It's a biological process. I like what you say about dressing-up. I like the idea of a vast but limited number of elements—ears, sideburns, hands, hats, ties, shoes, tears, knives, etc.—that I can combine in many different ways. I see images as letters of an alphabet, which I use to build visual sentences.

I keep thinking to myself this or that piece has got to be in some lineage of some decades-past Italian macabre circus culture—but I don't even know why. Do you feel like any of your visuals are particularly descendant from a larger Italian tradition? How about some of the circus culture—the juggling, acrobats, not to mention this old-world clown image with the puffy sleeves and pointy hat. What continues to lead you back to these central images?

I love the circus. I am obsessed with its iconography. There are childhood memories. When I was a child I couldn't decide if the circus was scary or funny. I remember monkeys dressed with red suits. I couldn't get enough of them, but when my parents put one of these monkeys in my lap to take a picture, I was terrified. I remember having nightmares with monkeys in red suits. That ambiguity, that emotional ambivalence, I hope it shows up in my work, because it's how I experience life. And the circus for me is almost too clear a metaphor of life.

There is definitely an Italian tradition behind my work. I should use the plural, traditions, because the richness of Italian culture is in the diversity of its regions, of its towns. I grew up in a Catholic environment. I am not a religious person, but I am fond of my Catholic background. It's a huge iconographic tradition. Italian religiosity is very stratified, colorful, histrionic. Catholicism is mixed with folklore, with magic, with mythology. If you read *Christ Stopped in Eboli* by Carlo Levi, you can see that clearly. It's an amazing book, autobiography and novel and anthropological essay and love declaration for the South all at once. There are a lot of pre-Christian elements in Italian religion. It's a huge system of images and stories, a sort of storytelling machine. Not far from my childhood house, there was (still is) a church with the skeletons of two bishops exposed to the public in their glass coffins. They have their garish regalia on, golden rings at their fingers. It's an image that I always carry with me. The opulence of the dress, the costume, symbol of wealth, of power, of life, pointing at death. The more you try to cover up death, the more it shows. There is a great scene in Fellini's *Roma*, the one of the ecclesiastical fashion show, with roller-skating priests, nuns with giant bird-like hats, bishops in psychedelic neon-light garments, which condenses a lot of my influences. It's a parade of the grotesque and the macabre, but with a great joy and inventiveness to it.

The characters you use can sometimes seem repressed—or at least sympathetic. What I find most unsettling is the singular expression on their faces, which borders on the unnervingly absurd, when juxtaposed against their own actions—cutting their chest to bleed out onto a mound of dirt, a fish falling from between a woman’s thighs—or in reaction of another’s. There’s sometimes this mystifying stare that seems to prevent any characters from ever actually reaching each other. Is this sad? Is it funny? Do you see your characters motivated by any of the same logic/motives/morals?

Even some characters with pink skin on their arms and exposed neck might have a make-up white face—it’s like they’re sometimes dressed up for performance. Or for burial. It looks like violence, blood, body functions, etc—all the body negotiations exist throughout your work. Does death? Can your characters die? And is it always tragic?

Where realm do your characters inhabit? What version of reality?

My characters are marionettes, they are made of paper and fabric, they have few moveable joints, one expression. Their movements are limited. Their world is a stage. They descend from the tradition of the *teatro dei pupi* (Sicilian puppet theatre). My characters do not express emotions so much as represent them, stage them. You are right, there is definitely a repression, a distance. They submit to their fate. Their submissiveness is the same of the characters of Robert Walser or James Purdy, a silent resistance, a way to make sense of what makes no sense. It’s acrobatics above the abyss. The white face, I love what you say about it. It has always been an instinctive choice for me. It is many things, the makeup of clowns, the mask of the kabuki, the visage of Henry Langdon, it’s seventeenth-century face powder. And death, yes. Or rather the spectacle of death. That’s what funerals are. A parade, a pageant. They are sublimely, deeply comic. Mourning is exteriorized, acted out, choreographed. Until the 80’s, in Southern Italy there were *prefiche* (or *chiangimuerti*), women who were paid to cry at funerals. They would enter the house of the bereaved and start shouting desperately. And in Northern Italy, religious orphanages would rent for money their orphans to funerals. The orphans would follow the coffin in tears. I have an animation project based on this.

Even in your drawings, there's always the implication of consequence—that what's happening in the image will evoke change—there's always this sense of on-going. Which is interesting, paired with humor or tragedy. Does your art evoke sadness or anxiety at the thought of a world that goes on and on, even after we're not around? I guess what I'm saying is...is there anything existential about your work? How does humor factor into that?

My work is comical. I am interested in the tradition of philosophical comedy. Rabelais, Cervantes, Voltaire, Sterne, Leopardi. Comedy contains everything, tragedy, drama, irony, it's a view of humanity both compassionate and unflinching. Rabelais writes that laughter and only laughter is human. It's interesting because laughter is also de-humanizing. Gags in silent movies make us see the body as a broken mechanism. We trip, we fall. We are things, toys. For me humor is both a way of seeing, and a way of accepting, of suspending judgment.

What's it like collaborating with your wife Leni Zumas? Do you guys see humor similarly?

Leni is great. Her intelligence is an absolute reference for me. I often need it to correct my instinctiveness. I am great admirer of her writing, of her way of shaping imagination through language. Her irony is the sharpest, and her compassion the deepest.

Our sense of humor is almost identical. We both have the same fascination for the absurd, and for the vulgar. We make fart jokes in restaurants. It's really inappropriate. But we are pretty good at pretending to be normal people. We have good manners.

Leni and I have worked on a few projects together, but not as many as we would like. Being a couple, having a young son, makes that a little difficult. We have been thinking about a children's book for a long time. Hopefully it'll happen one day. And there's this idea for a new issue of *Das Ding* together, in the same vein of *A Wooden Leg*. It'll be another re-thinking of the form of the novel.

In the booklet *Piccoli mali* (I think this is the title, right?), naked bodies land against one another—sometimes lovingly, sometimes longingly. It seems like you’re attentive to the physical motion of the human form in all its eccentricities—round, middle-aged couples rolling around on the carpet with each other—from the sickly thin to the cruelly rotund—it seems like there’s so much expression born out of the body’s form. And the way it moves—it must take a particular attention to the way life moves that allow you to pivot the joints of, for instance, the arms so that they swing into the air almost song-like. How do you go about studying the human body?

The inexhaustible variety of the human body is beautiful. I am not interested in canons, in ideals. The human body fascinates me for its disproportions, its asymmetries, its abnormal growths. It’s monstrous, in the Latin sense of *monstrum*: wonder, portent, remarkable, astonishing thing. Often I can’t keep my eyes off somebody that I see on the street: huge ears, or the smallest head, or enormous hands, or bulging eyes, or an odd hairdo (the variety of hairs, it’s an infinite encyclopedia of the bizarre!). I find this morphological proliferation beautiful. I hate the normalizing tendencies of part of our culture, the way our bellies, arms, butts are all supposed to look, how much we are supposed to weigh. I am really resisting the culture of fitness. It’s very naive to think that it’s about health. In one of the essays of *The Defendant*, G. K. Chesterton writes that “the moment we have snapped the spell of conventional beauty, there are a million beautiful faces waiting for us everywhere.”

The bodies I draw don’t come from observation, though. They are lines, they derive from other drawings. Drawing for me is a self-sufficient, self-referential universe. What I bring to it from my own experience is mostly my sentiment of the human body. There is a vulnerability to the naked body, a misery and a joy, for which I feel an extreme tenderness.

Some of the images in your animated shorts are wildly funny, but some are just as deeply sad—but in ways that are troubling because you don’t know why they’re sad—in *Il dirupo*, for instance, a man works to get a parrot down from a tree, then passes out on a piano which a woman plays—with the parrot resting quite bleary-eyed in her lap. In that sense,

many of the final images in your films are haunting—as though they provide resolution, but to what? How do you see endings?

I hope my endings do not provide any resolution, I hope they linger instead. I think that an ending shouldn't end anything. I see it more as a suspension. The kind of stories I am interested in don't really have a beginning or an end. They could go on forever. I just turn the switch on and then at some point turn it off (sooner rather than later). I like endings that suddenly take all the weight of the story and drop it on you, viewer or reader. And I like stories that begin with something small, insignificant, a detail, a routine, an object, a landscape.

And in the case of *A Wooden Leg*, the narrative is always out of order (or always in order). Is it one or the other?

Every order that a reader chooses for *A Wooden Leg* is a good order. It's a novel made of 64 cards, drawing on one side, text on the other side, which can be arranged in whatever sequence one likes. In its first incarnation, *A Wooden Leg* had a specific order. But when we were looking at a few options for the binding, we found ourselves playing with all these loose pages, and we thought: why not keep them like that? Why not leave the order to the reader? By choosing one sequence, we would have lost so many other interesting sequences. And it's not a very consequential narrative anyway. We both like fragmented, loose narratives. We are big fans of *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* by Italo Calvino.

In terms of narrative structure, your animated stories never seem to climax—or change dramatically in tone or otherwise from one frame to the next—but in a way they're very constant. And I think there's something inherently unsettling in this evenness—that sort of disables your sense of expectation—making you, almost, submissive to the story. Things happen based on some unseen force. What do you say to the person who says (and undoubtedly it happens)... “What does it mean?”

I like art that has an enigmatic quality to it, art that produces interrogatives. The meaning of my animations is within the images, and can't be taken out, translated without dissolving. Images are

silent, there is almost a religious quality to them, the feeling that something is there, ready to be revealed, visible and hidden at the same time. There is a great story by Henry James about the problem of meaning: “The Figure in the Carpet.”

It seems like you’re working furiously—and there’s a momentum that seems to snowball from project to project. Do you have any plans for any or all of your pieces to culminate in one big, all-encompassing, kicking-screaming feature project?

I love short pieces. Fragments. Most films and books drag on for too long. And it’s difficult for me to relate to the idea of a whole, both in art and life.