



Woman with Monster, 2018. Casein on paper, 22 ½ x 31 inches

Woman with Monster: Inhabiting Elizabeth Bonaventura's Paintings . . .

.....
..... Kerry Downey

Man Playing Horn. Block Head and Lizard. Elephant and Trainer. Alien Head. Big Beast Scares Two Men. Crazy Man with Evil Animal. Standing Man with Two Deformed Children. Middle Bird and Two Evil Men. Three Vintage Turtles. Tattoo Man and Crazy Girl. Evil Man and Crazy Twins. Standing Pregnant Woman. Woman with Monster [1].

Elizabeth Bonaventura's paintings make me anxious. They make me laugh. And they remind me of all the ways we reach for one another, the ways we do and do not make contact. Who will surrender and who will submit? What will be your move and what will be mine? Will you be mine? You will be mine.

Her figures encounter one another in states of alienation, and they double as sites of awareness [2]. The work swells with activity; in a series of paintings (2009-2014), svelte figures smear into the ground, positive and negative space are in restless co-production. Liz's gestural works are as much discoveries with paint and mark-making as they are displays of formal rigor—flicks of the wrist render twists of waist and subtle shifts in weight. Later works, made between 2017 and 2019, hold characters that grow wobbly or bulky; their flat bright punches of color have distinct edges and outlines. They are bounded forms that invite us to inhabit and animate a world of mercurial relations.

A trained and intuitive draughtsperson, Liz has skills with that casual comes-so-easy quality. She just as readily shows suspicion, maybe even boredom, with images and colors that are too seductive. With the whole sensorial world at her disposal, she looks for something else, that right admixture of swagger and disruption. Realism is mimesis until it's cracked open.

She reins in her virtuosity with chalky casein, a water-based paint that makes surfaces matte and milky—it is, after all, from milk protein. Milk is an essential bodily fluid, while oil is an all-too-toxic and heroic canonical medium. Resistant to luminosity and illusion, casein dries fast and flat and can be reworked well after drying. Liz's paintings are often heavily reworked. Casein's binders prevent it from thickening, so she gets good body through mannerisms and a spectrum of intensities through touch and color obsessions. When Liz's colors got too sexy, she grayed them out. One color was often traded for another. Entire paintings were painted over.

As part of her graduate thesis, Liz altered found postcards with mixed media, working with and against readymade photos and surfaces. There is a practice of Liz painting over found images which precedes her time in graduate school, a history of hybridizing animal-humans or whiting out figures altogether. She made some into diptychs or triptychs, avowing postcards' serial production and consumption: a scenic mountain doubles into two glorious peaks; a boat in one lake is now pulling a water-skiing shit-smudge in the other.

Drawing on the relationality of postcards, Liz played with the sending and receiving of images, engaging in a dialogue with art history and image culture's demands for coherence or legibility. In this way, she set up a framework where all images are readymades for invention and distortion. Start with Rupert Murdoch and see where you end up; put Margaret Thatcher beside an orange balloon blob head. As a quick reader of the world and its effects, Liz offers us great pleasure in perverting westernized, normalizing standards of seeing and knowing while showing us that the stakes are high; a radical break in the norms of recognition is also a break in social status.

Pants down, ass out, one figure faces another, whose red-dot eyes stare back, a hand over their mouth. They are almost mirror images, except there's no mirror. Their bodies are made of the same mossy green as the ground.

Liz's figures seem to be in their own worlds. A seafoam lady and a slumpy monster sit together but separate, before two dusty red rolling hills, beneath a pale cerulean sky. They feel familiar—have I met you before, Woman with Monster? The woman is hugging the rock that is also a porpoise, its tail



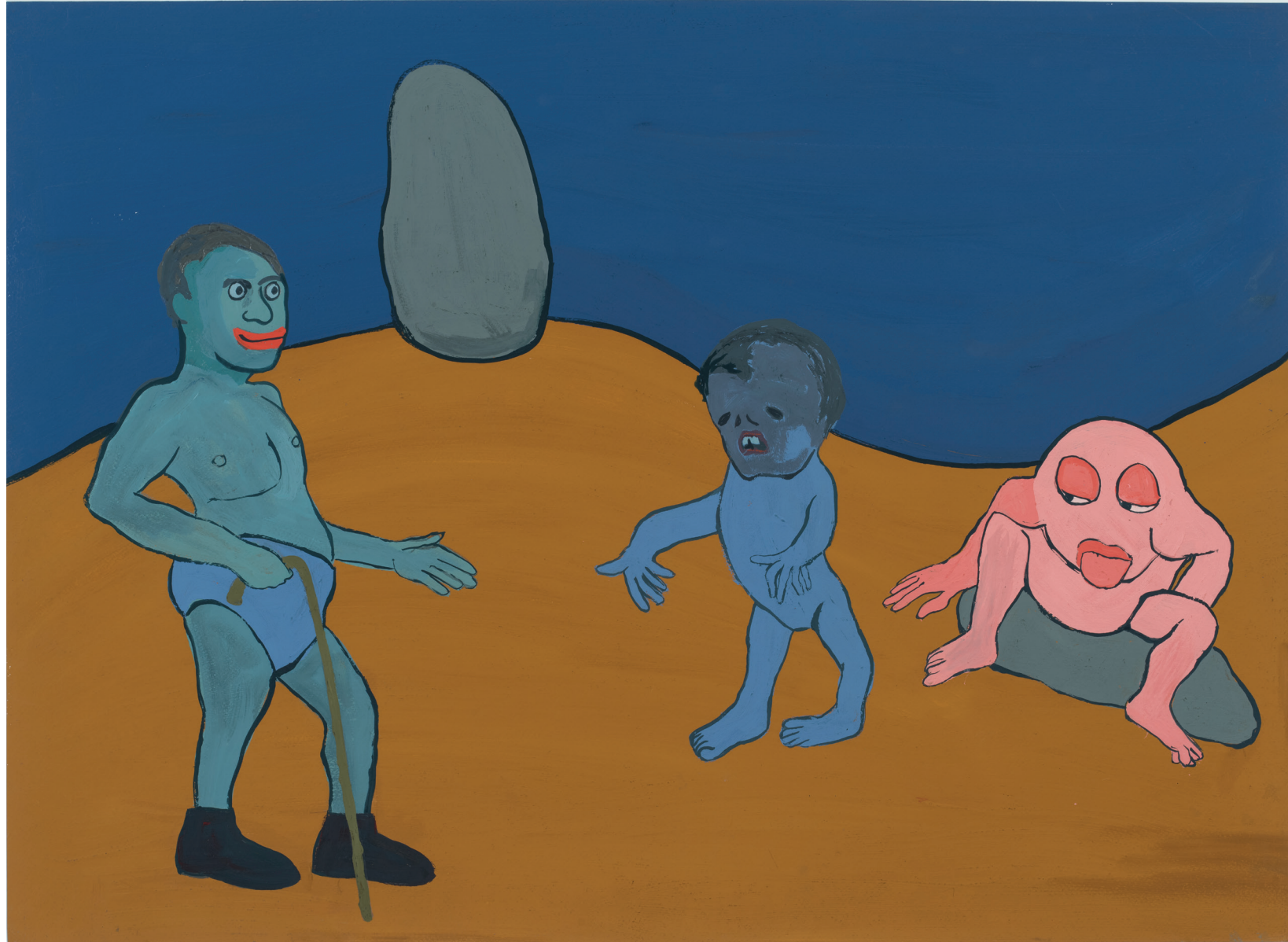
Two Figures in the Woods with Fire, 2010. Casein on panel, 36 x 48 inches



Middle Bird and Two Evil Men, 2018. Casein and pencil on paper, 26 x 40 inches



Block Head and Lizard, 2018. Casein and pencil on paper, 22 ½ x 31 inches



Standing Man with Two Deformed Children, 2018. Casein on paper, 22 ½ x 31 inches

tucked into the horizon. She leans in, looks like she is listening intently to the claylike creature, who is mute and sad and cute, hands big and awkward in his lap. His wide pink lips are parted, revealing a row of bottom chompers.

A gray-green father stands in his underwear, holding his cane. *Standing Man with Two Deformed Children* stares out and across the painting, his moronic gaze missing his two kids before him. One child is an abject beige fleshwad hunkered down on a rock. They look out from their truncated body with a suspicious and knowing side glance. The other one is naked, blue and gray, teetering towards his father, arms extended, wrists and fingers bent down. There is a brokenness between them, despite that solid phallic rock wedged into the undulating horizon. Bronze earth. Iron blue sky.

Dude, what's your damage?

A horn blows! The archer releases his arrow.

Once slippery figure-ground relations are firmed up.

An ochre man is marching, marching, swinging his gangly arms.

The evil man announces: I have arrived! A wall of green flames behind him.

A vintage turtle makes his slow crawl.

A bald clown wags his finger, no-no. His transparent friend replies, Oh, whatever.

As an out and proud lesbian since the 80's, Liz lived in a robust queer community. Queers also know something gnarly about alienation. We know about stigma, stereotypes, caricature. The human world of relations, and particularly bio family, is not all it is cracked up to be. The traumas that shatter us individually and interpersonally ripple through our bodies and communities. Making our private worlds in paintings, we know that paintings tether us to the social. The act of painting, not merely its image-object, locates us in time and place while simultaneously connecting us across some kind of fabric of chosen family. Liz worships Temple Grandin, James Baldwin, Shirley Chisholm, Bill Traylor, and Martin Ramirez. Out of the matrices of identifications and disidentifications, we make new kinship models.

When recently visiting Liz's archives in person, I was overwhelmed by a stack of unfinished works on paper. For these later pieces, she would paint the backgrounds first, getting the colors just right—

a cobalt sky, an apricot landscape, a definitive horizon line dividing two planes of flat matte color. These blank stages harken back to the years Liz spent painting backgrounds in the movie biz, preparing sets for actors.

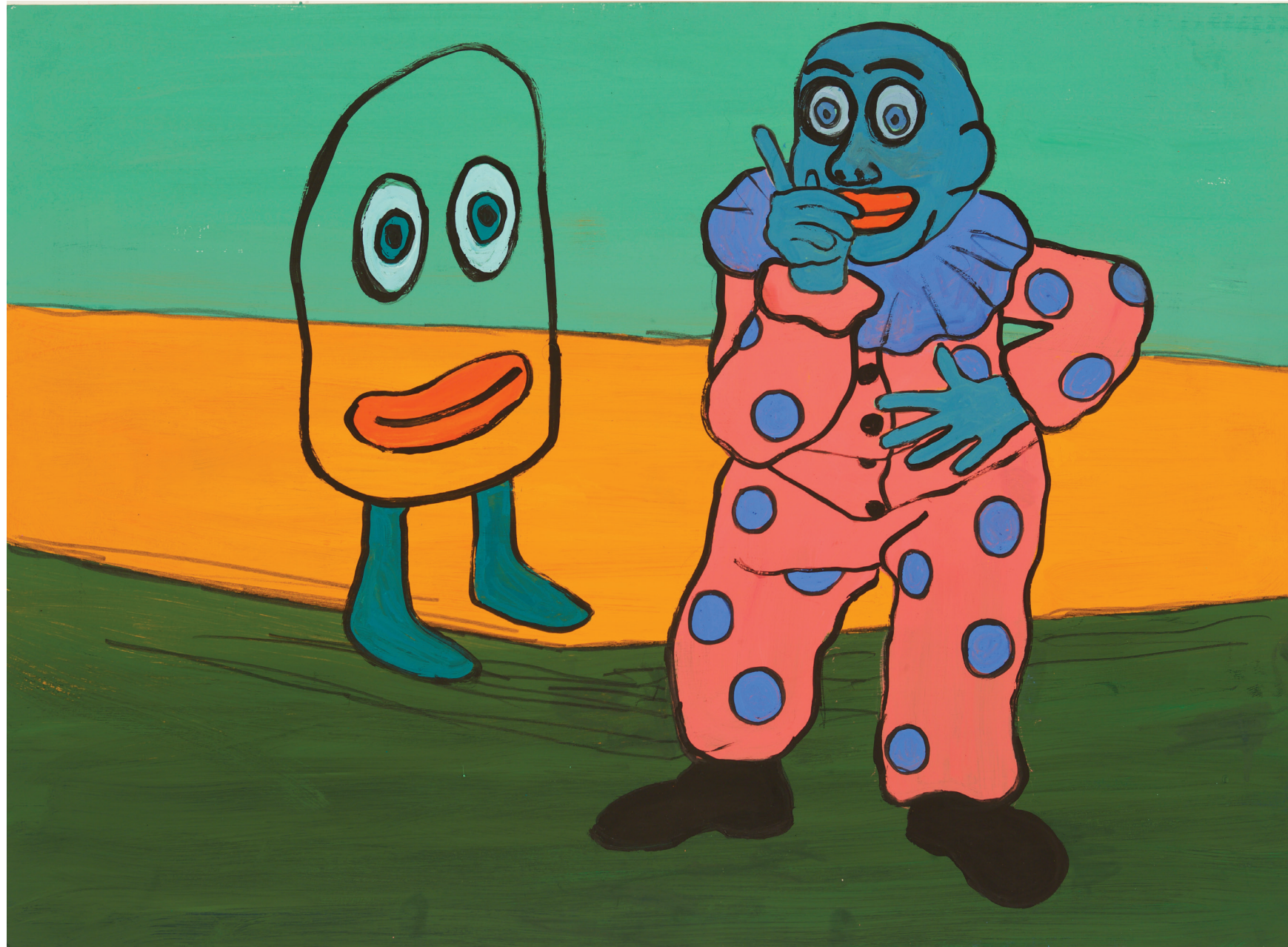
I imagine Liz entering the frame, posing like she did for her paintings, just another weirdo animal. A procession of creature-characters populates the space, waving hello, goodbye, I'm sorry, I'm hungry. Here, we endlessly encounter one another, with hands behind our back or clasped to our breast, or snug in our soggy armpits. Nice digs, nice shirt. Let's fly a kite, play an instrument. Here, let me help you help me help you. Here is the beginning and end of my forcefield. Here we are bitchy or bowled over. Scratch and claw at the walls. Lay the smack down. Here dicks go limp, flap in the breeze. Handsy hands go missing. We offer sucky salutes, we secret handshake, bend too far forwards or back. We gesture wide and far.

Liz's works reveal something primary about our needs. When (self) consciousness loosens, do we tighten our grip? Painting is experiments with control, desire, grief, and care. We can use muscle memory to remember and forget, integrate and disintegrate, unlearn and deskill, generate and degenerate.

Rather than trying to deliver a reference or tell a story, Liz's paintings are encounters with the unknown. The unconscious is always opaque to itself; painting is not some flashlight in the dark. Her figures offer no saviorism. They shed their skins, grow scales, fuck nature-nurture and human-animal dualisms. If inertia is the resistance to being a body in motion, painting supports the rampant and slutty desire to be a body that is always changing. Painting works with the energy required to move from one state to another. In these numinous and banal processes, we can relax enough to wrestle with the scale and shape of a feeling, and travel from mousehole to mountaintop. We experience shifts between states of being and becoming and make our radical call for expanded forms of recognition.



Portrait of James Baldwin (detail), circa 2012. Pencil on paper, 22 ½ x 31 inches



Standing Man and Block Head, 2018. Casein on paper, 22 ½ x 31 inches

Notes

1. This list is a collection of titles from paintings Liz made in 2018. They are some of the only paintings she titled and signed.

2. Artist statement, "About." Elizabeth Bonaventura. Accessed May 30, 2023. <https://www.elizabethbonaventuraart.com/about>.

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