



Olympia I & II, 2006, by Gabriel Abrantes and Katie Widloski



Ennui, 2013, by Gabriel Abrantes

**IN THE AGE OF
CONTAMINATION:
GABRIEL ABRANTES' TALL
TALES AND TAINTED LOVE**

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"Language just, I don't know, confuses things. Crazy."— Cookie, in The History of Mutual Respect

DISARMINGLY direct, it's a gaze that will forever symbolize the tantalizing transition into modernity, as if a single woman harboured the power to dismantle centuries' worth of objectification, prescribed Victorian codes of conduct, and the dominion of man. That stoic and somewhat sullen gaze belongs to the languid, self-satisfied odalisque in Olympia, Manet's landmark 1863 portrait of model-painter Victorine Meurent—a work so written about, referenced, deconstructed, reproduced,

and kitschified that it's well nigh impossible to fathom the scandalous effect it aroused at the Salon de Paris a couple years after it was painted. But, of course, times have also changed tremendously: blatant, confrontational, and highly sexualized encounters run rampant via every possible channel of communication as the vaunted self seeks to compete in a restless, shamelessly ambitious, and keenly underdressed world. And yet the painting's power persists; its tremulous sensuality barely conceals the vulnerability of its subjects—both courtesan and servant, as well as that of the painter. Even the cat is frightened. The brazen acts of looking and being looked at are ultimately secretive and speculative ones, suppressing fear and fantasy, seductive satisfaction and sadness.

That desire is entangled in power is nothing new, nor would it have been 150 years ago when Manet ironically substituted symbolism for naturalism and, in so doing, created a prescient coup of

contemporaneity. John Berger's assistance is hardly required to remind us that the web of the gaze is a complex ricochet, from Victorine's, Manet's, yours, and mine. Not to mention the freaky cat's. Olympia's eternal allure, at least partially, stems from its collision of myth and reality, of historical precedent and a moment in time so completely embodied in the fleshy brushstrokes that the work proposes a seemingly accessible truth; at the very least, it signals an attempt to scrape away placid decorum. (Ingres' contorted nudes, on the other hand, make no such claims for convenience, their neoclassical abstraction a pretense for perverse medievalism and eroticized "Orientalized" superiority; their source of disquiet is an altogether different matter.) There's something profoundly Baudelairian in Manet's painting, eternalized as a profanation indicative of modern life, which was at last revealed to be immoral, vulgar, transgressive. And it still is, although true transgression is harder to come by these days.

With Olympia's storied opprobrious reception having long since morphed into masterpiece-worship, it comes as little surprise that US-born, Lisbon-based artist-filmmaker Gabriel Abrantes, known for an increasing number of bold, often mesmerizing, and appropriately divisive works about sexual desire, the effects of historico-socio-political power swings, and globalized psychogeography, used Manet's painting as the subject of one of his earliest films. As is the case with many of Abrantes' projects—his is largely an art of collaboration with a remarkable binding sense of authorial cohesion—Olympia I & II (2006) was made with a co-conspirator. Co-written, co-directed, and co-starring Katie Widloski while both were at Cooper Union, Olympia I & II is a lushly textured 16mm diptych which first depicts a cherubic, nubile Widloski as the reclined Olympia, her porcelain skin aglow with blushing cheeks and perky attributes (her features, especially her round face, are more Ingres than Manet). In part II, it's Abrantes himself as an effeminate Caravaggesque transvestite expressing, in a mock Southern drawl, a deeply felt malaise and a need for consolation. The same brocaded mise en scène is used for both halves, a flat but sufficiently luxurious-looking space cropped into a tight composition creating a hermetically sealed world. Both tableaux are theatrical, awkwardly self-conscious, and equal parts seductive and absurd: the film playfully disabuses the sanctity of the original while simultaneously rendering homage to its disconcerting complexity,

significantly upping the ante with incest, gender blurring, and politically incorrect blackface.

In Olympia I, the courtesan's brother Duncan (nasally voiced by an offscreen Abrantes) has come to ravish her, as the camera explores a series of angles through close-up, beginning with her satin slipper; a glimpse of her servant appears for a split second as "black" hands deposit the requisite bouquet of flowers at Olympia's side. While the camera pans her nude body in and out of focus to soft melodic pop, the banter between siblings is lewd and confrontational (lots of "fuck," "fuck you," "you want to fuck me"), with Olympia maintaining the upper hand with her calm, hushed, gravely retorts. Olympia II is in a gentler key, with tinkling piano playing in the background as a needy male Olympia done up in female make-up is reassured by the amorous embraces of his servant, whose thick, impastoed blackface rubs off all over him. There's no cat this time, but Coca-Cola is served on a silver platter. It's wholly anarchic and performative, a sort of down-tempo Jack Smith two-person show bolstered by seductive images and dancing film grain, and a certain chutzpah that can be interpreted in a number of ways: referring to the aesthetic scandal that was born with the first public showing of Manet's painting and subverting its strict hieratic racial and sexual dynamics; an attempt at libertine excess and a paradoxical concoction of beauty-vulgarity-immorality; not to

mention a comment on the institution of art itself—how it anoints and judges, though hypocritically craves scandal and depravity. There's an art-school veneer and naïveté to the whole thing, intentional or not, that further cements the point and ironically transcends what could have been cheap irony by irrevocably mirroring Manet's symbol-making attempt to avoid symbolism.

Also situated in an artificial enclosed space and writhing with arch melodrama is Abrantes' follow-up, Visionary Iraq (2008), co-directed by Benjamin Crotty, with whom Abrantes later made Liberdade (2011). The two films couldn't be more different in design and approach, the former more in line with Abrantes' tightly cloistered, performative works (such as 2009's Too Many Daddies, Mommies and Babies), the latter from his "later" period, characterized by a globetrotting impulse and expansive, breathtaking vistas rendered via supremely cinematic creative geography. It may seem outlandish to mark a mere three years as the divide between "early" and "late" works, but such is the fecundity and scope of the 28-year-old's condensed output. Irreverently tackling topics from art history, the war in Iraq (Visionary Iraq), global warming (Too Many Daddies...), incest, gender, and racial blurring (nearly everything!), colonial and post-colonial exploits (The History of Mutual Respect [2010], co-directed with Daniel Schmidt), fascism and the Inquisition in Portugal (Palácios



Taprobana, 2014, by Gabriel Abrantes

de Pena [2011], also co-directed by Schmidt), mass migration (Liberdade), and reviving texts from Shakespeare (Fratelli [2011], co-directed by Alexandre Melo) and Aristophanes (Ἐπιπέτες, a.k.a. Zwazo, 2012) and subjecting them to an inventive and idiosyncratic trans-cultural exhumation, Abrantes displays a fervent restlessness. Nor does he have any cinematic limitations, with a penchant for genre subterfuge (Baby Back Costa Rica [2011] is an over-sexed take on the thriller, accompanied by crunchy bass) and a style that distinctly shuttles between a jerky (and somewhat quirky) amateurism and a stately Super 16mm grandeur, evoking, twisting, and turning Hollywood's conventions into beguiling and breathtaking devices.

In blatant ways, the work attests to the cultural divide that defines Abrantes' identity: American, with enough cultural theory to buttress his critiques of US imperialism and Hollywood's hegemonic power over the collective consciousness, and Portuguese, with one eye on the country's dual-edged colonial past and political oppression, and the other on its changing relationships in a post-colonial, globalized world. This multiplicity of identities, and ongoing trans-cultural experience, has quickly become a defining feature of contemporary life in general and a hallmark of the artist's work. Just as Manet's Olympia wrestled with the weight of inheritance and affiliation as it chose to delve into the disconcerting state

of its own presence, Abrantes' work is undeniably, even disarmingly, of its time and generation—one in which the question of sanctity itself is either not posed or is held up to self-righteous suspicion. This doesn't preclude an atavistic probing; not unlike Pasolini's "primitivism," Abrantes' films partake in a complex and seemingly contradictory moral vision that has become increasingly cloaked in a form of mannered realism. The term baroque is over-invoked these days, but nevertheless its ethos of contorted, contaminated splendour certainly finds resonance in many of Abrantes' indelible images.

Visionary Iraq collapses the aforementioned dual identity with protagonists who look and sound American but are supposed to be in Portugal. The film's many male and female characters are all played by Abrantes and Crotty, even the adopted Angolan sister (incarnated by a flat-chested, messy-wigged Abrantes). While Abrantes' androgyny is believable enough, his/her being African defies any pretence of realism and his glistening face looks like it was smeared with chocolate sauce (one thinks ahead to the protagonists' colonizing and exoticizing "warm chocolaty thoughts" in The History of Mutual Respect). The depiction is crude and ridiculous, in keeping with the makeshift mise en scène and stylized acting. There's no veiling of the film's many-layered artifice, especially its Warholian spaces, which alternate from a Chelsea Girls carmine-coloured

enclosure to an aluminum-foiled gallery space, to a battlefield that, on a dime, transitions into a discotheque with an euphoric light show. An overblown family melodrama depicting incestuous siblings Miguel and Ginja, who depart for Operation Iraqi Freedom while their father is surreptitiously profiting from the war, Visionary Iraq has a pronounced underground, Kucharesque feel to it. But nestled within one of its numerous Russian dolls lies a story of impotence: Miguel can't get it up.

This same theme is revisited in Liberdade, which opens with shaky, Super 16 handheld shots of a young man robbing a local Luandan pharmacy of its supply of Viagra. His sexual impotence is later revealed to be the result of debilitating stress from the social divide separating him from his Chinese girlfriend, whereas Miguel's flaccidness, which could understandably be born from pre-war jitters (and not presumably from the guilt of fucking his sister!), registers instead as a profound and narcissistic inability to fully grasp the moral implications of his circumstances. An existential nausea suffuses both films, though their worlds could not be geographically and conceptually further apart. The tawdry campiness of Visionary Iraq is replaced in Liberdade by sweeping establishing helicopter shots, and the stroboscopic arty music video-like sequence in the former is substituted in the latter with a Hollywood-style musical interlude, with "Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes" commenting on the class collision between the two young lovers. The tone strangely feels as sincere as it does ironic, couched as it is within the mechanisms of a cinema that is being critiqued and wonderfully usurped. Liberdade is in a constant state of formal mise en abyme, not unlike Visionary Iraq but on a grander, and yet less self-conscious scale. It's conceivable that some viewers may fail to appreciate the varying levels at which the film operates: it's gorgeously shot, with beautiful protagonists, stunning compositions, and enough of a linear structure and storyline to be taken at face value (including a karaoke scene). In other words, it's an impressive short film by two talented artists, regardless of whether or not one grasps the meta-melodrama and mischievous metonyms that abound and make it all the more remarkable.

In a recent interview with Cahiers du Cinéma, Abrantes suggested that the art crowd might be better disposed to the inner workings of some of his films. While I'm not entirely convinced that this is the case (especially as I fail to see how his sumptuous cinema would be served by the conditions of the gallery), there is an undeniable Rancièrean dialectic that runs through many of the works with their bifurcating theoretical schemes hewing to a certain au courant critical proclivity. Aesthetics (beauty, most specifically) and politics (of identity, i.e., race, gender, sexuality, nationality) are the twin poles upon which Abrantes' characters are precariously perched. Poised between them are decadence and decay, ancient ruins, unconscious traumas, opulent, awesome settings (both natural and man-made, utopian and fascist) and a perverse and persistent sense of destabilization often caused by nascent, barely contained, and largely pubescent carnal desire. But unlike contemporary artists like Ryan Trecartin and Ryan McGinley whose work participates in and actively evokes the hyper-sexualized and resolutely contemporary profanations of an extremely localized youth culture, Abrantes and his collaborators are more interested in addressing their own authorship or artmaking through historical, peripatetic, polyglot, and even folkloric investigations that comment on the complexities of today's globalized world, no matter how silly and reckless those quests may seem. Abrantes and co. also incarnate a range of characters themselves, collapsing notions of narcissism and exhibitionism with camp and curiosity, and making the most of a limited budget.

Detractors contend that Abrantes' politics are either facile or cynical and offensive. While the films sometimes adhere to simplistically categorical visual metaphors and put forth ideas that don't necessarily yield answers, resolution, or even profound consideration, they nevertheless delve into touchy terrain with mesmeric fervour, unabashed romanticism, imagination, and gleeful impropriety. Drawn to the popular side of industrial cinema and its vaudeville origins, Abrantes' films are seductive (often shot on Kodak S16mm, on an Éclair ACL), deceptively simple and brash as they transgress certain arbiters of taste in order to proceed to cautionary tales that

ordinarily stipulate seriousness, drawing inspiration from the likes of Carmelo Bene and Pasolini's transgressive morality plays.

Has anyone seen Terrence Malick's The New World (2005) lately? The History of Mutual Respect makes clear the inherent power trips of anthropological quests, doing so with twisted humour and wit which are far less offensive than Malick's violin-soaring, pantheistic epic, adding to the mix Abrantes' personal interest in the complex and ever-burgeoning dynamic between Brazil and Portugal, as the former colonizer veers toward economic dependency and collapse while Brazil enjoys an unprecedented global ascendancy. Shot in Portugal, Brazil (those jaw-dropping Brasília compositions), and Argentina, The History of Mutual Respect is ridiculously ambitious and excessive, as spellbinding as it is silly with mesmerizing waterfalls, a Nina Simone sound bite, and a naked Abrantes chasing his Native nubile object of desire in slow motion through a lush rainforest. The colonizing protagonists' search for a clean and pure sex (spoken in a sequence which bears a striking visual resemblance to the rickety chariot scene in Straub-Huillet's *De la nuée à la résistance* [1979]) ends with casual deceit conveyed through an SMS, and the transplanted brown beauty reclined on a roccoco sofa in an exquisite Lisbon apartment, assuming Olympia's haughty pose as Grandma (Abrantes' real-life grandmother) purses her lips sipping espresso and examining the girl's soft and supple skin. Indeed, a new world.

Abrantes' most elaborate and ambitious film to date remains his and Schmidt's 59-minute Palácios de Pena, a fabulist tale of guilt, girls, and a grandma that oneirically explores ideas of culturally inherited culpability and oppression through a dialectic of desire, and includes a surfeit of ideas and unforgettable images: the two stunning Moorish lovers condemned to death for their homosexuality (played by two Lisbon-based Brazilian hustlers), a dog-headed doctor, a lovely lesbian lawyer, vertiginous vistas and a concluding conflagration. Yet the more recent Fratelli and Ἐπιπέτες should not be overlooked within Abrantes' steadily growing filmography. Fratelli, which begins with a disorienting shot inside of the Pantheon's coffered dome, stars Portuguese heartthrob Carlotto

Cotto (Tabu), shirtless and sporting a flimsy leotard and cawing in sun-soaked Lazio in a very gay pastoral retelling of Shakespeare's prologue to *The Taming of the Shrew*. The film makes use of some of the original costumes from Pasolini's *Canterbury Tales* (1972) and recalls the wonderful anachronisms of Rohmer's still-underrated *Les amours d'Astrée et de Céladon* (2007) as it delights in anarchic pageantry and textual conflation, quoting as much as it creates. Shot in Italy, the dialogue is in Portuguese, spoken with the Brazilian accent from Bahia.

Ἐπιπέτες, Abrantes' most recent film, was shot in Jakmel, Haiti, with dialogues in Haitian Creole and Attic Greek. In some ways a fulcrum for his thinking about cross-cultural traversals and shifts and gaps in meaning, Ἐπιπέτες begins with a loosely quoted folk-myth from *The Arabian Nights* recounted in Haitian Creole as the two older men who form the film's bookend introduce the first of several idioms, each of which harbours its own symbolic and historical meaning. Sam Rohdie's line about Pasolini's "Trilogy of Life" being a prime example of "one language citing another" comes to mind as Abrantes mounts a spectacular theatrical adaptation of Aristophanes' 414 BC play *The Birds* with elaborate and colourful costumes fabricated by local artisans who mostly produce their work for the annual carnival (though also try to sell them to tourists whenever possible). The film as a whole hints at the dramatic structure of a typical Aristophanes play with prologue, parodos, symmetrical scenes and song, forming a multi-structured narrative device that questions culture's role in dealing with historical trauma via rippling layers, under the watchful presence of a vulture and an eagle who form the abstract silent Greek chorus. Abrantes is well aware that his film cannot concretely bridge gaps in knowledge, and doesn't purport to be making grand statements about repression, the slave trade, and the birth of Western democracy. Yet the unseen theatre director, whose astonishing desire to mount a play in original Attic Greek with locals, stands as a flamboyant metaphor for Abrantes' dizzying artistic feats, which form a strange, singular language of their own.