

PATRICK WEBB



PUNCHINELLO AS OTHER

paintings by

Patrick Webb

essay by

Brian Kloppenberg

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PUNCHINELLO AS UNCANNY OTHER

By Brian Kloppenberg

Patrick Webb's Punchinello is uncanny. No matter what adventure or trial he's thrown into—parade, gym, rodeo, fire, brawl, the list goes on—Punchinello continues to surprise with his unique combination of strangeness and familiarity. People seem to vaguely recognize Punch, even identify with him, while at the same time not being able to understand fully his ongoing presence in Webb's paintings. Why Punchinello? He seems to confound as much as he beguiles. Could it be that Punchinello belongs to that paradoxical realm that Sigmund Freud attempts to define, in his 1919 essay entitled "The Uncanny," as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar"?

What is the uncanny? And how do we experience Punchinello as uncanny? In "Fiction and Its Phantoms," the French writer H  l  ne Cixous calls Freud's essay a "strange theoretical novel," in which "nothing turns out less reassuring for the reader than this niggling, cautious, yet wily and interminable pursuit." Her description parallels both Webb's representation of Punchinello in a variety of contexts and Punchinello's own strangely hesitant yet dogged ventures that put the self in search of self. These parallels follow a strange logic of doubling, a phenomena that Freud considers to be an intrinsic aspect of uncanniness. "The subject identifies himself with someone else," he writes, "so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self."

If we allow ourselves such a substitution with Punchinello, to be caught up in his quandaries—overwhelm in the face of life’s burdens; the thrill of a secret shared; desire’s interruption of our best plans— do we not, at least for a moment, find ourselves in that uncomfortable, tragicomic space that defines Punchinello as one of us yet forever different, unique? His repetitive appearances in Webb’s paintings, always with his self-defining mask and hat, not only mark him as protagonist, and thus invite identification, they also split him from us—for better and for worse, Punchinello can never lose himself in a crowd. In fact, even Punchinello’s status as other is constantly changing. In Webb’s earliest Punchinello paintings, Punch always appeared as a phallic yet ultimately doomed gay man. More recently Punchinello has emerged as a survivor. And in this most recent manifestation of Punchinello, our protagonist has morphed to embody other kinds of otherness, including servants, a woman and a spouse.

Freud goes further in his elaboration of uncanny doubling. He historicizes it by linking the phenomenon to “a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people.” In other words, each of us carries within ourselves traces of a primordial phase in which I is and is not differentiated from you, from world. A flash of the uncanny would occur when an encounter with difference calls into question the clear separation of self and other. Am I the other or not, or somehow both? In an uncanny moment, that question remains open. As the psychoanalyst Alan Bass argues in his book *Interpretation and Difference: The Strangeness of Care*, “The encounter with what is other than oneself that is oneself—the “differentiating double”—is primordially uncanny.” Put another way, “The unfamiliar can emerge at the heart of the familiar.” In a telling turn of phrase, Webb describes Punchinello as “I and not I.” He is both at home and not at home at the same time—Freud shows in his

essay how the German definition for uncanniness, *Unheimlichkeit*, not-at-homeness, eventually collapses into its supposed opposite, *Heimlichkeit*, at-homeness. If we both are and are not Punchinello, he lives within our hearts as the double who is never reducible to selfsameness and at the same time never rejected as completely other.

As both I and not I, Punchinello occupies a zone of doubleness that can never be reduced to an “either/or” opposition. In the series *Punchinello Unloads*, we are confronted by images of extreme effort. At the same time, they manifest a gentle absurdity—how many Punchinelli will it take to complete the task? For as much as the uncanny speaks to what frightens and unnerves with its queer familiarity, it is also, as the literary theorist Nicholas Royle puts it in his book *The Uncanny*, “never far from something comic: humor, irony and laughter all have a genuinely ‘funny’ role in thinking on this topic.” When Punchinello becomes Figaro from Mozart and Da Ponte’s *Marriage of Figaro*, or Despina from *Così Fan Tutte*, or Leporello from *Don Giovanni*, we confront the uncanny mixing of tragic with comic, pathos with laughter, the marginal taking center stage and vice versa.

To speak of Punchinello as radically individuated vis-à-vis the crowd is to invoke another great thinker of uncanniness, Martin Heidegger. Writing in his uniquely existentialist language, Heidegger argues in *Being and Time* that moments of uncanniness, always accompanied by *Angst*, signal an opening of self beyond the mundane, the habitual, the easily known. Heidegger holds open the time and space of possibility, the possibility of an uncanny self not preoccupied with familiar conformity or alienated dislocation, but rather strangely connected to and differentiated from the world. In his own words, from the 1996 translation by Joan Stambaugh, “What could be more alien to the they, than the self individualized to itself in uncanniness?”

To appreciate the resonances between Heidegger's uncanny and Webb's Punchinello, we must understand the importance of world in each of Webb's paintings. Without the creation of a continuous, believable world—be it the gym, the street, a living room—there can be no fictive space from which Punchinello can both find himself simultaneously at home and not at home. Webb not only creates integrated, coherent worlds through pictorial structure, he also grounds his figures within each world. Take his gym paintings, for example, in which Webb utilizes a compressed play of figure shape to interstitial negative shape, generating figure/ground tension. Furthermore, he packs the various gym-goers into the workout environment, both in terms of the number of big, turned figures inhabiting the rectangle from side to side and top to bottom, as well as from the back of the space to the front. Webb also keys each painting to a dominant wall color, dynamically uniting and setting off the various flesh and clothing colors. In *Solitude*, the acid green of the back wall aggressively advances, harshly interposing itself between the figures. In *Love*, the rich, royal blue of the back wall recedes and envelops the figures in its calm spaciousness.

Although Punchinello, like the other figures, is caught up in the complex pictorial dynamics of these paintings, he is also, at the same time, set apart. Returning to *Love*, we find that Punchinello is the only figure looking out of the picture, directly addressing his audience. His pink shirt is slightly out-of-key to the rest of the painting, and his arm strongly pushes out through the picture plane, which is locked to the bench. And whereas most of the painting utilizes lights in front of darks, Punch's iconic nose makes a potent dark mark before his lover's white shirt, an intense chromatic note in front of a neutral field. In the intimate interior *Secret*, we see the recipient of Punchinello's private utterance, painted with deft simplicity, practically dissolving into the warm-toned space. Punchinello, in contrast, punctuates the space with the

rhythmic folding of his shirt, the gesture building to the almost broken form of the hand and that long nose pushing into a receptive ear.

Delving into the uncanny occasions, as Cixous suggests, an interminable pursuit. And in just this way, the endless richness of Webb's uncanny Punch means there will always be another load, workout, secret, around the corner. The challenge then is to remain open to the methods Webb uses to build up spaces and figures through a complex process of integrating both remembered and imagined phenomenon—a gym space patterned on the artist's studio, for example, or human figures as hybrids of fact and fantasy. The very generation of Webb's paintings, with their composites of real and unreal, is the uncanny in action. To remain open to his work is to remain open to a question: How am I (not) Punchinello?

Brian Kloppenberg is a psychoanalyst in private practice in New York City. He is a training and supervising analyst at the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis, where he also teaches courses on human development. He is the Director of the Theodore Reik Clinical Institute

The Da Ponte Trio



Punchinello As Figaro
48X84, o/l, 2007-10



Punchinello As Leporello
48 X78, o/1 , 2006-10



Punchinello As Despina
48 X72, o/l, 2007-10



Solitude
60 X48, o/l, 2008-10



Love
60 X48, o/l, 2008-10

Punchinello Unloads I
72X36, o/l, 2007-9

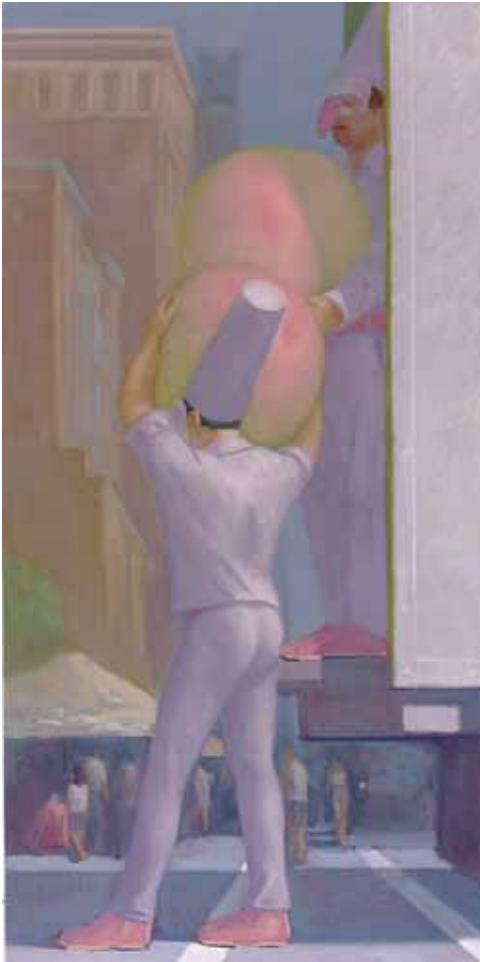




Punchinello Unloads I I
72X36, o/l, 2007-9

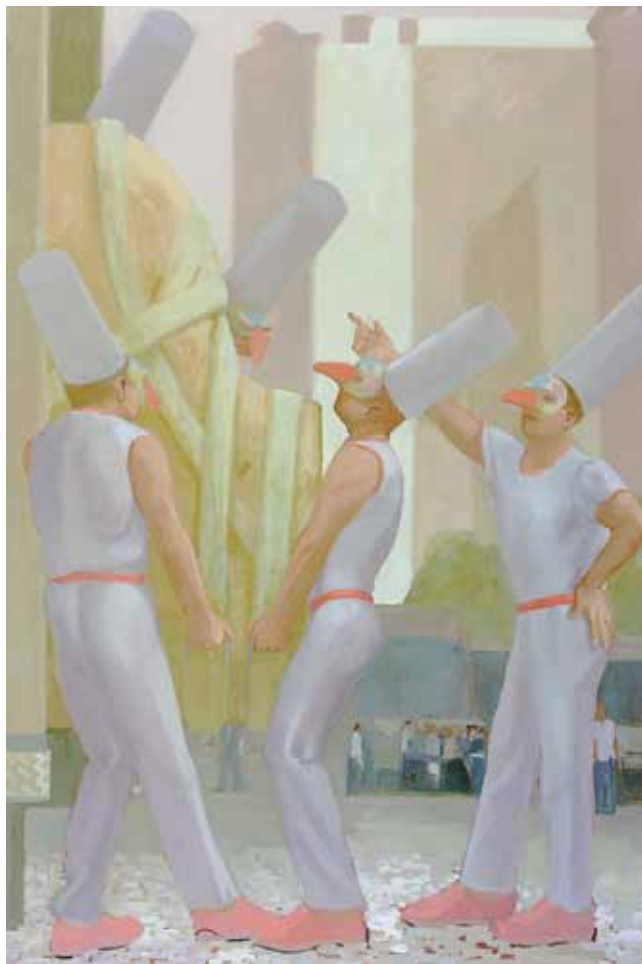
Punchinello Unloads III
72X36, o/l, 2008-10





Punchinello Unloads IV
72X36, o/l, 2008-10

Punchinello Unloads V
72 X48, o/l, 2008-10





Married Life: Sunday Brunch
36X30, o/l, 2007-10



Married Life: Breakfast
36X30, o/l, 2007-10



Married Life: Secret
40 X32, o/l, 2007-10

RESUME

patrick-webb.com

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2010 *PUNCHINELLO AS OTHER*, The Painting Center ,NYC
2008 *25 YEARS OF WORK*, Provincetown Art Museum, MA
2007 *PROVINCETOWN-NEW YORK*, Julie Heller Gallery
2005 *CHEAT*, Julie Heller Gallery, Provincetown, MA
2003 *HOME*, Julie Heller Gallery, Provincetown, MA
2002 *PUNCHINELLO'S CITY*, CJG Projects, NYC, NY
2001 *PUNCHINELLO YOUNG*, Julie Heller Gallery
1999 *IN NEW YORK WITH PUNCHINELLO*, Erector Square Gallery, New Haven, CT
1999 *PUNCHINELLO UNDRRESSED*, Julie Heller Gallery
1998 *PUNCHINELLO WORKS OUT (PWO)*, Cortland Jessup Gallery, NYC
1996 *PUNCHINELLO GOES WEST*, Julie Heller Gallery
1995 *PUNCHINELLO IN AMERICA*, 55 Mercer Gallery, NYC
1993 *PUNCHINELLO PAINTINGS*, Amos Eno Gallery, NYC
1990 Forum Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
1988 Capricorn Galleries, Bethesda, MD
1987&5 Alpha Gallery, Boston, MA
1985&9 Kendall Gallery, Wellfleet, MA

COMMISSIONS

2007 *PUNCHINELLO JUGGLES FOR LOLLY POP*, Milwaukee
1995 ART MATTERS, 2 Lithographs, NYC, NY
1995 Barry Skovgaard, Landscape, Watermill, NY
1993 William Jennings Doyle, portrait, Boston, MA
1992 Phillip Gambone, portrait, Boston, MA
1988&7 SHARF MARKETING GROUP, installations, Boston/NY
1986 GLICKENHAUS & CO., mural installation, New York
1980 Donna Kennedy, portrait, Las Vegas, NV

SELECTED PUBLIC & CORPORATE COLLECTIONS

FRED ALGER & CO, New York, NY
BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY, BOSTON, MA
CHEMICAL BANK, New York, NY
GLICKENHAUS & CO., New York, NY
HORTON & CALAMIFDE, New York, NY
INTERNEURON INC., Boston, MA
JANE VOORHEES ZIMMERLI ART MUSEUM, Rutgers University,
OTIS ELEVATOR, New York, NY
PIER-FINE ASSOCIATES, New York, NY (multiple purchase)
PROVINCETOWN ART ASSOCIATION & MUSEUM, MA
QUEENSBORO COLLEGE MUSEUM, CUNY, Queens, NY
MICHELLE ROSENFELD, INC., FINE ARTS, Ramsey, NJ
SHARF MARKETING GROUP, New York & Boston
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-OSHKOSH, Oshkosh, WI

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2008 *CARBONE, GRIMES & WEBB*, The Painting Center
2005 *MALE DESIRE*, Mary Ryan Gallery, NYC, NY
2005 *THE BODY AND ITS DANGERS*, The Painting Center
2004 *ARTIVIST FILM & ART FESTIVAL*, Egyptian Theater, LA

2004 *NEO QUEER*, CoCA, Seattle, WA
2002 *TRANSFORMATIONS*, Sakia City Museum, Osaka
2001 *RITUAL*, DAM, Detroit, MI
2001 *SELF INTEREST: Autobiography and Myth In Recent Figurative Art*, curator Nancy Grimes, RC Fine Arts, NJ
1998 *THE 173rd ANNUAL EXHIBITION*, National Academy Of Design, NYC, NY
1998 *EMBODIED FICTIONS*, Saint Mary's College, MD
1995 *THE COMMON MYTH: Icon And Symbol In Art Today*, curator Ludwig Datone', Park Avenue Atrium, NYC, NY
1991 *FIGURING IT OUT*, curator Nancy Grimes, Daniel Quinn Gallery, LIC, NY
1990 *SELECTIONS*, curator Connie Butler, 55 Mercer St., NYC
1988-90 *ART AND THE LAW*, West Co., multiple venues
1989 "...the Subject is AIDS", Nexus Art Center, Atlanta
1987 *CURATOR'S CHOICE*, curator Bill Arning, BWAC, Bklyn
1987 *MAINSTREAM AMERICA: The Collection Of Phil Desind*, Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH
1984 *MODERN MASTERS OF CLASSICAL REALISM*, Allen Priebe Gallery, University of Wisconsin- Oshkosh
1983 *SUMMER SHOW*, Odyssea Galleries, New York, NY
1983 *NEW TALENT*, Alpha Gallery, Boston, MA
1982 *EVERSON BIENNALE*, curator Nancy Hoffman, Everson Museum Syracuse, NY

PARTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

"100 Artists of the Male Figure" Eric Gibbons, Schiffer Publishing, 2010
"Stripped" Harvey Redding Bruno Gmunder Publication, 7/09
"David Carbone, Nancy Grimes & Patrick Webb" Alex Taylor, Art News, 1/09
"Treasures of Gay Art from the Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation" Peter Weierman, All Saints Press, 2008
"Webb Finds Truth in Anonymity of an Everyman" Sue Harrison, Provincetown Banner, 3/15/08
"Male Desire: The Homoerotic in American Art" Jonathan Weinberg, Abrams, 2005
"Webb Takes an Outsider's Look" Deborah Minsky, Banner, 7/17/03
Listings, New Yorker Magazine, 4/ 6/98
"Provincetown On Hudson" Ned Depew, Provincetown Arts, 1997-8
"Patrick Webb's Adventures With PUNCHINELLO" Stephen Greco, POZ, 10/96/1/97
"Portrait of an Artist" Lynn Stanley, Provincetown Magazine, 8/22/96
"A Life Reinvented: The Paintings of Patrick Webb" & "Punchinello In America" Laurie Fitzpatrick, Art & Understanding, 95
"Eros and Angst" Phillip Gambone, Bay Windows 7/29/93
"Finding Those Who Fall Before" Gambone - Bay Windows, 8/20/92
"Real Implications" Mary Verrill, New North Artspace, 2/90
"Coat of Many Colors", Mary Abbe, Star Tribune, Minneapolis., MN, "...the subject is AIDS", Art South 5/89
"Alone and Embattled" Walter Wadas, Bay Windows, Boston, MA
"Painterly Realists", St. Louis Courier, St. Louis, MO, 86
"Rhythms of New York and Promising Young Talent" Temin, Globe, 83

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