

MARCEL DZAMA

THE COURSE OF HUMAN HISTORY PERSONIFIED

David Zwirner New York

## CREDITS

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### FIGURES

Page 6: John Everett Millais, *My Beautiful Lady (Lovers by a Rosebush)*. Copyright © Birmingham Museums & Art. Gallery accession #12,20. Page 8: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice (Dante Drawing the Angel)*. Copyright © Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery. Gallery accession #485,04. *First International Dada Art Fair*. Dr Otto Burchard Gallery, Berlin. Courtesy Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz. Page 11: Francisco Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, from *Los Caprichos*. Photo credit: Victoria & Albert Museum, London / Art Resource, New York. Copyright © Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Page 12: Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Destruction*. Collection of the New York Historical Society. Gallery accession number #1858.4. Page 14: Piero della Francesca, *Baptism of Christ*. Copyright © National Gallery, London NG665. Page 16: James Ensor, *Pleasant, Sad Carnival in Flanders*. Courtesy Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Copyright © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SABAM, Brussels, Belgium. Page 22: Francisco Goya, *Disasters of War #33: The hai gue hacer mas?* (What more is there to do?). Location: Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Copyright © Bridgeman-Giraudon / Art Resource, New York. Page 24: William Blake; *The Wood of the Self-Murderers: The Harpies and the Suicides*, illustration to Hell, Canto 13, of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Copyright © Tate Gallery, London / Art Resource, New York.

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ESSAYS

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FIGURE 1. James Ensor, *Bon triste carnaval en Flandre* (Pleasant, Sad Carnival in Flanders), 1920.

JASON TOUGAW

## MARCEL DZAMA'S NOTEBOOK

Marcel Dzama keeps a notebook at his bedside, for sketching ideas that emerge from sleep. "I draw during the day," he says, "but my ideas come at night."<sup>71</sup> Dzama wakes periodically and sketches while he's in the liminal state between sleep and waking. Before he renders them fully in his drawings, paintings, music, video, and sculpture, Dzama crowds the pages of his notebook with the bat children, vampires, distressed damsels, perplexed bears, walking trees, and skinny cowboys that populate his sleep. The Dzama world is immediately recognizable: the restrictive color scheme, the skewed archetypal figures and pop culture icons, the dreamlike scenarios. The notebooks reveal the process behind the iconography, the embryo of imagination. They give audiences the vicarious experience of imagining Dzama scribbling in the dark, between REM cycles.

The images and ideas Dzama documents in his notebook are close relatives of hallucinations that can occur during sleep onset or arousal—called, respectively, hypnagogic and hypnopompic imagery. Surprisingly common, these hallucinations often accompany a related phenomenon called sleep paralysis, where a sleeper wakes paralyzed, motor skills still inactivated by the brain as they are when we sleep or dream. The episodes can be terrifyingly real. Some argue that supposed alien abductions are, in fact, hypnagogic or hypnopompic hallucinations. Teenagers in Japan, where the phenomenon is called *kamashibari*, have even been known to cultivate the experience recreationally. The terror and the appeal both derive from a collision of the fantastical productions of the sleeping

mind with the rational expectations of the waking. Uncanny imagery that is routine in dreams can be startling when it intrudes into the waking world. The same might be said of Dzama's work. While the scenarios in them are undeniably oneiric, rooted in the dream world, they also suggest a diversity of sources and method, including collage, cartoon, a Dada-ish delight for the absurd, and stream of consciousness. Nonetheless, Dzama's notebooks reveal a core tendency to cull comic book themes and styles and recast them as though through the lens of a jubilantly perverse dream, the stuff of sleep let loose in the light of day.

One of the drawings in *The Course of Human History Personified* depicts a scene reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal." Four men sit along one side of a makeshift picnic table, munching on live infants (plate 9). Behind them, a prototypical Dzama tree-creature, typically leafless as though it were eternally winter, sprouts infants like fruit. The men are engrossed, blood spouting where they chew. Their faces have the bloated homeliness of stock comic book characters, their hats, coats, and bow ties worn fastidiously, making them look like the bosses, politicians, scientists, and police that populate the superhero's world. On the tree, the infants look like puppets, apparently without bodies, draped in genderless gowns of a bygone era. Viewers are given the dubious opportunity to imagine a missing frame in which the men pluck the infants from the tree and peel their gowns—or skins—to reveal hidden fruit. Where the scene departs from comic book conventions, it enters the world of dreaming. Sigmund Freud coined the term *condensation* to describe one of the fundamental operations of what he called *the dream-work*. In a dream, every image is condensed, a kind of shorthand that represents multiple ideas, or *dream-thoughts*. These images are often literally composites: a man with a fish head, a trumpet that's also a gun, Johnny Rotten with Caruso's voice. In this case, the men are consuming a composite of human infants, children's puppets, and fruits off a tree. Freud observed that in condensed dream imagery it is often possible to detect a *mediating common factor* that links its elements in the dreamer's mind.<sup>2</sup> Trumpets and guns, for instance, might both be phallic symbols. Human infants and fruits off a tree are both products of sexual reproduction, and when children play, Freud might observe, they tend to sexualize their toys. It might be a stretch to follow the Freudian route to its logical conclusion and argue that the munching of infants represents a sublimated sexual desire, but the drawing is typical of Dzama's work in its aesthetic appropriation of what might be called the conventions of dreaming. In a sense, Dzama reverses Freud's method. Where Freud extracted such conventions in search of revelations about the dreamer, Dzama injects them into his work, to animate visual fragments of narrative that *stymie* definitive interpretation.

If Jonathan Swift's satiric call to cannibalize the infants of eighteenth-century Ireland had a pointed aim to dramatize the exploitation of the Irish by the English, Dzama's drawing has a more diffuse effect. It reveals unexpected continuities, perhaps exposes some savagery within conventions of everyday life, but it does so with a wink to the audience, a recognition that it's all just a dream or a prank. In a sense, Dzama's work condenses the effects of satire, comic book, and dream. Satire is a comic critique designed to manifest concrete change, comic books primarily entertain (even if they do offer some social critique in the process), and dreams tend to provoke a *feeling* of epiphany whose significance dissolves into perplexity upon waking. Dzama's work tugs viewers in opposing directions. Its cumulative effect is a patchwork of critique, entertainment, and epiphany.

The Canadian city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, where Dzama lived until his recent relocation to New York City, is often cited as the source of his wry and austere aesthetic. While in Winnipeg, Dzama and a group of other local artists formed The Royal Art Lodge, which has included, at various moments, Jonathan Pylpchuk, Adrian Williams, Neil Farber, Michael Dumontier, Drue Langlois, and Marcel's sister Hollie Dzama. The group met on Wednesday evenings to produce collaborative drawings, stuffed dolls, fanzines, collages, puppets, and dioramas—one artist starting work on a piece and passing it along for the others to augment until somebody pronounced it finished. The collective's name advertises a playful idealism. The notion of a monarchy of artists ruling a small Canadian city where hunting lodges far outnumber art collectives is typical of the group's improvisational confidence—inspired by groups like Dada and Fluxus. More recently, Dzama has shown with The Royal Family, an overlapping collective including sister Hollie Dzama, wife Shelley Dick, father Maurice Dzama, mother Jeanette Dzama, and uncle Neil Farber. The spontaneous methods of these collectives are fundamental to the spirited work they produce. "We have no agenda," Dzama has said. "We just like to draw."<sup>3</sup> While their work is the expression of a personal sensibility more than an engagement with art-world trends or politics, it generates an ethos of idiosyncrasy and spontaneity.

The other members of The Royal Art Lodge may be Dzama's most immediate influences, but he also cites Hieronymus Bosch, Fluxus, Dante's *Inferno*, Leadbelly's and Woody Guthrie's murder ballads, Samuel Beckett, Belgian painter and printmaker James Ensor, and Jack Kirby's *Captain America* (the 1940s comics, before Captain America became an ally of Joseph McCarthy!). Some of Dzama's fantastical creatures are borrowed nearly intact from Bosch; his narrative snapshots are inspired by surrealist precursor James Ensor's macabre vignettes; his interest in collective spontaneity is reminiscent of Fluxus; the wit underscoring his most violent images includes a touch of Beckett. But, returning to the

origin of Dzama's ideas in his nightly sleep and dreams, his uncanny condensations of the mundane and the fantastic—an office worker surrounded by menacing tree-people, for instance—resemble the methods, if not the aesthetics, of the surrealists.

The surrealist method, motivated by a collective consumption of the works of Freud, involved looking at the world from the vantage point of fantasies that normally remain semi-conscious at best, the more irrational or bizarre the better. While most of the world dismissed the irrational products of daydreams, surrealists pursued and documented them. Dzama's work suggests a similar method, but one employed by an artist more concerned with morbid tenderness than Dalí's cosmic paranoia, Magritte's philosophical dreaminess, Buñuel's social critique, or de Chirico's architectural alienation. Like many of the surrealists, Dzama works in visual snapshots of a recurring personal iconography, replacing floating clouds or melting clocks with tree-people and blood-drinking coeds. Dzama's palette of moss green, black, grey, deep red, and a military brown (achieved with root beer syrup), like a black-and-white film, sends the message that viewers are entering a world similar enough to our own to be recognizable, but different enough that we can't take anything for granted. Dzama distills everyday images in a tonic of unconscious fantasy to show viewers what the world would look like if fantasy were to stage a coup and overthrow reason and reality.

Dzama's 2003 collaboration with Neil Farber—*Nichts Hinunter Hier* (German for "Nothing under Here"—can be viewed as a capsule of a general method still motivating his work. The drawing is one of many involving the interplay of above- and underground scenes. A young man, possibly just a boy, stands aboveground, on moss-green grass, surrounded by a swarm of bubblelike heads with vampire widow's peaks and blank expressions (one of Farber's signatures). The man-boy holds a fishing reel strung with grey rope, at the end of which, belowground, hangs a man in a bucket with a flashlight, illuminating what looks like a man-made cave. The title phrase, floating above the scene, refers to the man in the bucket's discovery: he sees nothing, but only because his flashlight is pointed in the wrong direction. On the other side of the cave, mere inches from him, stands a moss-green lizard-man, whose arms and feet suggest impending motion. The lizard-man's expression is difficult to decipher. He might devour the man in the bucket, greet him cheerfully, or scurry into the black depths of the cave. We'll never know, because the products of fantasy are fragmentary and ephemeral. Dzama suspends his viewers in a state of uncertainty. If this were a film, the next frame might be delightful or menacing, but if it were a dream, it might be both delightful *and* menacing. Dzama suspends viewers in states of condensation by stitching the surreal into the everyday, intruding the sleep world into the waking—or, as this work suggests, digging into the underground from above.



Yet Dzama's work is more emotional—or empathic—than the highly intellectualized experiments of the surrealists. Dzama once told an interviewer that he liked to draw the Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz* “because he could be remorseless because of the missing heart.”<sup>4</sup> If Dzama's work suggests a dream logic, the Tin Man's missing heart is a key to revealing why this world is so startling. A man made of tin is novel, but a man without a heart suggests the kind of question Dzama's work consistently engages: how might a man without a heart behave? Dzama's answer: without remorse. As in a dream, judgment is absent from Dzama's rendering of such figures. The Tin Man lacks remorse not because he is somehow bad or evil, but simply because tin men without hearts lack remorse. Dzama's narrative fragments are visually arresting in part because the interaction of novel creatures with nonhuman dispositions condenses actions and emotions that would otherwise seem incompatible. Throughout his work, Dzama dislocates action and emotion, creating scenarios in which his characters and creatures respond to each other in unexpected ways. A gang of trees abducting an elegantly dressed young woman is startling enough, but when the abductors' faces express perplexity and the abductee's appears nonchalant, viewers must adjust their preconceptions and accept the skewed emotional dynamics of Dzama's visual world on its own terms.

This visual world is governed by what Freud called the dreaming mind's “representational resources,” differentiating them from the more familiar resources of the waking mind. While the dreaming mind lacks the resources to perform tasks that require sustained attention or logic—like reading or calculation—it can create entire worlds with logics all their own, where flying or mind reading can be performed with ease. Updating this idea in light of research in contemporary neuroscience, psychiatrist and dream researcher Ernest Hartmann argues that dreaming cognition “allows us to make connections more broadly and more inclusively than when we're awake, because dreaming avoids the ‘tightly woven’ or ‘overlearned’ regions of the mind.”<sup>5</sup> Dzama works through a similarly inclusive thought process. If it were in a dream, the image of two cowboys literally climbing the spindly tendrils of a vine while they fight would be an ideal example of what Freud meant by representational resources. In Dzama's drawing, the vine seems to support the weight of the two cowboys both effortlessly and precariously. In dreams, as in Dzama's world, gravity ceases to limit physical reality. Gravity can be suspended in dreams because neural networks loosen during sleep, freeing thought from the logical constraints that govern waking life. There is controversy among dream theorists about whether this loosening means anything. Psychiatrist J. Allan Hobson argues, for example, that dreams are a form of delirium akin to psychosis or drug-altered states. They may perform a physiological function, like the consolidation of memory



FIGURE 2. Francisco Goya, *Disasters of War 33: Tue hai gue hacer mas?*  
(What more is there to do?), about 1820.

or the expulsion of mental refuse, but according to Hobson, the contents of dreams are more or less random and meaningless.<sup>6</sup> Two cowboys brawling on a vine might be an arresting image, but it says little or nothing about the waking life of the dreamer. Hartmann disagrees. According to his theory, dreams are purposeful. They exploit their power to make connections our waking minds dismiss as irrational or dysfunctional in order to form “pictorial metaphors” that help us understand our waking concerns in new ways. Are Dzama’s cowboys, then, pictorial metaphors or simply an absurd image? There’s more than a hint of Marx Brothers physical buffoonery in their tangle. If this were simply physical comedy, viewers could look, smile—or not—and move on. The Marx Brothers, though, were a favorite of surrealists like Salvador Dalí because they found a popular medium for exposing the absurdities of social life under burgeoning capitalism in the first half of the twentieth century. In short, The Marx Brothers’ antics were metaphorical. Dzama’s work *feels* like metaphor (just as it feels like epiphany), but if these tangling cowboys are a metaphor, what might they represent? The cartoonishness of iconic masculine violence? The heroism of iconic masculine violence? The staginess of fixed or stable identities? The precariousness of human domination of the natu-

ral world? Any attempt to reduce Dzama's work to metaphor ends in oversimplification. Even more than the surrealists, Dzama trades in metaphorical *instability*. His vine-climbing cowboys might represent the valorization of iconic masculine violence as easily as its critique. They might represent the playful indictment of the human drive to dominate the natural world or the more oblique observation that humans and vines—along with the birds and bats who look on—are mutual performers in the absurd acrobatics of that same natural world. If Dzama's work feels metaphorical, the contiguities his metaphors reveal are promiscuous.

The slipperiness of Dzama's metaphors becomes more evident as iconic characters reappear in multiple scenarios. In one frame, trees and cowboys may be allies, while in the next they are foes; bats who are predators become prey; young women who are victims become perpetrators. The palette and aesthetic tell us it's the same world, but alliances and dispositions shift without explanation. In comics, of course, character is very stable, even rigid. Good is always good, and evil is always evil. Even when good becomes evil, it is through a dramatic reversal of character that maintains a distinction between the two. By filtering the iconography of the comic through the logics of dreaming, Dzama muddies these distinctions and creates a world whose foundation is moral and metaphysical instability.

In the newer work, Dzama's frames become increasingly populous, multiplying metaphorical possibilities. Dzama's work has always included a thread of violence and gore, generally on a small scale, local skirmishes involving relatively few players. Now, that violence is acquiring a collective dimension. Many of the drawings in *The Course of Human History Personified* are crowded with figures at war. The drawing selected for the cover, for example, depicts the systematic slaughter of bats, bears, mice, human infants, trees, birds, elephants, deer, turtles, and at least one giant octopus by a collection of men in cocktail dress armed with rifles. The scene looks like genocide. It might seem at first to be a satirical portrait of the hidden violence that makes civilization possible—for example, the force-feeding of ducks to produce foie gras, the deforestation that gives us filet mignon and shopping malls, the wars that keep us in oil. But if you turn the book over, the other half of the frame—which would be the left or first half if the drawing were laid out flat—depicts a very different scenario. The ratio of creatures to party guests is reversed. The creatures falling from the sky, joined by flying red flowers, are storming the party guests. Bats who appear frightened and besieged on the right are looming and predatory on the left. Nobody is innocent. It is tempting to see in Dzama's portraits of collective violence a metaphor for a world at war. But where Picasso's *Guernica*, Dalí's *The Enigma of Hitler*, and Goya's *Disasters of War* prints are direct ideological statements about modern warfare and alienation, Dzama's drawing is a more oblique representation of the mob mentalities that drive large-scale violence. Goya's series,



FIGURE 3. William Blake, *The Wood of the Self-Murderers: The Harpies and the Suicides*.  
Illustration to *Hell, Canto 13*, of *Dante's Divine Comedy*, 1824–1827.

with its terrifying vignettes, dismembered bodies, and landscapes as ravaged by war as their human counterparts, have been a direct influence on Dzama's battle portraits. Goya's prints are devastatingly serious renderings of atrocity. Though Dzama's war scenes are more playful, they don't trivialize atrocity, particularly because his anthropomorphic trees and other assorted creatures have acquired such emotional range over the course of his career through their reappearance in so many charged scenarios. Anybody who's seen more than a few of Dzama's drawings and paintings has encountered these figures in the throes of solace, rage, terror, compassion, and confusion. As in Goya's series, the chaos of war makes victims and perpetrators difficult to distinguish. Everybody in Dzama's battle portraits is to blame, but if everybody is to blame, then nobody in particular is to blame. The images are simultaneously horrific and absurd, their metaphors less ideological statements than philosophical observations of the collective responsibility for atrocity.

As Freud observed, every dream-image represents multiple dream-thoughts—and to confound matters, every dream-thought disguises itself in multiple images. While an analyst may spend a career untangling the web of meanings generated, an artist is free to

play with them. And while surrealists were notorious for their provocative experiments with dream logics and aesthetics, they were by no means the first to draw on dreams for artistic inspiration. Dzama is part of a longer tradition of artists in just about every genre who have looked at the world through the lens of dreams and visions—including, to name a handful, William Blake, Edward Munch, James Joyce, Marc Chagall, Maya Deren, Jorge Luis Borges, Terry Gilliam, and Toni Morrison. When artists mine their dreams, the results are as disparate as the dreams of one individual and the next, but all of these artists incorporate conventions of dreaming to stretch the limits of their genres. Where William Blake culled the metaphysical traditions of the world to construct a personal cosmology in word and image, Toni Morrison creates characters whose mental landscapes are misshapen by the unjust social horizons they've inherited from the real world outside the pages of her novels. In each case, though, the artist's particular dream iconography produces a visual or verbal language that *defamiliarizes* the waking world and provokes viewers to reexamine what they think they know, or feel, about life as we know it or the course of human history. In Dzama's case, the comic book is a starting point. But whereas the comic is rooted in very traditional narrative forms, Dzama recasts it, offering isolated vignettes that feel like they belong to a larger narrative the viewer can't access, like fragments of a dream.

But as his work accumulates and evolves, Dzama is beginning to reveal another kind of narrative logic. His iconographic figures return in new guises. He adds new ones—the cavalry leaders and man-head ottomans of this new work, for instance. He places them in increasingly complex scenarios. His palette shifts slightly, more and more red appearing while the grey of his earlier work wanes. As with a comic or a dream, Dzama's work is beginning to achieve something like suspense, inviting readers to wonder what his creatures will get up to next. The publication of the notebooks provides some back story, though the relationship between their contents and the finished works is as elusive as that between a dream and waking life—or between one Dzama drawing or painting or video or sculpture and the next. The notebooks, like the work itself, keep viewers on the edge of epiphany, a place like a petri dish, where Dzama's dream-thoughts, filtered through waking reflection, mingle with the effluvia of his audience's expectant fantasies. That elegant young woman *might* stab the man with the Hitler moustache. That cowboy with the erection *might* incite sexual revolution. The trees, bears, and bats *might* form a shaky alliance and take back the planet.

NOTES

- 1 Marcel Dzama, personal interview, April 25, 2005.
- 2 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. Joyce Crick (London: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 3 Jerry Saltz, "Paper Trail: A Survey of Drawing on the Rise," *The Village Voice*, January 29–February 4, 2003.
- 4 Stephen Elliot, "The Strange, Prescient Art of Marcel Dzama," *Newsweek* (web exclusive), July 2003. <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/3069231>.
- 5 Ernest L. Hartmann, *Dreams and Nightmares: The New Theory on the Origin and Meaning of Dreams* (New York: Plenum, 1998), 3.
- 6 J. Allan Hobson, *The Dream Drugstore: Chemically Altered States of Consciousness* (Boston: MIT Press, 2002).

