

Valerie Favre, by Jerry Bell, Oct. 2012

Favre is an artist I've been meaning to write about for a while – since I was alerted to her work by Michael Duncan's review in AiA in 2009, really. Like Duncan, I was puzzled why the artist's large (over 70 works) mid-career survey at Nimes and then Lucerne wasn't accompanied by wider recognition – a leading gallery in New York or London, say – or inclusion in the Biennale circuit. That show generated a respectable book, as had a previous smaller survey in Munster in 2004, so her work has hardly suffered from lack of promotion. I don't pretend to fathom the art world politics that goes on at that level of course, but the question of whether there is still mileage in what is essentially a Neo-Expressionist style, seemed worth considering.

Favre's work is noted for its large scale, vigorously worked facture, restrained colour and tonality, elegant, relaxed drawing of gangly, mythic figures, most famously, a series of women with rabbit heads in swimming costume and high boots, titled *Lapin Univers – Rabbit Universe*. The effect is comic yet strangely agitated. As Duncan explained, the title plays on French slang for penis – 'La pine' - and perhaps signals a feminist agenda, certainly a sexual one. But this much is also clear from costume and traditional iconography (think Playboy Bunny Girls for starters). What is less obvious is their situation. They are not placed in boudoirs or bacchanals; the absence of 'Bunny men' – or males of any kind for that matter – is conspicuous while the introduction of a low platform or pedestal in virtually celestial setting, upon which they cavort or jostle, grants their role a somewhat higher, more remote domain. A rabbit role here is more an opportunity for exhibition or extroversion than submissive sexual allure. The rabbit women are absurd yet the contrast between rabbit head (or mask) and sleek feminine torso not only perpetuates a longstanding duality but literally 'truncates' sexuality, resorts to an 'animal' attraction where greater identity fails or falters. In this respect it is notable that faces or expressions for the rabbit women are either fleeting or no more than cartoons. Facing up to some things seems to set off a frisson of facture. These are by no means straightforward satires on standard mythology or sexual politics. But more than subtleties of subject matter, Favre's broad and broken brushstrokes, muted colour or tonalities, give the work a luscious but seething, simmering quality. Treatment is at once rich and confident, yet hesitant, subdued.

And such treatment signals a deeper level to the ambivalence; an unease not just with sexuality or identity, but ultimately with pictures. The artist paints, not because the imagery is unavailable in print – although, strictly it is not – but because painting offers greater opportunity to physically immerse oneself in their formation, to linger over and thematise or exemplify this proximity and commitment. Favre wants to get demonstrably close to her content, as a matter of attachment and to keep it close, as a matter of succour. Significantly, the artist sees her rabbit women as basically self-portraits and that said, there is undeniably something a little rabbit-like and twitchy about her features! Joking aside, the paintings shimmer or vacillate around the degree of realisation or recognition to content, the painter's freedom or care in respecting that. The paintings are about making the content credible in this sense, making painting and painter credulous.

The Expressionist heritage to all this is clear enough and any number of more celebrated contemporary painters draw from similar sources. Duncan cites Tuymans, Kippenberger, Baselitz and Dumas. I'd add Doig, Cecily Brown, Daniel Richter and Rauch, stressing the turn to allegory and myth rather than topical or political content used by Tuymans, Dumas and Kippenberger. This strand to contemporary painting tends to stretch technique and materials in announcing process, confounding stylistic norms yet resisting greater abstraction. And it's fair to say the results are often dubious compromises, empty gestures and affectation. They overreach. Where print sources no longer provide obvious or reliable standards we return to all the old problems for painting. We look to basics, for better or worse. But now it is the sheer diversity of sources and means that trouble us,

the profusion of standards that leave us with too many or none. Once, it was a single reductive tradition exhausted or expiring in exotic caprice and decadence. It hardly matters whether we consider this classical or modern. Faced with mounting excess at some point one turns fundamentalist, at least for a while. One solves one problem by entertaining another. But it's not so much a vicious cycle as a fiendish fractal. We never quite get to the bottom of it; never quite get over it or simply move on. Painting and its history refuse to sit still, lie down or go away. Digital options only remind us of the necessity of the analogue. Motion and audio options only remind us of the advantages of stasis, silence. Print or multiple instances only remind us of the value of the sole instance. Painting is a tradition we cannot help but renew, in light of other developments. No matter how cleverly we unpack form from content, iconography from technique, style from substance, we never quite have the full set of instances, the fixed and final perspective. It always entails more painting, other experience.

For critics dedicated to novelty, of course, painting is disappointing simply for remaining painting. Nothing short of complete substitution can satisfy their blunt criterion for progress. At the same time painters increasingly monitor art history for forgotten or obscure moments, rival developments and current technology. If painting is no longer enough, some part of it is at least necessary. The postmodern painter can appear a jack-of-all-trades or dabbler for embracing this breadth of concerns in the face of sweeping dismissal. Favre too has her side projects, her flings at full abstraction, her salutes to Bonnard, Böcklin or Bresson. But these never really threaten her style or themes, on the contrary confirm them. Older abstractions are grouped as Balls and Tunnels, maintaining an intensely compartmentalised sexuality to theme, while the series at Wolff are titled Fragments and offer intimate spectral presences, dark encounters, perhaps ejaculatory moments. But these broader gestures actually flag the artist's conservatism of means here, her standard canvas supports and pigment chemistry. Work of an older generation of American painters, from Larry Poons to Linda Benglis, has rendered such painterly licence tepid and tentative, frivolous or decorative, especially when prompting stark sexual metaphor.

Favre fares better where expansion of animal metaphor invites more elaborate setting as in *Quelle Am Bach* 2005 (The Source of The Brook) or *Peter Pan* 2007, where facture is given more to work with and passing tributes to figures such as Bonnard or Ensor sit comfortably with a more free-ranging iconography. Equally, in the series of frieze-like processions grouped as *Theatre*, where figures are granted ritualistic interaction, painterly vacillation happily joins motion or animation, as in *Secret Service for the Queen* 2008 or *Ladybirds* 2010 (my fave Favres) and the elongated limbs take on a more overall rhythm or gestalt. A fetish shared is a fetish halved, perhaps. But the rugged finish alerts us to an effort to maintain the picture, the cost of commitment. Again, they are works that flicker with irresolution because there is a lot at stake. Not for nothing do these works feature death in their midst. Where sex is accorded an animal vitality at the expense of identity, alternatives quickly turn savage, morbid. Sex and death is a trusted recipe of course, especially for an Expressionist, but in Favre's work it not only adds a funereal tone to moments of union, or elation, but confers even the slightest meeting with fatal consequence. There is no hiding in the crowd from this failing, no animal attraction strong enough to compensate for a lanced ego, a surrendered self. The paintings take the painter to the edge of her comfort zone, oscillate fiercely between grim options and celebrate the prospect.

Elsewhere Favre finds the conjunction no more than insect-like, and there seems to be a growing interest in more schematic structure, that nevertheless acknowledges a phallic threat or arch accommodation. This is as much of her work as we need to survey here. Her themes are familiar, possibly universal, but pursued with great imagination and sensitivity. I have tried to show a greater cohesion throughout the work than is generally acknowledged in commentary and where she may be placed in contemporary painting. Her contribution lies in a distinctive brand of comic and mythic themes, treated in a sensuous, discursive manner. Favre's strain of Neo-Expressionism maintains

metaphor and allegory, but its comic irreverence has less of a satirical edge than say Kippenberger or Immendorff. Rather, her iconography belongs to contemporary myth in poetic displacement. Her drawing and brushwork similarly carry less of a sense of parody or provocation than an attenuated, anxious engagement. The works are built not recklessly or ruthlessly but ardently, apprehensively. Significantly, several works cite Bonnard, an early member of the Nabi or Symbolists, given to erotic metaphor, but whose later bucolic and domestic scenes exchange myth for stippled colour fields of great delicacy, that often surrender depth for more striking orientation, keyed not by qualities of light so much as rich, overall colour harmonies. Something in Favre's work aspires to a similar all-embracing approach, quite distinct from contemporaries. Finally, Favre brings a distinctly feminine, if not feminist, perspective to issues of sexuality and identity that provide welcome contrast to more doctrinaire rivals and moving insight into a vivid individual.