

Owen Fu: Midnight Snacks

By Sabrina Tarasoff

Consider these notes as calisthenics performed for the following muscle groups: confused, vulnerable, idle, intrepid, bathetic.

I'm reading an interview with Kristen Stewart talking about "the human flail." Watching Spencer to spot instances of how this flail unfolds. My interest digresses to an article quoting the CEO of Chairish insinuating that searches for the term "wiggle" "jumped dramatically during the pandemic." Apparently, the wiggle usurped the squishy on the furniture market. I think about the upside down worlds of Fleischer cartoons, and how, in Norman Klein's terms, "gags that are specifically upside down describe displaced pain, for what feels cruelly out of place in the world." Since the wiggle is an animated line of sorts, and one that has replaced the dumb volume of the squishy, I'm thinking that the CEO may not be entirely wrong when she surmises that people are, simply, "craving more lightheartedness and whimsy." Is this the human flail?

Remember Brueghel's Icarus, his little leg flailing near-imperceptibly in the glistening Aegean?

Klein suggests that after the Cold War toon logic spills into urban planning and fantasy architecture. Space is what becomes cartoonish: "as nostalgia, as architecture." The cartoon becomes a theme park built on a virtual memory. Life is a seven-minute loop. He promises that there will be "many cartoons about nervous tourists in a collapsing world."

Have you watched the Midnight Gospel? If not, you should. It is the actualisation of Klein's prophecy in an eight-part series. It's the epitome of the (almost-)human flail.

Everything is wiggly and stirred in the Midnight Gospel world. The violence is ambient.

Find me stupefied in front of all these fragments, amuses-bouches, like daily life's cartoon ambience, the raunchy and confused in a collapsed society, sweet spots, and midnight info-snacking. Like...

O - TOWN HOUSE

"Me wasn't born with name Cookie Monster. It just nickname dat stuck. Me don't remember me real name... Maybe it was Sidney?"

— Cookie Monster

"No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin."

— Marcel Proust

Perhaps pushing the bliss of oblivion, gratuitous pleasures, or cultural repression?

These paintings appear to be made in stark fridge-light. That's where it starts: in the pitch black, alone, staring comatose into a fridge. Owen pulls out cookies and milk to prepare his canvas. Perhaps Oatmeal Choc-Chip. "I have a crave," he writes, "to remember." The night-time craving is a very ambient concept. Cinematic, regressive, private. Eating in the middle of the night is classed as a sleep disorder in some circles. In others, the midnight snack is a crack to surreal light.

In *The Night Kitchen*, protagonist baby Mickey floats out of his clothes and out of bed into a mixing bowl full of batter. There are three chefs churning. He's kneaded into the dough as an essential ingredient and escapes only when he manages to turn the malleable mixture into a flying machine. He flies to the milk bottle and dives inside, dough slipping off milky limbs. He's poured back into bed.

Bread becomes a pillow, an airplane, an escape chute.

Owen writes, "I have a crave to remember [...]". A 'crave,' he says, as if it were a machine churning out memories. I have a crave, with a crank, levers and pulleys, that moves to remember. These paintings are about a crave, a want, a long. They fill the mouth: a yawning hole.

O - TOWN HOUSE

A moon-faced form glows inside a stomach. A pale, flat cookie with chocolate chip eyes. It seems dipped in the psyche's variously spilled milks. Like biscuits shot up with some radioactive substance and swallowed for medical purposes.

Cookies referenced in culture is an exhaustive, inconclusive theme. Cookies pre-date cakes due to their robustness. Small, plain, flat, sweet buns. It is said the first gingerbread man was initiated by Elizabeth I of England in the 16th century, who'd requested her kitchen staff create gingerbread likenesses of her dinner guests. Faceless, flat roughly man-shaped-men. Of course, there's also Proust's Madeleine. Mary Poppins' Triple Gingerbread. Alice's Eat-Me biscuits. The Witch's House in Hansel & Gretel. The Cookie Monster.

Each of the Sesame Street characters were developed as representations of human foibles and fallibilities, exaggerated to the point of comedy. The Cookie Monster was Jim Henson's emblem of regression. He eats cookies compulsively, perhaps him, too, with a crave to remember. That the character cannot recall his real name is a strange detail. He makes babyish demands. He's Jim Henson's cookie-eating conception of the overactive id. The character was developed in 1966 for a General Foods cereal ad and later incorporated into the show. Each cookie he eats is an attempt to dip into the milk of memory.

A puppet show à la Proust.

"For a long time, I went to bed early." So begins the Search. But the night mind soon crawls in; the reflections often refuse to stop their run. Cue the "metempsychosis" of bedtime, as Proust has it: the transmigration of the mind to the sleep side. There's an onset of something lucid but unintelligible at night. Ideas are moonrocked, maybe strawberry-flavored. Thoughts are baked. You wander into the kitchen, and stir. Crave for a bite to soothe the mind. Someone turns the light on: what was I on about? Kristen Stewart?