

Queer Thoughts feels great pleasure and honor to present the first New York solo exhibition by Puppies Puppies.

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Since my birthday in April, I haven't parted with the gold ring on my finger for more than a moment. It's a replica of *The One Ring* that nearly gave Sauron the world, inscribed with Elvish prophecy and it's also known as the precious. For me, it is a symbol of my engagement to be married, and thus a symbol of love and my commitment to it. I'm hopelessly committed to symbols, too. Taking it off on purpose, going a day without wearing it, would feel like going a day uncommitted to love.

I was given the ring by a shaking, sobbing man in a Minion costume that day, and I accepted it wholeheartedly. For me, then, it could have been any ring, its meaning was only love and the future and the happy risks of planning to do something I never expected to do. It happened to be associated with the Tolkien mythology because Puppies Puppies has taken it as part of his cultural territory, the same way he has Minions and Harry Potter and violent cigarette warnings. It was *The One Ring* in that moment because, of course, the artist I love wanted to personally inflect an archetypal gesture. But I remain committed to symbols.

You do not want to be given *The One Ring*. It invites the attention of profound danger. It corrupts your intentions and divides you from your friends. It attaches you to Sauron, the world's abuser, and he marks you forever, twisting you, luring you, drawing you toward evil and isolation. It is a great burden.

The crescendo of the ring's inscription describes the implosion of the world as an attachment between people: "One ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them." Its wearers are all bound together by their experience of the darkness, their memories of Sauron's torment. Being tortured by him separates the ringbearers from the world—they can no longer empathize with the hopeful, having seen the shadows—but it brings them closer to each other. If one of them gives you the ring, they are cursing you. Yes, the offerer of the ring is inviting you to be closer to them, but they are simultaneously inviting you to spend your life despairing. They are inviting you to share in the pain of knowing Sauron. The one offering you the ring, then, is inviting you to do something no one would ever want to do, so in a sense they are inviting you to reject them. They are warning you to stay away from them lest you be bound to them in darkness, lest their trauma become shared trauma.

Smeagol got the ring, more or less, directly from Sauron, seduced into putting it on, and its

relentless torture withered him into the monster Gollum. Gollum is not evil— he is conflicted. His opposing parts are acted out in dialogs with himself. One part wants to soothe his pain by harming the people around him and thus distancing himself from them, and the other wants to reach out to them in friendship. He powerfully resents the ring, and part of him knows what it has done to him, what Sauron has done to him. But another part of him yearns to feel it around his finger, always either jealously guarding it or frantically, maniacally searching for it and scheming to steal it back. These conflicts define Gollum's identity and his role in Tolkien's narrative: he functions as both an ally and antagonist of the heroes and their quest to defeat Sauron and reclaim hope. He sabotages them and then he saves them. His conflicts, and his behavior, repeat a cycle from helpful to harmful, hostile to caretaking, a loop given to him by Sauron in the shape of a ring.

The artist who gave me my *The One Ring*, who introduced me to Sauron, will perform as Gollum during the opening of the exhibition. I'll be there in case he needs something, watching nervously as an unknown, untrusted public approaches him, talks about him, and looks at him. I'll be wearing my ring too, so there will be two echoing circles the size of eyes orbiting each other in the room. I think that he transforms himself into the image of Gollum because he identifies with Gollum, with conflict as a response to trauma. The proposer kneels as a gesture of humility, to admit that they can't promise that they will make the person they love happy, to offer only to try, to admit that we will have to share each other's histories and what they do to us as we wear them around our fingers or our necks. Gollum could never quite escape his own conflicts enough to let go of the ring, to offer it to someone else, unable to know if doing so would be a step away from Sauron or a step within his marching armies.

But Smeagol/Gollum/Character lacked the Puppies/Gollum/Artist/Person's greatest weapon, the perspectival step backward. What if Gollum had created a symbolic system with which to represent his situation and resolved his conflicts there? What if Gollum had been able to realize that he was imprisoned by the ring of conflicts Sauron had bestowed upon him, to break it by seeing it completely? What if a third voice had explained to Gollum's other two why they were fighting, that Sauron had already been defeated somewhere far away, and listened to them as they mourned all of the terrible things he did to them? What if Gollum had realized that he existed in the minds of hundreds of millions of other people, in pages and screens and artworks, that he was only a character, and that *The One Ring* is actually a limitless supply of copies without an original, that its neutralizing global ubiquity has fundamentally changed what it means, that he can just order another ring after giving his away? That *The One Ring* stands now for the survival of violence, that it stands for the fact that he survived?

Forrest

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