

Frog



Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster
as Sarah Bernhardt,
photographed for Frog by Giasco Bertoli.

«Si on jette une grenouille dans la gueule d'un chien, il devient muet.»

[Michel Pastoureau, *Bestiaires du Moyen Age*]

Jack Early, Fergus McCaffrey, New York,

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Happiness is a dangerous thing for an artist. It's easy, of course, to critique institutions; or to address our current environmental crisis, especially when you have the funds to, say, fly a bunch of glacial ice to Paris; or to maintain distance from any sort of content whatsoever by making objects—one hesitates to call them images, and this happens just as easily in three dimensions—that are six or seven times removed from whatever they resemble or were meant to address in the first place, a sort of late-modernist autoerotic asphyxiation that masks itself as “practice”. These easy, played-out tactics, though once novel, are now all that seems left to artists. There is very little lust, or joy, or misery, or beauty, or even ugliness, unless it's dressed up as something else: as ugly-beauty, or a critique of the lustful gaze, or “the simulacrum of joy inherent in late-capitalist neo-liberal commodity fetishism”.

Of course, this isn't to say that happiness is a virtue in and of itself. Happiness is dangerous not only because it's out of vogue, but because it all too often makes for boring or thoughtless art. Moreover, most of us are miserable most of the time; or too busy chasing our own notions of happiness to have time to suffer through the happiness of others; or at bare minimum pretending to be impervious to happiness, swaddled in the weltschmerz and lack of enthusiasm that is in fact the prime affectation of those who crave a seat at the cultural table. Happiness is dangerous in all sorts of ways.

Jack Early isn't afraid to be happy. His exhibition at Fergus McCaffrey in New York pulses with joy, with paintings and sculptures that combine the innocence of childhood wishes, the throb of adult lust, and the artist's own story. Though Early does not shy away from the darker edges of that story or its embarrassing marginalia, the exhibition as a whole is a paean to the pursuit of happiness.

The main gallery is ringed with oil on silkscreened-canvas paintings, some measuring as large as 10 x 8 feet. The silkscreened backgrounds are a version of Early's childhood wallpaper, depicting cartoon Revolutionary War soldiers with their regalia, albeit modified such that the soldiers are holding hands. In the foreground, Early has painted exquisite images of various objects of desire—popsicles, marshmallows, and sugary cereal, but also extremely sexy renderings of homoerotic types. For example, in *Hog Rider*, 2015, a black-and-white leatherman in chaps sits on a motorcycle turned away from the viewer, his lower back arched such that his perfectly round ass is on prominent display. Similarly, *Sock Jock*, 2015, depicts a jock in white and red-striped socks with matching gym shorts from mid-calf to lower-torso; the figure's left foot extends in front of the right knee, caught mid-removal of a (suspiciously clean) sock, his crotch barely obscured. In these paintings, Early is not contrasting “adult” and “childish” desire—are we still afraid to acknowledge childhood sexuality even all these years after Freud?—but placing them on an equal symbolic footing. A child does not differentiate between different sorts of desire, but merely wants this or that, and early enough in life, these desires are simply felt, rather than stratified. (That comes later, although usually earlier in certain respects for queer kids.) The center of this first gallery also features *Jack, Mr. Early and Friends*, 2016, a soft sculpture portrait of Early as a young child watching television surrounded by an army of hamsters (gerbils?),

a goldfish, and a very non-plussed looking cat (Mr. Early, of course). The sculpture, viewed in conjunction with the surrounding paintings, suggests the domestic space in which a young Early might have encountered these images on a television screen.

In the smaller rear gallery, four additional paintings surround a large yellow Victrola that rests on a red, white, and blue octagonal base, evoking both the American flag and a circus tent. *Bomb Pop*, 2015, picks up the red, white, and blue color scheme, blowing the icy dessert of its title up to appropriately phallic scale. In *Pool Boy*, 2014, Early has painted a slim, tan figure in pale blue swim trunks from mid-thigh to shoulder; Early captures every sensual detail, down to the pale-blonde body hair. *Tubes and Pubes*, 2015, is another depiction of the lower half of a jock, this time from navel to ankle. A veiny left arm rests on the left hip, the left thumb pulling down shorts to reveal pubic hair. The figure's right leg projects forward, bent at the knee, again showing off a pair of clean, striped tube socks. Deliberately or accidentally—my money's on the latter—his cock peeks out below his shorts, resting on his right thigh. Like *Hog Rider*, the other painting in the exhibition that clearly betrays the influence of beefcake imagery, the figure here is painted in black and white; Early renders his “hotter” images in cooler tones.

Jack Early's Life Story in Just Under 20 Minutes, 2014, plays on the Victrola gramophone in the center of the room. The sound emanating from the yellow LP can be heard throughout the exhibition space, albeit at a comfortable volume that beckons the listener to come closer and hear Early's tale, which is accompanied by an upbeat, jazzy tune played by a small ensemble (trumpet, banjo, bass, clarinet, pump organs, and drums). The piece delivers what it promises—Early's life story from his birth as a “cute, little redheaded baby in the year 1962” to his recent artistic downs and ups.

The heart of the exhibition, *Jack Early's Life Story in Just Under 20 Minutes* demonstrates the hard-won happiness that suffuses the exhibition as a whole. It does not shy away from difficult details (the portrait of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Early's childhood living room, a trip to witness a skydiving demonstration gone wrong) or charmingly embarrassing anecdotes (Early performing Tiny Tim's “Tip Toe Through the Tulips” in grammar school talent shows, or getting caught with a “drugstore stash” of Geritol). Nor does it gloss over other aspects of Early's story that another artist might recount in a maudlin or even traumatized tone (growing up queer in North Carolina, or with severe asthma). Instead, Early recounts a variety of details about his life, from the sexual to the artistic to the mundane, as equally interesting and important to the person he has become. The story proceeds more or less linearly, but also makes symbolic jags, as when Early transitions from recounting visiting a psychologist in his youth (potentially to treat what sounds like a bout of obsessive-compulsive disorder) to relating three stories about his early experience with penises. The transition hinges on a single remark made by the psychologist (“I know what your problem is, your penis isn't as big as the other guys in gym class”); like all good storytellers, Early makes narrative turns on a dime while never losing the logic of the larger story along the way. Near the conclusion of the song, after an artistic low point—“Pruitt-Early started like this... [ascending major chords] ... And then ended like this ... [descending minor chords and sad, muted trumpet] ...”—Early decides not to think about art anymore and becomes a housepainter. He fills his head with songs. He has a vision that a



wall he is painting is a big white screen. He decides that he may not be a housepainter, or a musician—"I'm something else. Maybe like a magician. Pulling rabbits out of a hat."

And what is that "something else"? The easiest answer is that Early is an artist, and surely he is, but he is also something more. These days, anyone with sufficient means can be an artist. Any sufficiently moneyed person can find a university with a BFA program, graduate, and immediately take on mountains of debt to obtain an MFA without having had any life experience whatsoever. They can continue to be an artist even though they, say, begin teaching and stop making art altogether, or somehow obtain an

MFA without ever learning how to make an object or image of any real quality. I will not question that these people are artists, or that they are making art. What I would like to suggest, however, is that it isn't enough for someone to be an artist or for something to be art. Artists must also be "something else"; art requires "something else" to make it meaningful, or lasting, or worth writing about. In Early's case, that "something else" is joy.

