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Re:presentation

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WAYNE KOESTENBAUM'S CINEMATIC SWEETMEATS

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When I visited Wayne Koestenbaum's studio on West 26th Street last October, he opened the door in a black turtleneck and beaded necklace. "How would you describe my look?," he asked. "Bob Fosse..." I responded, "meets Prue Leith"—the South African pastry chef famous for her colorful statement pieces. The confectionary referent was top-of-mind, as I'd just watched Wayne's latest project, *Stigma Pudding* (2023), a 16mm-digital hybrid he wrote, shot, and edited himself. He is also the star and sole performer, delivering a litany of grandiloquent, off-color remarks over the course of the film's five minutes and forty seconds: "I'm here to crack down on orgasms," he declares as it begins, "like rhododendrons cluttering the garden."

Wayne intones each line in low, plodding, articulate rasps, which anyone who's heard him read a poem, or perform one of his Sprechstimme lounge acts, will immediately recognize. There are other elements that are unmistakably *Wayne*: saturate DayGlo colors, portentous allusions ("my deadbeat husband, Agamemnon!"), slouching posture and come-hither look—eyes fixed, chin down—though in *Stigma Pudding* he masks his face with enormous bakelite sunglasses, a scarf tied 'round his neck. Ironically, it is Wayne's singular voice and manner that enable him to "evolve different personae," from arcane Clytemnestra to modernist zaddy Henry James (conjured in his short film *The Sacred Fount* [2022]). Sometimes he creates his own characters, like October Castelnuevo Spielhaus, director of the fictitious Fondazione Credenza, but in other cases legible identity disintegrates. At the end of *Stigma Pudding*, he dispenses with character altogether, drifting into a fugue and singing "St-i-i-i-i-igma" in descendant half notes. The whole performance

transpires behind a veil of ink splotches and hand-painted flowers, rolling by on 16mm clear leader (slowed to 12 frames per second) and spliced together with rasterized tabloid photographs, studio watermarks, and clips of a rotund, cigar-smoking Orson Welles—another inventor of American gesamtkunstwerk.

Over the last five years, Wayne's made more than 200 short films, but *Stigma Pudding* is the first to combine original painting with digital video. "Before I actually dared to apply paint or ink to celluloid, the relationship of paint to film was somewhat conceptual or abstract," he told me. "I was *as-if* painting with film and with super-imposition." Yet having at last put felt-tip to film-stock, he's come up with something different—more opulent and vivid, remarkable for "the increasing vibrance of the color" and "the peculiarity and individuation of the marks." Wayne's interest in the materiality of film reflects a greater shift in his creative life, a sort of Adorno-y late style—his hand-made films are like the "unseemly preposterous knots" that, he says, make up his forthcoming poetry collection, or the impasto "boogers" on his abstract paintings. It's not that his films are coarse or in-aesthetic or unpleasant to watch, rather that they are *pure* pleasure, nonsensical and childlike, created for no reason but to amuse and occupy their maker.

Wayne's entry into visual art and media is, in this sense, an act of self-discovery—"be the student of your own desire," he instructs—and, at the same time, a renunciation of subjectivity. "There's no growing wisdom," he says of his work, "but there's bricolage, there's association, there's a construction of passageways based on memory units and affects." There are also challenges, puzzles, that Wayne designs for himself, and which push him



in new, uncharted directions. He credits writing his book *The Anatomy of Harpo Marx* (2012)—a series of ekphrastic readings of Marx Brothers film stills—with his turn from criticism to painting, and later to film and still photography. “I was trying to verbalize Harpo, a silent figure,” Wayne says of this pivotal moment, “and it pushed my linguistic machine to the breaking point. The turn to the film still was a flight from writing.”

Wayne’s low tastes and disciplinary boundary-crossing come with certain risks. As a rising critic and literary scholar, he was punished for (among other infractions) the “decidedly non-academic tropism” of his writing. He admits, still, to feeling a sense of shame at “trespassing on sacrosanct artistic activity,” describing the terror of growing up during the “reign of the cultural gate-keepers”: “There were ‘voices of our generation,’” he

recalls, “and the rest were hobbyists, or shouldn’t be writing.” But things have since improved and Wayne is now lauded practically everywhere. Among his titles are Distinguished Professor at CUNY and Guggenheim Fellow, and in 2020 his papers were collected by the Beinecke Library (on the campus of his former employer). His success confirms what many of us—young people especially—want so badly to believe: you don’t have to show fealty to a grammar or an idiom, certainly not to an academic milieu.

There is a democratic aspect to Wayne’s vehement amateurism. He disdains authority but, more than that, has a profound interest in other people. All his life, he’s pursued “private writing, private practices of fabrication out of the same urge to join with, belong, interlocate.” Thus while his films occasion solitary tasks like writing poems or composing music,

they're also social events that involve friends and young writers (the French novelist Édouard Louis), as well as strangers Wayne meets on Instagram, or on the street. Many are attractive men, captured in Warhol-esque close-up. "I get to know my subjects in a very specific, loving way," Wayne says, "and I feel a deep affection for them forever, based on our bond of having made this portrait." He quickly adds: "I always give the sitter the veto power." Signs of blissful reciprocity are, in part, what make the films so captivating. "People's willingness to be photographed or drawn is a beautiful thing," Wayne explains. "They are letting the photographer, artist, filmmaker be the platform for their evolution. It's an incredible feeling, to be asked to pose—that invitation is permission to become something you would otherwise feel embarrassed to approximate."

Wayne's most extensive work in this vein has to be his fifty-minute performance-documentary *The Collective* (2021), a film loosely inspired by George Kuchar's *I, an Actress* (1977), made in one of Kuchar's legendary film production classes at the San Francisco Art Institute (Wayne screened *The Collective* at SFAI a few months before the school closed in 2022). Like Kuchar, Wayne remains behind the camera, giving loose instructions to his trio of performers—poet Gia Gonzales, actor Kyle Dunn, and dancer/pianist Patrick Ljubi Gallagher. We watch the players laze on a couch, try on each others' clothes, and toy with one of those wire head-massaging tools. They often break into laughter, and the film is itself both funny and erudite. Most of the prompts Wayne provides are fragments of great literary and theatrical

works, ranging from Kenkō's *Essays on Idleness* (1330-1332) to Ingeborg Bachmann's radio play *The Good God of Manhattan* (1957), even a scene from the sci-fi hagsploitation movie *Trog* (Joan Crawford's last film appearance, from 1970). Yet there is no attempt at coherence, no implied causality. What most comes across are the actors' repeated and elaborated gestures, their chemistry and mutual trust, induced but never demanded by Wayne's communiques.

Now he's created another Kuchar-inspired project: *The Blood Drinkers* (2023), a homoerotic vampire thriller shot at the foot of Frank Gehry's IAC Building in Chelsea. In the recesses of the building's milky street-level windows, two undead strangers—Armando Grant and Alonso Díaz Rickards—cross paths, lock eyes, and guzzle down vials of red liquid. Eventually they kiss. While the plot is simple and without dialog, the atmosphere



of the b-horror genre is thick, insistent, redolent of potboilers and PornHub, and intensified by a haunting, ethereal score of sustained chords with meandering piano improvisations. "Desire in art is more real than desire in life," Wayne told me, alluding to the dense medial quality of the film. "The consummation of an erotic encounter in art has a much richer texture, often, than those same encounters in real life—the furniture, the décor, the phrases, the lighting, the music, the weather, the smells, the before and the after..." The whole *mise en scène* is one of seductive Jamesian indirection, a case of what Wayne calls "giving aura" to the experience of existing in a world with other people.

Spending time with any artist will offer insights into process and motivation, but Wayne is unusually eager to discuss his work. Just speaking with the man is a great intellectual rush: the buoyant wordplay, the duff of dropped hairpins, most of all the

rapturous adulation ("I feel a deep need to over-appreciate")—these have a way of enveloping you, taking you inside Wayne's supple, original mind. His films have this immersive quality as well. *Stigma Pudding*, with its layers of paint and digital appliqué, reveals the inner life of a complex visual artifact. You see its workings like the stitches of a glove turned inside-out, or an x-ray taped to a light box. *The Collective*, too, is a kind of open work.

But nothing compares with stepping into Wayne's studio. You're totally surrounded by brilliant canvases containing strange, amorphous figures—he calls them "dolmens" or "visitors." Everywhere are stacks of paper drawings, dimpled aluminum paint tubes, brushes and markers stuffed into Lavazza coffee cans. At the center is an electric piano and volume of Rameau opera transcriptions, emblazoned with Jean-Philippe's hanging jowls and dirty powdered wig.



The accoutrements of filmmaking are there, too. Wayne presents a white cabinet decorated with line drawings and floating color blocks—Cinecittà, he calls it—which began as a moveable set piece and is now more of an altar, piled with empty film canisters and rolls of Urbanski splicing tape (“I’m sure the readers of *Millennium Film Journal* are knowledgeable of Mr. Urbanski”). Another cherished object: a NeuTaper “guillotine” splicer, which Wayne holds tenderly as he muses on Victor Hugo, decapitated Carmelites, the red beanie I happen to be wearing—symbol of “revolutionary ardor.”

Also: the light! The studio’s huge wired windows are great for drawing and painting, certainly, but the filtered West Side luster is perfect for film. Scroll through the thumbnails on Wayne’s Vimeo page and you’ll catch glimpses of the space—in *Verlaine’s Feet* (2022) as dancer Jean Capeille suspends his legs above the linoleum floor (he wears a pair of patent-leather oxfords) or in *Miracle of the Rose* (2021), a sumptuous Super 8 portrait of the demonic and sexy Marc Ludwigsen (photographer by day) who stands beside the open window reading, then disrobes...

A knock at the door. Our own photographer, Guy, has arrived and it’s time to turn the camera on Wayne. He poses at the piano and in front of Cinecittà. He captures me in Super 8 while Guy takes pictures of us both using an old 35mm point-and-shoot, held together with duct tape (a family keepsake, Guy tells us). For a while we converse, digressing on Gertrude Stein and George Platt Lynes and Curt McDowell (“all the homos I esteem”), but eventually the mood shifts. Enough talk; Wayne and Guy need privacy. I retire to a white leather sofa and pretend to look through my notes. Glancing up, I witness a drama of light, clutter, outré fashion, and blossoming queer friendship. They’re making-unmaking, finding the right angles. “Tilt your head,” Guy tells him, “look at me.” On goes an LED stage lamp, fuchsia gel clipped to its face. The whole studio is suddenly radiant. Wayne stands beneath the pink halo and looks into the camera, efflorescent.

