

# David Olivant's Recent Retroglyphs

by Mark Van Proyen

“The voice spoke once more, as if addressing a class, saying ‘These are the gods who have passed out of memory. Even their names are lost. The people who worshiped them are as forgotten as their gods. Their totems are long since broken and cast down. Their last priests died without passing on their secrets... Gods die. And when they truly die, they are unmourned and unremembered...  
...everywhere he looked, there were statues and carvings and rough-hewn images...The carved eyes of those statues that had eyes seemed to follow his every step.”

Neil Gaimen, *American Gods* (1)

The newly coined word retromancy comes to mind. More than mere nostalgia, and much more than the idea that memories of the past can be more vivid than the experience of the present, retromancy suggests that the key to understanding the anxious future lies in uncovering the buried secrets of bygone eras, perhaps as a way of discovering some form of forgotten knowledge concealed by the passage of time, or pinpointed where the march of events took a disastrous, iconoclastic turn. Retromancy is the implicit goal that animates the painstaking efforts of archeologists, who know that the articles of material culture can speak the truths that written history must pass over in silence, simply because official stories always concede too much to convenient assumption.

David Olivant's new series of mixed media works on paper are called *Retroglyphs*. They invite their viewers to adopt the mindset of the archeologist who sifts through diverse iconographic clues to recover a forgotten and possibly repressed narrative pertaining to the loss of hope and a fall from grace. Each and all seem like fragmentary scenes salvaged and reconstructed from the remnants of bygone circumstances that both reveal and conceal a kind of coming to consciousness, presented in compressed layers of pictorial activity that are provisionally sutured together to recreate something resembling a crime scene. We are left unsure as to whether or not something bad has happened, or is about to happen, but either way, a human dilemma is revealed.

The figures that inhabit Olivant's works are both familiar and strange. Their exaggerated body language and theatrical facial expressions seem to be cut from the same

expressionistic cloth used by James Ensor, Max Beckmann and R.B. Kitaj, but those similarities are balanced by some absurdist departures from that same art historical fabric. One of those is revealed by the wistfulness of the figures' faces and poses, making the figures seem as if they were caught in an oblivious daydream well on its way to becoming an anxious nightmare. Another lies in how many of Olivant's figures seem to lack the strength to sustain the weight of their own bodies, as is evident in *We Love Turlock* (2020) or *Digging Permitted at Any Location Without a Legend* (2021). Sometimes those figures are elongated and apparently undernourished, as is the case with the central female figure in *While Rome Burns* (2021), while in other instances they are stunted and fragmented like the monstrous upper torso described in *Eye Witness* (2021), echoing the long modernist legacy of fragmented and disrupted bodies (selves?) reaching back to the Cubist and Expressionist experiments of eleven decades ago. Disembodied heads turn up in several works, including *Half the Man* (2019) and *From Russia with Love* (2018), and a few of these heads are more automaton than humanoid, as can be witnessed in *A Thomson Gazelle* (2021). Indeed, this emphasis on how the fragmented body, or to be more precise, the fragmented psyche evokes Michael Balint's observation of the collapse of ego integrity into distinct psychic compartments, that being an earmark of industrialized social experience. As Balint has written,



*While Rome Burns*, 22 1/4" x 15", 2021

“Something like this has happened in "modern art." The treatment of the object, or the artist's attitude to it, i.e., his phantasies, feelings, emotions, ideas, images, etc., when stimulated by his chosen object, are conspicuously on what psychoanalysts would describe as the anal-sadistic level. The objects are dismembered, split, cruelly twisted, deformed, messed about; the dirty, ugly qualities of the objects are 'realistically' and even 'sur- realistically' revealed... less and less regard is paid to the object's feelings, interests, and sensitivities; kind consideration for, and "idealization" of, the object (e.g the human subject) becomes less and less important" (2)

What Balint's characterization fails to account for is that it is the rapidly changing, technologically overstimulated world itself that prompts such reactions and reflections, with the artist's individual psyche absorbing and metabolizing them with its own set of emphases, distillations and exaggerations. In an information economy, the objects of the world start to lose their embodied luster, becoming mere vector points for the coalescence of otherwise disconnected factoids. This holds true regardless of whether (or not) those objects are of the human or the manufactured variety (the traditional concept of "nature" does not factor into this equation), because the simulation of experience allows for a regimented manageability that the particularity of actual tangibility tends to resist.

Olivant's *Retroglyphs* provide just such a resistance, but they do so in a sly and seductive way. Because these works entail various forms of pictorial representation, there is no forthright declaration of the authority of the object-as-object, but there is always a subtle restaging of the dialectical tension between objecthood and its hypercoded opposite, with human outcomes that are provisional and far from certain. The unusual materiality of Olivant's new *Retroglyphs* supports this assertion. They start as digitally printed photographs, and it is not at all clear to the viewer if those photographs were at any point subjected to the pixelated manipulations of image editing software. It may not be important to know if they were or were not, because they were subsequently subjected to other manipulations executed in pencil, acrylic pen and collage. The acrylic pen is a relatively new art tool that allows for an application of acrylic paint that is much more precise than what can be accomplished with a brush, allowing for crisp, decisive edges. The collage materials come from multiple sources, and it is important to remember that some of them are also fragments of other digital photographs that can easily be reprinted at differing scales.

The digital substrates of Olivant's *Retroglyphs*, prompt other questions, because digital photographs call subtle attention to the constructed and manipulated aspects of photography's claim to honestly reflect reality. Questioning those claims leads the viewer to the core of the work's narrative logos, that being one that pertains to the tragic flaw of wishful thinking that undergirds all forms of artifice. Of course, such questions can be asked of any work of art that represents any event outside of itself, but it seems more pressing because of the relative immateriality of those digital substrates. They can be likened to the work's DNA, in that they form the shapeshifting basis from which other morphologies can be said to mutate. Because they are products of an extreme technologization, they are *contra naturum*, but they also remind us that we live in a world where almost everything else is more-or-less the same. Whether or not this amounts to an apocalyptic proscription is a question left to the viewer's imagination.

The material program of Olivant's *Retroglyphs* invites us to use the descriptive term palimpsest, which means layered accumulation of incidents manifesting over time, but it can also refer to a peeling back of those layers for the sake of parsing their specifics, oftentimes revealing an uncanny reemergence of repressed memories and associations, whether they be of a personal or historical nature. It slowly dawns on the viewer that the what of these works and the how they are made both mirror and

editorialize on each other, all the while bearing witness to the consequences of a social world on the verge of amusing itself to death, struggling to fully apprehend the consequences of its translation of myopia into zeitgeist.

Another departure from the normative stylistics of Expressionism is the fact that, like Samuel Beckett's Winnie from the 1961 play *Happy Days*, the figures depicted in the *Retroglyphs* are at once confidently oblivious and at the same time anxiously self-conscious of the fact that they are vexed by circumstances that slowly reveal themselves to be complicated predicaments. The figures' facial expressions, body language and modes of dress (or comically embarrassing lack thereof, as is the case with the floating figure visible at the top of *The Observed of All Observers* [2020] ) all support this recognition, giving them a Sisyphean cast that is part clown and part absurdist avatar flailing against fate's wicked mischief. Closer inspection reveals hints of anxious flop sweat and lingering shadows of self-doubt, allowing the viewer to catch subtle glimpses of their lack of a happy confidence in their foreseeable fortunes, almost as if that viewer had caught them just prior to aborting an ill-advised act of self-deception.



Even when they adopt mock-heroic postures, as is the case with the floating figures in *Another Gift* (2020), or the tower of body fragments in *Quantitative Reflex Suppression* (2021), they seem like actors rehearsing scenes from a play bereft of a clearly conceived narrative arc. In other works, their flirtation with the mock-heroic gives way to something akin to abjection, as is revealed in *Distance Learning* (2020), where the two figures depicted therein remain impassive as they give over their agency to an impersonal system of regulated consciousness. Although the larger share of the figures in these works are clearly adults, in many cases they also seem a bit like palsied children garbed in their parents' clothing, semi-sincerely pantomiming adult postures and behavior for theatrical effect. And at the same time, many of Olivant's figures also betray hints of their own pain and their visible attempts to hide from it. They inhabit worlds that are clearly not of their own making, nor even of their own understanding. But, like Samuel Beckett's Unnamed protagonist in *The Unnamable*, they do persist, even if their reasons for doing so seem far from clear.

*Quantitative Reflex Suppression*, 30" x 18", 2021

Does this mean that Olivant's figures are victims of circumstance? Victim is too strong a word, because those circumstances are portrayed as being far too indifferent to bother meting out anything resembling punishment or persecution. Passive exclusion or potential ostracization from the hearth of human kindness seems to more often be the Kafkaesque order of the day, and that exclusion takes its own subtle toll that casts the figures as undernourished orphans, such as those we see in *Twilight Destines* (2019) or *While Rome Burns* (2021).

Olivant's figures are pictured as being free to come and go, but they do neither, because wherever they might travel to and from would offer little that was significantly different from the possibilities available in the locations in which they are depicted. They live in a Sartrean hell of programmatic indifference, impassively seeking salvation from a runaway complexity that changes guises while moving in rhetorical circles. Nonetheless, it is their hell, and the fact that it is portrayed as a familiar one makes it seem something like home. In that way, these protagonists are tragicomic, earmarked by a canny balancing of the elements of charm, pathos and absurdity to slyly suggest the ways that each of those aspects is an obliquely mirrored reflection of the others, all stage-managing anxious relations between multiple modes of disconnected particularity.

In many cases, the normal points of pictorial orientation such as foreground, middle ground and background give way to something more topsy-turvy, confounding our hope for a forthright journey through the incidents described in the works. Color also varies, teasing a shadowy murkiness in some works, while in others such as *Vagina Envy* (2019), it reveals itself in rich autumnal variations. Vantage points might look down on the subject matter of the work, or they might take a worm's eye view that looks up at the incidents represented therein. In some other works, such as *Those Feet* (2020), those subjects are examined from a distance, straight across, meeting the viewer eye-to-eye. The extent to which any of those eyes are blind is another open question that teases the viewer's imagination.



*Those Feet*, 30" x 41 1/2", 2020

Are Olivant's new works interior landscapes inhabited by figures, or are they figures set in fantastical architectural landscapes? Obviously, the answer is both and neither, which is further complicated by the inclusion of other inanimate objects that might be called still-lives. These either support or contradict the already fraught relations between protagonist and circumstance that we see in the works, often articulated in a disrupted scale that asks the viewer to take them as allegorical reflections that annotate the tensions portrayed by their figurative actors and of the post-human world that surrounds them.