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Forward [to Andrew Gilbert: Andrew, Emperor of Africa]

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Foreword

JOHN ZAROBELL

Making pictures of past events has long been a means for regimes to solidify their interpretation of history. The official image, sponsored by the government and placed in a prominent public location, comes into existence as an endorsement of the regime that commissioned it, but it is not the only visual manifestation of history. There are always alternative, vernacular histories that challenge the authority of the powers that be. These histories are the source of Andrew Gilbert's work.

In psychological terms, if one thinks of official history as a kind of conscious projection, popular histories—in image, story and song—reflect the subconscious and sometimes abject dimensions of a life lived closer to the ground. These expressions are a kind of desublimation; together they stand as an articulation of the sincere and the grotesque, the immediate and the awkward forms of knowledge. In other words, they manifest all the aspects of life that an official history leaves out.

Gilbert's work is itself a form of desublimation, a means of speaking the inexpressible violence of colonial history and its legacy. More pressing is that it is a contemporary response to our own age. Though Gilbert's works reference once heroic, now reprehensible, episodes of domination in the history of the modern world, they intentionally mix everything up, often to comic effect. What is Napoleon doing amongst the Zulus? Why is an enslaved Kaspar [sic] David Friedrich being dragged around colonial India? Like his precursor Alfred Jarry, who lampooned colonial violence in his *Ubu* plays written and first performed in the 1890s, Gilbert is creating a pastiche of historical episodes that are designed to generate repulsion, and laughter, in us.

There is a reciprocity between the subject (Andrew Gilbert, officer, Emperor, the Man Who Would Be Queen) and the artist (Andrew Gilbert) whose imagination, capacious though it is, could never have invented the bizarre and gruesome history he brings to light. His unique ability to illuminate these events is nothing if not subjective. The immediacy of the work allows viewers to find their own fantastic projections reflected in a distorting mirror of Gilbert's paintings and sculptures. Even to be repelled by them is to recognize their force. By demonstrating the reciprocity between artist and subject, he shows us that all of us are implicated in the history of domination by consuming its images and projecting our identities in relation to them.

While this work references historical episodes that few may be aware of, Gilbert's extreme pictorial unctious concern the violations of humanity visible to all in our contemporary world. In Afghanistan today, the so-called Allies (predominantly the forces of the United States) are replaying a strategy from America's unsuccessful imperial adventure in Vietnam, namely "counterinsurgency". When things do not go well for a dominating force, and members of a population actively resist their subjugation, this is what is called "insurgency". Such is a brilliant coinage that masks imperial aggression by claiming that those who would free themselves of foreign domination are actually the insurgents. So the invaders must then resort to counterinsurgency, an attempt to convince the subject population of the rightness of the foreign

powers. This is currently referred to in the American media as "a battle for hearts and minds".

Counterinsurgency can be, like desublimation, an ugly business. It involves attempting to pick out elements from a conceptually cohesive domain that does not exist (in this case a "liberated" Afghanistan) and this process results in episodes of excruciating brutality that occasionally come to light. This is the way desublimation works as well for the idea is to stabilize the conscious mind by freeing it of the impulses to undermine it. If you can go to a concert on Friday night, get drunk, and hook up with a stranger, you might not mind spending the rest of the week in a cubicle staring at a flat screen. But the conscious mind cannot be stabilized by purging the erratic impulses any more than a state can be generated by removing all those who might oppose it and the very messy results of these two practices, revolution and degeneracy, collide in the paintings and sculpture of Andrew Gilbert.

The relationship between personal and official histories is of central relevance to Gilbert's work. An Emperor of Africa has never existed in fact, but he can exist in art and creating him is a mighty feat. Africa is a vast continent populated with countless cultural groups, many distinct terrains, and complex networks of resource distribution. Only a madman would attempt to conquer it. And many did. And still do. But Andrew's conquest is both more fantastical and more realistic. For what he masters are the images of campaigns, the historical brutality, and the outlandish stereotypes of "primitive" natives whose lives are torn asunder by the "civilized" colonizers. What Andrew shows us is the significance of the imagery to the audience for whom it is generated and the impossibility of controlling its interpretations. There is an implication here that pictures inform an ideology which supports imperial missions abroad, both past and present. Yet the imagery in these paintings is inherently unstable and subject to any number of interpretations. By presenting colonial history in vividly personal and scatological terms, Andrew has truly conquered, not just Africa but the colonial self.

All hail Andrew Emperor of Africa! Let us sing his praises!