

Giants in Paradise

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They tower over frenzied shoppers. Even this late at night, people are milling about Sephora and The Gap, but not around *Adam and Eve*. The bronze couple breaks up the tedium of the Time Warner Center lobby, equally brazen and huge. They never look at each other, but their connection is unmistakable. I feel the same way, shuffling in step with the tall, decade-older man next to me—a separate entity, but connected nonetheless. Their title is misleading. These are not the rudimentary exemplars of humanity from Genesis, but exaggerated creatures beyond our grasp. Posing as “public art” in a place that is far from artistic, they are subversive wolves in sheep’s clothing, anonymous but deadly, like two obese ninjas.

Tonight they stand guard as Ryan and I ponder the fate of our relationship under their haughty gaze. I’d like to find something—anything—to keep me from facing Ryan, but *Adam and Eve* are so large I can’t really use them for solace—unless I want to look like a pervert. I am eye-level with their genitalia. I realize that both couples—*Adam and Eve* and Ryan and I—are not using this space the way it must have been intended to be used. I am not here to shop, but to seek refuge from the bitter cold and talk out my anxieties; these statues take up space in a mall, but offer nothing to buy. Instead, they stand without overture or apology, haunting the Time Warner Center, barely disguised by the fact that they themselves—as “corporate art”—have been bought. Maybe it was a gut response—my first encounter with this pair being in the middle of a ridiculous argument and all—but *Adam and Eve* did not make a good first impression on me. I became impatient with them, as if they, too, were an enemy with unclear intentions.

The night I met the man in question, I’d led a friend to Lil’ Frankie’s Pizza on 1st Avenue, a place where Mafiosi and Modern Mad Men could eat bruschetta alongside college kids and kissing couples. The place had a warmth and security that *Adam and Eve* did not, but also the same unflinching sense of purpose. Entrapped by tiny tables and brimming plates, elbow-to-elbow with my roommate and neighbor, I felt cramped and small and cozy.

With bellies full and minds not yet consumed by a college workload, high off carbohydrates and the promise of a late night, we walked to the Kraine Theater to see *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind*, a performance art piece by the New York Neo-Futurists. We watched twenty-somethings perform thirty plays in sixty minutes, from *Sticky Wall Man* to *Jack Kerouac Play: Sans Caffeine, Sans Nicotine, Sans All*, to *The New York Neo-Futurists Demonstrate the World's Most Bitchin' Handshake*. The six actors were breathspans away from us, touching our shoulders and shaking our hands. Unburdened by costumes or stagecraft, their art—a public art—oozed into the crowd, and we felt like equals. There was no pretense in the Kraine Theater. The Neo-Futurists broke down the fourth wall, the edifice of “High Art Theater,” pissing on it and inviting us to dance on its ruins. Then, in my case, inviting me out for a drink.

Months later, I am under the squandering eyes of *Adam and Eve*, fuming at one-sixth of the Neo-Futurists. I have felt too small for too long, and the Nephilim lovers (more Goliath than David) are doing little to quell my anxieties. I stare at Adam—tranquil yet arrogant, reserved and unabashed, his penis rubbed gold by passing hooligans. I look to Eve, outlandishly proportioned, obnoxious but anonymous. At this point, I don't know the names of the statues. There is no plaque, no literature at the front desk, no “You Must Be This Tall to Pose with our Biblical Progenitors” placard, no inscription below their enormous feet giving their title or mentioning Fernando Botero, their creator. Left to my own devices, I never would have identified these behemoths as our first descendants. Where is their humanity? Why elevate them to mythic proportions, if they are meant to be the first tangible representatives of humankind?

I'm in a mall, for all intents and purposes. What are these statues doing here? If this is “corporate art” masquerading as something deeper and more metaphysical, why can't I find evidence of a higher motive? Why can't I read that statement? It is almost as if *Adam and Eve*, towering over us, so lofty and inaccessible, were created to be ignored. Sure, the odd tourist will take a picture with a hand on Eve's hindquarters, or an art student will sketch her proportions—which are reminiscent of Garcia Marquez's magic realism—but the vast majority of passersby are there for pot holders, eyeliner, and Zagat pamphlets. Not inspiration. It seems to be a tragic case of intention gone awry.

I feel like Jonathan Lethem, caught in the act of scrutinizing a place that doesn't want to be scrutinized. In “Speak, Hoyt-Schermerhorn,” Lethem analyzes his local subway platform, the platform of his youth, out of practical context, trying to transform it into a place of meaning. He has trouble letting

Hoyt-Schermerhorn rest in its ambiguous identity, with its “ghost platform,” resisting interpretation (434). I am also trying to view these statues subjectively, with little success. I am stubborn, as he is, about not letting *Adam and Eve* fall flat on their fat faces, as pieces of public art (439). But they are not at eye level—their genitals are. They are not accessible, readable, immersive. All of these qualities can separate an artwork from its pedestal, breaking the fourth wall. Outside frames and velvet ropes, art can take any shape it desires. So why choose to deify, to gigantify, these two simplest archetypal images, Anima and Animus, removing them from our world?

Then I wonder, “Do *Adam and Eve* even *want* to be scrutinized?” They look pretty content just standing there. It doesn’t seem to matter if they shock, offend, bore, intrigue, or generate apathy. What’s more, *I* am standing in the lobby, like an idiot, throwing around words like “archetypal” and “immersive.” I am being moved by this piece. I am being moved by the way it takes up—and yet it doesn’t seem to take up—space. The incongruity between art object and context has revved me up, fueling all these observations.

In public art, the “where” is just as important as the “what.” What if these two statues were placed somewhere more befitting their size and implications—a park, their own Eden, as it were? Not Central Park. Flushing Meadows Corona Park in Queens, as unnaturally large as this couple, could house them. They could flank the Unisphere, humans only slightly subordinate to the universe, returning us to some semblance of order through bombastic comparison. Yet this venture would fail. *Adam and Eve* may be huge, but they are daringly personal, while the Flushing Meadows Corona Park is a paradigm of over-analytical, anal-retentive hyper-structure. All the hyphens in the world couldn’t bring it into the present and out of the future of the past. I see the sprawling park falling into decay—the last piece of New York that remains resolutely dedicated to the World’s Fair—and the Unisphere, a giant metalwork tangle of Earth, looks to me like a prototype of the Epcot dome. Here, what looks too big to approach is a nexus of familiarity. Someone else’s familiarity. It is oversized, like *Adam and Eve*, but in an alienating way. This park, with its linear path and fairground aesthetic, this “instrument of ‘social control,’” as Blagovesta Momchedjikova describes it in her essay “Design and Discipline: The Legend of an Urban Park,” turns the visitor into the odd man out (211).

Adam and Eve, anonymous and incongruous, have no ostensible meaning to the average shopper. The statues are placed so that you must walk past them, must notice them, if only to pass them by without bumping into a

buttock. Many people walk away from the pair, hiding from their implications. The comical effect—half shock, half ridicule—induced by the statues reduces them to a one-time deal; people rarely revisit the site to look for hidden meanings in their folds.

Musing in the lobby, I mulled over the concept of such stark idols of sexuality being placed at the epicenter of commerce. I considered the seduction of shopping, the conquest of capitalism. At its heart, Original Sin was commerce: the trading of innocence for knowledge, grace for mortality. An intriguing concept, but I doubt that Botero had it in mind. His “art is deformation” mantra applies to all of his pieces—grandiose figures radiating jollity and pride, begging to be seen through a wide-angle lens (qtd. in Genocchio). Most of his works are still in Colombia, leading me to wonder why, of all the places in America, he chose the Time Warner Center lobby to showcase his work. But even this is a foible of my expectations. Perhaps I just cannot walk into the Kraine Theater and the Time Warner Center anticipating the same thing. But why not? Who’s to say I won’t get it?

By remaining aloof and unattainable, *Adam and Eve* has all the charm of a gallery piece, but all the intimacy of a hood ornament. Untouchable art is for museums, not lobbies—yet, still, people will not take “no” for an answer and stroke the statues, hoping to rub off a layer of whatever sent them skyward, perhaps to ground them, perhaps to join them. This may be Botero’s plan—a joke on his commissioners, a subversive wink to those, like me, who pause to contemplate in a temple of instant gratification.

Marco the security guard scoffs at me. “They’re statues. You look, you shop, you look on the way out.” There’s a level of disrespect intangibly present in the blank stares of mall rats and tangibly visible on Adam’s discolored penis. The statues, however godlike, also wallow in their own ridiculousness. They are, after all, superimposed on the template of a shopping center, under the banner of one of America’s largest corporations.

The eyes of *Adam and Eve* have probably seen a great deal. From up there, you have to. Like the Hoyt-Schermerhorn subway station, these two let their experiences settle onto them like so many layers of dust. Lethem says that “contemplation of the life of a site . . . becomes, in the end, tidal” (438). *Adam and Eve* have implications that are social, political, Biblical, philosophical. At least, they *could*, if the public would take it upon themselves to consider for them. Without craning our necks, we can’t even make out the details on either face. We scramble around their feet like antsy children, looking for clues.

The height, the anonymity, the barrier the oddity creates—it limits viewers and shuts them down, but it can also light a spark that lingers even after the register closes and the heavy bags leave crease-marks on fingers. It is impossible to make eye contact with these giants of the first mortals. They're cut off from their audience in a way no actor should be. In such a public space, an artwork should open up to more than the average twelve-year-old boy who gleefully snaps a cell-phone picture of a giant bronze pubis. But I catch myself again. I, the impatient actor, am looking mighty open right now. I'm on my tiptoes, seeking their approval.

I think back to when I first met Ryan, drinking whiskey on stage, still half-naked in an apron. The group passed out flyers as they read them. One was called "How to Fix the World by Ruining It: A Manifesto," and it became an epic chant as every audience member joined in the reading aloud:

We want to sing the love of humanity—even when it is wholly unloveable. . . .
We must shake all of the citizens wide awake. It is a big job and you are called upon to do your part. Let us regress in order that we may progress.
Let us tear society's fabric with our own hands that we may re-work it into a more beautiful thing. (Hartsough)

The Neo-Futurists have an agenda—shake up theater with their ideas until it shakes back. Their art is honest and raw, stripped of pretense, wholly human. They sacrifice none of their moxie in an attempt at immorality. *Adam and Eve*, come to life and placed like a splinter-cell of subtle rebellion in the middle of a mall, have a paradoxical but equally probable chance at pissing on "High Art." Their esteem and aesthetics make them unlikely harbingers of contemplation, but there I am, caught up—sometimes in frustration, sometimes in enlightenment—with enough observations to formulate a conflicted response. Sure, they don't shoot sparklers out of their asses or show off swastika tattoos, but their presence is enough—more than enough—to generate thoughts in a Rachel-sized crumb like me. Someone on her way to The Gap might stop for a split second and wonder, who, what, why, and, perhaps, how. Perhaps *Adam and Eve* would be domesticated if labeled, like demons turned impotent by those who know their names. The parents of us all watch stoically as we fumble for meaning, like super-sized children.

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