

## **Cheerful and Sinister: Michael Fliri's Comic Heroes and Uncanny Metamorphoses**

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Michael Fliri is the protagonist of his own performances. They are experimental arrangements and test-runs of the subject against a refractory or indifferent outside world, which ultimately comes to the same thing. Travesty and masquerade transform his antiheroic "heroes" into broad-brush clichéd figures or beings whose animal nature cannot be clearly defined.

Entirely without pathos, the cowboy, punk, footballer, or suicide attacker is entangled in somewhat helpless forms of failure as if painstaking repetition and demonstration of that very failure were the only real act of heroism. Slightly surprised, yet cheerful, the protagonist seems to be kept forever busy by the revolt of things that appear to be animated, even to have a life of their own, but in fact only get in the hero's way as though by chance, because of an unfortunate chain of physical events. Sometimes he is occupied with an inversion of logic: a castaway throwing a plastic anchor into the middle of the ocean to save himself; building a house under water he intends to inhabit against the laws of gravity; or casting an anchor into a tree in order to pull himself up and "drown" in the air. He courageously exposes himself to, and stoically faces, atmospheric resistances such as snow and water. Yet he also probes the limits of feasibility as well as a sudden creativity and ease that allow him to change his world in accordance with his wishes with a bricoleur's sleight of hand. Accompanied by simple and monotonous music, he effortlessly makes changes to his house at one-minute intervals by nimbly shifting its parts around.

Transformation processes and regular metamorphoses have always featured prominently in Michael Fliri's "disguises." For some time, they have become manifest not only in performances, but also in wooden sculptures and a specific variation of the traditional casting technique: layer by layer, latex is incorporated into a mass of clay molded after a pattern, removed, and put on a frame. The outsized embryonic creature confronting us is completely closed in itself, amoeba-like, without any body orifices and, thus, without any contact to the outside. Its state is a pre-syntactical one, as it were, the signs of the symbolic order not yet formed; everything is there in an immature condition, but nothing is defined. Vague ambiguity frightens us and addresses the unconscious, as the hybrid beings emerging with increasing frequency do which seem to be undergoing a process of transformation – though it is not clear whether man turns into animal or animal into man. The character of this conversion, which may occur in both directions, becomes strikingly evident in a sculptural work in which a bovine head turns into a human one, or vice versa – which recalls the physiognomic studies by Le Brun and Lavater in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who investigated emotions

and thus, ultimately, the residues of animal and instinctive, i.e. uncontrollable, aspects in the human face. Nevertheless, the form of the human face that has been purged from (animal) drives and, with it, the form of reason always hang in a precarious balance: regression remains a permanent possibility. It does occur in Fliri's sculptures presenting the animal as the known entity, though a series of painful changes accompanies the transmutation of the human face into an animal, of the diabolical grimace into a peaceful creature.

The topos of the anthropomorphic, which Fliri reverts, is based on the awareness of a return of the suppressed or even its invocation; the stronger the suppression, the more uncanny the fantasies of destruction, the more monstrous the potential of the regression.

In former days, reveries of relief found an outlet in rituals, carnivals, and parades. We know of "case studies" on this form of ritualized and more or less channeled violence by artists that turned into ethnographers and anthropologists like Cameron Jamie or Mike Kelley. Michael Fliri's ambivalent figures reflect the realm of the depraved, things in us which disgust us, which we fear, which we would rather split off, yet which, like a kraken, embrace our body and take it captive. Nature strikes back and makes our attempts at sublimation come to nothing, when an extremity that turns out to be a scaly tail gets in touch with us – this thing does not belong to us, or does it? We are unable to control it, because we resemble birds in a cage, in a kind of incubator, with dangerously little air to breathe.

Fliri's comic, mute and uncanny heroes recall the marginalized and therefore melancholic monsters which went down in movie history and comic-strips, or Buster Keaton's or Jacques Tati's imperturbable laconism; with tiny gestures of everyday failure and the poetry of simple actions they illuminate the way our world works, its paradoxes and contingencies, and yet reveal how easy it is, with devotion, to get a handle on things – if perhaps by the rules of a different type of efficiency and under a different order of things.