# EXHAUSTED AUTUMN

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*Exhausted Autumn*

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A COLLECTION OF FICTION, CRITICISM AND TESTIMONY

WITH PLATES FROM PAINTINGS BY

TONY GREENE

*Published on the occassion of*

SWEET OLEANDER:
AN EXHIBITION OF WORKS
BY TONY GREENE

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LOS ANGELES CONTEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS

*This book is earnestly dedicated to*
*the many lasting memories of*
*Tony Greene*

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# Introduction

Having had the joy of living with Tony Greene, I now continue to live with the joyful memories I have of our lives together.

During the years that Tony lived with AIDS his hunger for living grew, his artwork blossomed and the love he had for his family and friends expanded to new levels of caring. The respect our relationship received during that time sustained us both and I cherish the support that is still offered me.

The honesty in his world and in our relationship allowed for both understanding and misunderstandings. Our relationship began and grew from the spiritual foundation of a 12-step recovery program and we each lived full, separate lives but still had space for a world shared together. (What a mix, realtor and artist). This private world shared with Tony allowed me to experience a tender and sensitive man who could agonize over how he might have treated someone or how he may have expressed his opinion. He had self-doubts and anxiety about his art but his work was both a passion and an obsession.

LIVING was the buzz-word for Tony Greene and Tony LIVED fully until his death. His last days were days of completing things, both relationships and paintings. Family and friends visited or gathered

in the garden at our home. They watched and reassured as he completed the last paintings for his solo show at *Feature* in New York. Tony felt complete and a legacy of beauty and honesty lives on after his death. It is paid tribute by all of us who knew him, loved him or see the beauty in his work.

The vast worlds that Tony lived and thought in are no longer foreign but are still a wonder to me. His world was so wide and had room for many concepts, ideas, attitudes and thoughts presented in all the forms of painting, photography, writings and chatter (especially on the phone). I am often confused by the theoretical concepts and big-word language of the art world, but my insight has expanded because of Tony. His passion for people's rights to be who they were, think what they thought and live how they wanted always ran high. Tony's wealth of expressions and his passion for the freedom to do so left me in awe.

This catalog of his peers strikes me in the same way, with awe. Possibly some readers may not fully understand all the metaphors or concepts here but, Tony Greene had room for all. This was a vital part of the man. Thus, they are all crucial; they all belong. They are appropriate.

# Editor's Preface

This book should stress continuance. Tony's death marks a flaw in today's culture, our lives, living and mortality. But his death also (without pleading heroics, without losing him and creating something emblematic) folds into our own isolated strengths, into our own attempts to seduce ignorance in and then, quite fervently, slap its ugly face.

The reader'll find in this book mostly writing, some affiliated with Tony's work, some directly about it. These by no means trace the paintings but run alongside them in the way a schizophrenic's many voices examine one singular but complex pain. Scattered throughout are reproductions of paintings which are through being made but continue to change long after we've locked Tony away and begun to re-place him.

It is a crime that someone like Tony, someone like anyone should die. It is a gift that I can resurrect him in my own dying and living. It is a gift to see in his paintings my own morbidity and love. It is a gift that I can miss someone so fucking dreadfully much.

I hope this book can attempt to live up to his living.

*(He knows I'd love to see him.)*

• 1 •

*Dying of Correctness*

# M

"Goodness," I muttered to myself, "never have I seen such splendor."

• • • • •

I had fainted and was not at all certain of where I was. I had a vague idea of what had led to my fainting, but thought it impossible. Surely my own imaginings, I thought. I stood and began to walk across a meadow, where I had awoken, parallel to an infinite bed of lilacs, emitting a glorious fragrance. I heard music, but could not tell where it emanated from. It was quite familiar, but a moment passed before I could place it, as I was still very drowsy. I realized in a moment that it was Nico's "Desertshore," which I'd heard countless times before, and absolutely adored. I thought it odd, however, that this music should begin to play precisely at the moment when I stood. I know very well the opening strains of "Janitor of Lunacy," and recognized how abruptly it had begun, as though intended to either underscore my confusion in a ridiculously dramatic manner or simply to serve to make my surroundings seem more grandiose.

*"Tolerate my jealousy*
*Recognize the desperate need..."*

As I continued walking, I tried to decipher what had happened before my fainting spell. My attention had been concentrated solely on M for several months. He was unquestionably the most supernaturally beautiful boy that I'd ever seen, and I'd already long since been having deliriously ornate visions of his canonization and placement upon a grand pedestal, as is characteristic of me in such situations. I had been fortunate enough to come across a photograph of M, though I shan't say how. I pulled the photograph from my pocket and stared at it for several minutes. "Almost compels a tear...," I found myself saying quite loudly, and was bewildered by an extraordinary echo. I immediately wished to play with this echo. "Offering a lilac wine...," I said, and waited for the response. I went on like this for a minute or so, and then began to sing very loudly

*Ta-lirra-lirra-lo-la-la.*
*La-lirra-lirra-lo-la-la!*
*Ta-lirra-lirra-lirra,*
*La-lirra-lirra-lirra,*
*Ta-lirra-lirra-lo-la-la!*

I had thought this a pleasant enough idea at first, but was virtually assaulted by the resulting cacophony. I put the photograph back into my pocket, and started to walk in another direction, murmuring unintelligibly along to "the Falconer."

*"And the lovely silver traces erase*
*My empty pages..."*

• • • • •

I next remembered having begun to speak to M, a remarkably difficult act in and of itself, but having grown dizzy and being forced to excuse myself. He had followed me as I was walking away, which I was more

than a bit startled by. Of course I couldn't have been happier really, but I never would have dared to imagine that M might do this.

What had happened next was unclear. The next scene in my mind was myself next to M in a bare room with lilacs all over the floor. M was nude, but of course I was not. Now I must say that "Le Petit Chevalier," a magnificent French interlude sung by Nico's beautiful son, Ari, seemed brilliantly grand in these surroundings, and so my mind wandered from attempting to piece together these incidents. What I found before me at this point was most baffling. It was a pond of sorts, but it clearly did not contain water. Its contents were still and almost white. I knew what it looked like; it unquestionably resembled semen, but I considered this an absurd idea. But it was semen, I determined, diluted with some wonderful substance to keep it in this form—perfectly smooth, with the manner of white honey. I regarded this as terribly majestic, but confusing as well, and it sent my head spinning. It occured to me that this might very well be M's semen, and I decided to bathe in it. I removed my clothes, and entered the pond.

It was quite a long time before I left this pond and put my clothes back on, and I was even dizzier by then. "Ah!," I exclaimed, "My soul's peace has fled forever," and I began to sing along to "You Forget to Answer."

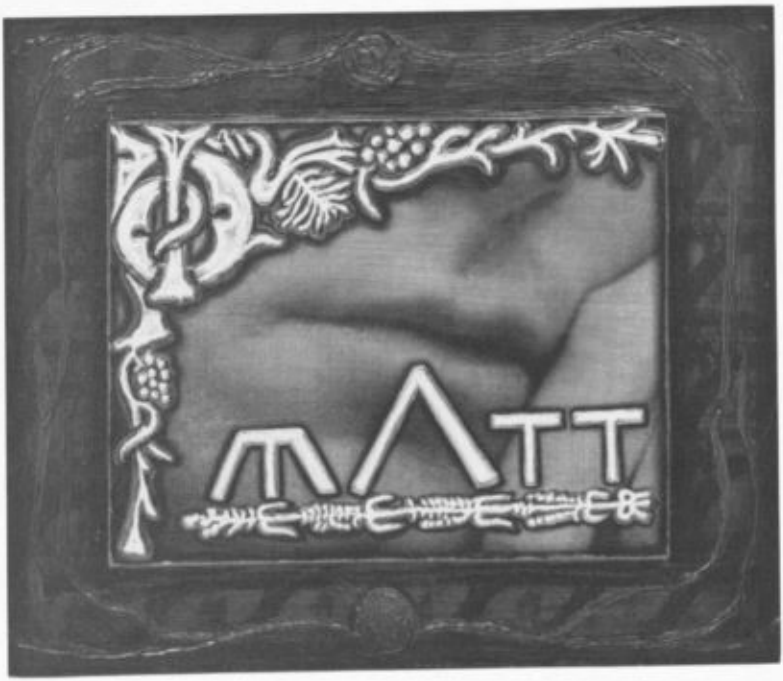
*"You seem not to be listening..."*

I continued walking, past still more lilacs, and my thoughts reverted back to myself next to M's rapturous nude figure. I remembered having seen a radiance from his buttocks, almost like a halo. I could by now not determine if this 'radiance' had simply been a hallucination, or had in fact actually emanated from M's splendorous thighs, a thought that hadn't occured to me at the time. What had happened next, however, was absolutely certain in my recollection. I had spread M's buttocks, and plunged head first.

. . . . .

This was where I was, I realized—up M's buttocks. I nearly fainted again, but quickly regained my balance, and resolved to walk indefinitely, wallowing in the smell of lilac, and singing gleefully "All That is My Own"...

*"Your winding winds did sow*
*All that is my own*
*Where land and water meet*
*Where on my soul I'll sit*
*Upon my bed*
*Your ways have led me to*
*believe."*




• 11 •

*Untitled (Matt)*

# A Death In The Neighborhood

Tony died at home. In the house behind and one over from ours. That was the way he and Norm wanted it. We knew Tony only to wave and say hello to. To chat with once in awhile. To attend an exhibition of his paintings. He was a sweet man, always smiling. We didn't know he had AIDS. We didn't even know he was sick. Maybe we were too busy, with our baby boy, and our work. Too busy to notice.

All of a sudden Tony was in the hospital. Then he was in the hospital again. Still, Norm said he was doing great, that he'd be out soon. In November, Tony would have his first New York show. He'd be there, said Norm, smiling, reassuring.

But just a few days later, Tony was home, with five days to live. Or die. He had paintings to finish. And friends to see. For five days they came, blocking our garage with their cars. His parents arrived from San Francisco. In a limousine. Maybe it made them feel better, just a little. They stayed a couple of days, then said goodbye. That's the way Tony wanted it.

The friends kept coming, kept blocking our garage. We offered to visit, of course, and to help. But we didn't know him well; it would have been awkward. Christopher, another neighbor, kept us informed.

Christopher has AIDS, too. He lives directly behind us and, unlike Tony, his illness is painfully obvious. Sometimes we see him pausing halfway up his drive, to gather strength before finishing the climb. Christopher's cough is now as much a part of the neighborhood cacophony as our dog's bark, the cackling of Sylvia's chickens, the Filipino kids and their skateboards, and the police helicopter.

Christopher is angry. Angry at AIDS. Angry at his—and Tony and so many others'—bad, bad luck. "Oh, Cal," he lamented to our one-year-old son the other night, "I hope someone tells you about condoms some day." A decade ago, Christopher would have been joking. But this was no joke. Having knelt down to Cal's stroller, Christopher needed help getting up.

At the memorial service, Tony's doctor spoke of the numbers: AIDS is now the #1 killer of American men under 40. Norm and a few of Tony's friends spoke of his love and anger and talent, and of the impact he has had on their lives. These were moving words.

But what really touched me was the sight of Tony's father—his balding head bowed, a brush of silver hair at the back. His hunched shoulders seemed to carry more than just loss. Perhaps he was uncomfortable with his son's homosexuality (just as I, frankly, would be). Perhaps he didn't know what to make of his relationship with Norm—or of his art, which features the male sex. But what did all that matter now, he must have been thinking. This had been his son—the boy he had held, kissed, nurtured a short 35 years ago.

I couldn't see that boy but I could see mine, smiling up at me, trusting, loving. I do not want that boy to die. For any reason, from any cause, but especially not from AIDS. No, I do not want to sit in some church some day, bowing my balding head, wondering how it all came to be. So suddenly.

It saddens me to realize that it took my own son—*my life*—to give real meaning to Tony's death, and that of so many others. But maybe the

next time I will not be too busy to notice—or to vote, or to donate my time and/or money.

Maybe more of us need to go to a memorial service such as Tony's. Of course, if things continue as they are, we won't have much choice. AIDS will find its way into all of our neighborhoods.

Care now. Or sit back, and listen for the cough.

# Garden

Sanctuary
*Shackle*
Enclosure
*Smother*
Protection
*Entwine*
Inclusion
*Choke*
Shelter
*Camouflage*
Haven
*Stifle*
Embrace

...FOR TONY

FROM THE FINAL SHOTS OF
*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*

# Untitled

His lips part as if to speak, to call, to embrace. He turns to the right, looking away from me, past me, into the distance. Bright white sheets surround him, covering him, hiding all but his lips from me. I cannot see beneath the sheets; no impression of his body remains. Yet I know so well where he is, and upon whom his attention rests. He is not ignoring me. I know he loves me. But within his love for me is a love for many others—past lovers, past desires—and all those who are still to come. I cannot be jealous of a love such as that. It is hard to think these things today. I am supposed to be hardened and callous. I should keep at a distance. For posture. For self-protection. They tell me that this is not the time. I think they are wrong.

> *There was a month of truce. A weary truce,*
> *a blessed calm after the storm.*
> *We resembled those water-logged dahlias which*
> *hang their heads after a heavy rain.*
> *H*** didn't look well. He was wan, drawn,*
> *and often remained at Versailles.*
>
> —*The White Paper*

March 22, 1991

• III •

*Untitled*

November 5, 1989

Dear Quincey,

Remember the dawn of our *liaison intime*? Of course you don't—an all-American like yourself would never know French beyond *Oui, Monsieur* or *escargot!* Let me begin again. It's been a century since you poured your heart out to me and I still haven't recovered. Have you? The occasion is lovingly recounted in Dr. Seward's diary:

> *Van Helsing was evidently torturing his mind about something, so I waited for an instant, and he spoke—*
>
> *"What are we to do now? Where are we to turn for help? We must have another transfusion of blood, and that soon, or that poor girl's life won't be worth an hour's purchase. You are exhausted already; I am exhausted too. What are we to do for someone who will open his veins for her?"*
>
> *"What's the matter with me, anyhow?"*
>
> *The voice came from the sofa across the room, and its tones brought relief and joy to my heart, for they were those of Quincey Morris. Van Helsing strode forward, and took his hand, looking him straight in the eyes as he said—*
>
> *"A brave man's blood is the best thing on this earth when*

*a woman is in trouble. You're a man and no mistake. Well, the devil may work against us for all he's worth, but God sends us men when we want them."*

Perched in front of my MacPlus my fingers itch for your "goshes" and "gee-whizzes." Quincey, we both know the pleasures plain English provides—to hell with that artsy mumbo jumbo you're always hearing in Berkeley. Let me dish you up some good old down home dangling participles the word "Illinois" pronounced with an "s" at the end a syntax just bursting with Tina Turner *I don't do nothin' nice and easy* did you really think you could get to know Dodie without having to deal with me? She can tolerate an incredible degree of ambivalence but I *Mina Harker Queen of the Dictaphone and Typewriter* always want to know whatever there is to know. In those innocuous 40's films you're so fond of some malcontent invariably wails "Try to get some sleep" or "Wait, I can explain everything!" I wouldn't be caught dead in one of them. Call me Mia—Sigourney—Catherine Deneuve—Fay Wray—I am the heroine of every horror movie—fearlessly I turn in the direction of your words/telekinetic activities and demand: WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?

He fails every test I throw his way yet, crazily, I keep coming back for more.

Beside me on the couch a young man called "Quincey" sat folded and morose *is this any way to show a girl a good time?* When the words HELP ME etched themselves across his forehead in reverse he simply sighed, "It's been a rough year." His soft brown eyes stared at the polished oak floor but I doubt he saw anything reflected there. A demon was scribbling inside his cranium! Was it Mary Lou the prom queen who was burned alive in *Prom Night, Part II*? The jewels in her tiara gave her the power to possess teenagers and computers, to seduce all the wrong men...with a single evil glare she crushed a row of lockers accordion-style. Last week I saw her

scratch the same backwards HELP ME on a blackboard. Mary Lou (hidden on the other side of the board) was really writing forwards, but we the viewers reversed her words like a mirror. I knew better than to examine this young man's forehead: when the naive ingenue leaned towards that blackboard caressing the H with a manicured forefinger Mary Lou's dead arms poked through the slate and jerked her inside—the board's chalky surface churned to a turbulent pool of black liquid as large block letters swirled around her screaming face. The young man sighed, "It's been a rough year." END OF TRANSMISSION. He sank down deeper into the cushions as if the year were a whirlpool drowning him in real time. Before this brooding man this vat of alphabet soup I had to grab onto something solid—my own elbows or the arm of the couch.

*God sends us men when we want them* his American throat so squeaky pink beneath his button down collar all that unripe ruby potential—I know the type *firm and lean on the palate though not as exuberant as some* a fresh berry character you'd gulp down rather than savor—as a connoisseur I'm interested in his potential *a spiciness that could develop complexity with a few years of cellaring.*

I'd grown used to your face. . .relentlessly pleasant and smiling a face devoid of dark corners. Without warning your eyes broke through—I said, "You make too much eye contact." You locked your arms and pouted, "Then I'll stare at the floor" and I was amazed how sexy you looked—all tiger like the long-legged women on MTV languishing in their negligees and anger. We were at a cocktail party the first time I saw those mild brown eyes come alive: after an evening of tolerable chit chat we wandered to opposite ends of the hall—as you idled by the stairs with your coat on I stood in line for the bathroom—your eyes like ferocious beasts snared me and no matter how much I feigned interest in the ceiling or the doorknob they wouldn't let go—I didn't know how to read this but I do know your eyes are the devil's playthings their pupils glowing violet, the room threatening to dissolve.

The bus is electric—that is—the ride is bumpy though relatively quiet . . .twin gleams of turquoise satin come into focus *am I seeing double?* a couple of Asian grade school girls sit in front of me disguised as unicorns . . .frenzies of lavender taffeta sprout from their compact equestrian bodies *mane and tail* from each hooded head pokes a single woven metallic horn . . .I'm afraid—but of nothing in particular (just the thought of anyone near enough to touch me) so I stare at these girls cute as salt and pepper shakers turquoise spats sliding around their four little feet. I keep waiting for my subconscious mind/artistic soul to come to some conclusion or witty summation to nudge these juveniles from decor to anecdote to myth. . .their costumes remind me of sleepers or snow suits. . .matching mittens. . *.nothing about them will open.* . .I pull the bell and exit at Octavia, a blast of chill air distracting my thoughts in the direction of a khaki green mailbox which has been uprooted and twisted around backwards—I can't look at it without thinking *automobile accident* or *Linda Blair's head.*

He doesn't even have the patience to read a novel—how's he going to deal with *me*, my line-up of selves as long and gilded as the Great Books of the Western World.

Holding the computer printout in your veiny fingers you wonder *how dare she write a letter like this to a man she barely knows*— at least that's what I want you to think, my epistolary urges simultaneously high tech and primitive as opposed to your black scratches hand drawn in perfectly even rows—virtually marginless—no sides for the Great White Whatever to creep in you keep to well-mannered topics, the nicknames of your relatives, an in-depth critique of Franz Wedekind (the claustrophobia of live personalities bungling lines from another world). *Shy yet persistent aromas of creamy lemon and apricot. . .faintly grassy flavors that betray the region of origin. . .a touch of light oak.* I can be elusive too. In my last letter I disguised the protagonist so well that when I confessed his true identity to Lucy, she sputtered, "Him? I never would have guessed it—I can't imagine *him* that sexual." Glancing around the bedroom, I replied,

"If it suits your writing, you can make a vacuum cleaner sexual." We were on the phone so she didn't realize I was seated on the floor beside my Hoover with the broken bag. Safety pins kept the dust from flying in my face.

Small of the Back, 1 pat = just passing by, 2 pats mean "Is anybody alive in there?" while 3 is a definite, "Hello, honey." What are you who do you want from me?

Did you know it was my thigh you were rubbing your leg against or did you think it was the table? I realize that touch is not an idea, but do you think this is a good one? A person can never tell what hocus-pocus an idle burnish will release. Look at Aladdin—take it from me—his survival was pure blind luck. Quincey, for all you know I Mina Harker who possess Dodie could in turn be possessed by Mary Lou who might be a marionette manipulated by Freddy Krueger. . .WHO. . .That isn't blood on the front of my nightgown it's juice from the pomegranate I was eating during *Nightmare on Elm Street, Part 3*. All the special effects made me kind of messy the mute boy his arms and legs bound to the bedstead with tongues, the mattress dissolved to a rectangular pit over the fires of Hell—those tongues writhing around his wrists and ankles like fat snakes *even in his dreams the poor thing couldn't scream out his despair* my breast bloomed crimson in sympathy, like your breast, Quincey, bloomed for me on page 408. If you had to save my soul all over again would you still impale yourself on the blade of a wild Gypsy? Dying on the manly shoulder of my betrothed you gazed up at me with your pragmatic brown eyes and feebly exclaimed, "See! the snow is not more stainless than her forehead! The curse has passed away!" I hate to break this to you, but with my libidinal atmospherics as of late, Love, I fear you may have perished in vain.

Try to get some sleep. I can explain everything.

*Love,*
*Mina*

# Duet of the Buttholes

EXCERPT *from the* FILMSCRIPT
"ZERO PATIENCE"

*for* TONY GREENE, WITH MUCH LOVE,
BECAUSE HE KNEW THAT
ASSHOLES COULD SING

The Setting: Sir Richard Burton, the 19th century African explorer and sexologist, and Hercule Marple, a Haitian, heroin-using, homosexual hemophiliac detective, are in the passenger cabin of Jane Bond's jet. Jane is a super dyke secret agent. They're flying to Lake Kinshasa to find the African Green Monkey, who they think knows something about the death of Gaetan Dugas, the Air Canada flight steward accused of bringing AIDS to North America.

Burton enters the passenger cabin in a dressing gown, towelling down his damp hair. Marple is already asleep, lying facedown on the bed with the sheets at his ankles. Burton considers waking Marple, and then decides against it. Slipping out of his bathrobe, he lies down beside Marple and soon falls asleep.

*Overhead shot. They lie side-by-side, facedown, their respective buttocks center screen. Silence for a moment. Then, a whisper of music is heard. The buttholes of Burton and Marple begin their duet, lipsynching (as it were) to the following song.*

BURTON'S BUTTHOLE

Are you awake?

MARPLE'S BUTTHOLE

I never sleep.

BURTON

Want to talk?

MARPLE

What's your beef?

BURTON

I'm new at this game
I'd love to chat
One asshole to another
About this and that

MARPLE

You assume I'm an expert
That I've been around the block
Don't wanna disappoint you but
I'm not crazy 'bout cock

BURTON

You don't like getting fucked?
Haven't heard that before
One asshole to another
It's the thing I adore

MARPLE

In theory it's no problem
In practice it's a pain
My psychologist says
It's a common gay refrain

You see the symbolic order
Doesn't recognize the hole
The phallus is the ruler
It's the one that's in control

BURTON

That makes me juvenile
I'm a polymorphous mess
Oedipus is weeping
When my butt I do caress

I lie down and think of England
All the power that must pass
It's a triumph for the Empire
When I take it up the ass

MARPLE

Your colonial fantasies bore me
Don't delude yourself with lies
I am not your heart of darkness
I am not some African prize

You can lie there all you want to
I won't be your horny slave
Getting fucked ain't so symbolic
Your rectum ain't a grave

BURTON

But Freud says we have a deathwish
Getting fucked is getting killed
Is this goddamn epidemic
Something our subconscious willed?

MARPLE

An asshole's just an asshole
Avoid the analytic crit
The meanings are straightforward
Cocks go in and out comes shit

BURTON

If the asshole ain't so special
Then the phallus can't be either
Perhaps patriarchy would crumble
If we started getting wiser

MARPLE

I agree, and now let's sleep

BURTON

Pucker up for just one kiss

MARPLE

You never give up, do you?

BURTON

Not when you're
lying here like this

MARPLE

You're an asshole, such an asshole
It's great you like being fucked
Sorry I can't oblige you
But you're not my type—tough luck

BURTON

Well, pretend I'm someone else then
Please take pity on my plight

MARPLE

Go out and get a dildo
On that note I'll say goodnight!

*Overhead long shot, which shows the two of them, still face down, fast asleep.*

• IV •

*Artificial Night*

# Pressuring The Surface of Reality

Some of the most powerful work being done today around sexuality and the body seems to question the possibility of critical distance and rational critique, choosing instead to inhabit a messy, ambiguous space where pathology meets pleasure, where what we most fear is what we most desire. For Tony Greene, investigating this messy space of culture and desire often revolved around the use of physique photos and other artifacts of a historically gay male aesthetic repertoire. His paintings offer a confluence of the tacky and the tragic, the painterly and the photographic, welded together into an aesthetic amalgam that I would like to discuss as melodrama. While Greene's work is doubtlessly informed by critical postmodernism, adopting its implicit theatricality and politicized concern with representation, his drippy canvases invite a more participatory stance, setting up a tension between emotional identification and critical interrogation.

Tony Greene's paintings tend to look like religious objects, small, precious *retablos* paying tribute to a world now past, a future delayed, a history we are forever reaching for but cannot grasp or hold onto. Occupying an indeterminate space between prophesy and reminiscence, the impossible worlds envisioned in the canvases simultaneously invoke longing and loss. They are works about emotion, about the heightening

of sentiment and sensation. They are paintings which are, in fact, unabashedly melodramatic.

In its late nineteenth-century incarnation, the melodramatic mode tends to invoke a certain relationship with the past, with the hyperbolized representation of values which are no longer stable or obvious, values and beliefs whose very fragility, paradoxically, is figured through intense *over*statement. It is often a mode of nostalgia; at its most reactionary, the nostalgia for a calmer, simpler world which never existed. Terminal illness, particularly in the young and vital, is an almost inherently melodramatic trope, figured around the conflict between the appearance of "health" and the reality of "sickness." Personally, culturally, and politically situated in the age of AIDS, Greene's work often seems engaged in a constant reading of the body for signs, symptoms, and surfaces that will reveal its inner state. Layered and opaque, the canvases work by the rules of a melodramatic logic, generating an endless series of correspondences and allusions, metaphors and associations, which nonetheless refuse to yield any sure knowledge.

Refusing—perhaps even suspicious of—the clarity and authority of more avowedly-critical art, Greene's work explores an ambiguous position for gay representation, one committed to investigating the entrapment, inhabiting the distortions, engaging and perhaps even identifying with the sense of pathology. It is work about complicity, and for good reasons it may make some viewers uncomfortable. Threatening our own position as viewers, our forever-thwarted desires to escape the entrapments of our culture, Greene's work reflects a stance I see in contemporary art that tends towards a re-engagement with sentiment and artifice. Reflecting a deeply-immersed fascination with popular genres, styles, and devices, this kind of funky, messy, risky work often involves the entry of comic books, soap opera, photo-novella, and pornography into high art practice. Yet I want to make a distinction, one which seems key to me, between works which use pop as material, as the surface for yet another critical

reading—a strategy which seems all about reassuring the viewer in his/her own superiority and distance—and works which appropriate pop on a much more structural level, and engage with the mechanisms of desire and entrapment. Such a strategy is not about the critique of "misrepresentation"—from the presumed plain of greater enlightenment—but about a cautious entry into the discourses of decadence and pathology as fields of fantasy and pleasure or as sites of exploration.

I hesitate to call such work "postmodernist," because it seems to invite a different kind of relationship to critical theory, a less parasitic one, than what often goes by that term. Yet neither does it represent a disavowal of postmodernism (as in works of David Wojnarowicz, Kiki Smith, et al) but something more like, in Richard Hawkins' term, a "conscious forgetting," informed by the criticality of the 1980s and yet moving beyond it. While this essay, looking at some of Tony Greene's paintings, is necessarily focused on questions of a gay male imaginary, this contemporary engagement with popular mythologies is hardly limited to the work of gay men. While the genre of melodrama—especially excessive, artificial, denaturalized melodrama—has been increasingly turned to by younger gay artists who have come to question the mandates of "realistic representation" and "positive images" and their links with the liberal identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s, such a strategy equally brings to mind work by women artists like Lutz Bacher or Abigail Child, who use pornographic, pulp-sociological, or *film noir* materials to push feminist analyses to, and beyond, their limits of explanation.

Displaying a fascination with pathology and entrapment, Tony Greene's work charts the particular convergence of fear and desire that is still emblematic of lesbian and gay sexual formation. Greene's small, beautiful, almost over-wrought canvases are layered with gesture and visual excess. From the awkward sequencing of earlier paintings like *Untitled* (1988) to the dense superimpositions of the later work, Greene's paintings often returned to and reworked a fixed set of elements: closely-cropped torsos,

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strict compositions, threatening vegetation, stagey interiors. In their use of exaggeration and emotionalism, these paintings stage a series of heightened and hyperbolic dramas. What are we to make of this decidedly melodramatic mode, this allusion to a drama whose stakes are those of life and death? How do Greene's paintings invoke a history of melodrama and pathology to figure gay male subjectivity in the age of AIDS?

I want to invoke melodrama here, as, in Peter Brooks' terms, "a mode of conception and expression, as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience, as a semantic field of force." Situated between genres of comedy and tragedy, an underpinning of the melodramatic genre is the failure to differentiate between high and low, between the significant and the insignificant. For it is precisely this concern with *how things signify*, with how to make sense of a world of appearances whose link to any transcendent sphere are tenuous at best, that motivates the melodramatic investigation. Melodrama emerges in a late nineteenth-century world where the relation between surface and structure, appearance and "reality," threaten to break down. With class structures in upheaval and social meanings up-for-grabs, the social world of decorum and protocol no longer offers easy reading. The surface of events—a gesture, a glance, an inappropriate remark —take on extraordinary significance, yet it is a significance that is, at the same time, groundless. And yet the more these relations of signification are threatened, the more they must be shorn-up, with melodrama as a genre ceaselessly, repetitively, and compulsively pressuring the surface of reality for meanings which it endlessly fails to yield.

With their careful superimpositions, cinematic reframings, and heavily evoked pathos, Greene's canvases suggest how some of the techniques and emotional resonances of classic Hollywood melodrama could be adapted to a visual art form. Working at an intersection of genres and disciplines, Greene draws on histories of film, photography, and magazine imagery; his intense engagement with melodramatic tropes links up with an immersion in popular cultural histories and materials. All are united under an

idiosyncratic project of gay representation. Selectively welding bits and pieces of a subcultural past, Greene's paintings construct a history from the most disparate of fragments: the acute stylization of the late nineteenth-century "aesthetes," the half-parodic, half-nostalgic tone of Kenneth Anger's films, the visual excess and anarchic energy of the New York Dolls. Some influences are present as material, others as invisible inspiration, contributing the emotional intensity behind a gesture or a subtext.

The paintings from 1988-1989 exhibited in Greene's installation *Sweet Oleander* (1989, at Southern Exposure gallery in San Francisco) re-create a melodramatic relation to the past, probing this sense of nostalgia in all its artifice and manufactured sentimentality. Situated in a small room painted a deep red, a faux men's club ambience of precious objects, the paintings featured a series of still-life tableaux taken from gay male physique porn and natural history museum dioramas. Covered over with translucent red or green lacquer, the images are further obscured through the painting/modeling of decorative floral and botanical motifs, which evoke ornamental wrought-iron grills. Small re-worked and carefully-framed canvases, the pieces visually suggest an odd cross between Romantic paintings and stained glass panels. Conjuring up a nineteenth-century world of lush floridity, dread and pathos, Greene's paintings frame desire as a fused longing for and fear of the unapproachable other—be it the idealized male torso or captured and preserved nature.

Yet it is more than this choice of materials, this location in the florid Victoriana of death and decay, that marks Greene's work as gay. Beyond his refigured use of images—this excavation and re-investment of a gay male visual imaginary—lies a refigured use of historically "gay" modes of representation: irony, artifice, the melodramatic and something we might call "camp." Greene pushes these to their limits, deforms them, turns them inside out. Like a number of younger gay artists associated with Cal Arts, his work evinces a distinctly *theatrical* substratum referenced and reworked at the level of visual representation. Centrally concerned

with theatrical devices of artifice and concealment, Greene's densely-designed canvases evoke the processes by which the representation becomes the substitute for lived experience. They suggest a world of overdetermined and constrained positions and relations, a world of stultifying fixity and stillness. Working with superimposition, Greene explores the layers of the Western male psyche, suggesting the suppression of desire and the complex auto-fascism needed to maintain a position of separation and superiority, and indicting those practices by which the world is offered up as objects—of knowledge, of fascination, of pleasure and of control.

The use of 1950s and 1960s physique porn in several of the canvases —which Greene also used in his mural *Chains of Bitter Illusion* (1988, with Richard Hawkins)—perhaps exemplifies the double-edged ambiguity of such representations. In Greene's work, these heavily muscled male torsos function as an innately contradictory discourse. They evoke, on one hand, extreme isolation and repression—the individual homosexual man alone in his room masturbating to idealized and unavailable figures. Yet they also point to the possibilities for a shared subculture and the circulation of physique porn as a heavily-coded gay self-representation, one which evaded postal/governmental controls by masking itself through the icon of the macho, presumably straight, man.

Greene's work taps into the fascination and pleasure of this secret society, this subcultural reading of masculine icons. Yet by situating these images alongside the diorama photos of the other canvases, he also suggests the constraining and embalming qualities of such highly-coded and protective strategies. Through layers of artifice, exaggeration and concealment, the tableaux evoke processes by which coded practices, generated to avoid detection, become prisons. Taking the natural subject out of landscape painting and the human figure out of portraiture, Greene presents them as highly-ironic still life paintings, decorative and deadly *tableaux mortes*. Evoking some of the uses of melodramatic framing by

Fassbinder or Sirk to suggest the moral and mental entrapment of their characters, Greene's tableaux emphasize man's alienation from nature and from sexuality, and mock the consequent aestheticization of those realms.

Somewhat perversely, Greene's paintings conduct their interrogation through veiling. Reversing a "conventional" relationship between representation and ornamentation, the image is covered-over, layered-over, constrained to the point of threat. In *Grain of His Skin* (1988), for instance, the closely-cropped torso seems to bleed from the "wounds" inflicted by its overlaid floral motifs, a figurative crown of thorns which drapes the image. In *His Ithaca* (1988), the ornate grill work threatens to block out the human figure altogether, as "decorative" ornamentation becomes a substitute for the "naturalist" image, itself a faded marker for some endlessly-deferred realm of "real" experience. Likewise, in *Opinion of Silence* (1988), the elaborately-evoked "nature" of the wrought-iron grill, the superimposed artifice, threatens to obscure the landscape behind it. The line between living things and dead things crumbles, as the grill nearly comes to life in a creeping mass of vines, shutting out the preserved and embalmed nature scene. And yet neither is presented as "natural"—the layered superimpositions evoke not the "depth" of some inaccessible truth or origin, some grounding metaphysic, but an endless series of surfaces.

Covered and dripping, sticky and heavy with the weight of ornamentation, the canvases very literally *pressure* the surface of reality for meanings which they endlessly fail to yield. In their use of cropped images from physique porn, Greene's paintings offer a strategy of appropriation and partial reterritorialization of pleasurable and problematic materials — a strategy based on reconstructing and refiguring these historical images, rather than striving to produce an "affirmative image" of gay sexuality. Working with these fragmented and troubled documents, images not "free" but completely embedded in histories of oppression and resistance, Greene's work implicitly questions the production of sexual identities that are stable, natural and good—as well as questioning the privileged position of any

"critique" which seeks to authorize its own status as rational analysis, somehow outside such histories of distortion, desire, and entrapment.

Produced in an age of AIDS in which the intersections of "sexuality" and "nature" have become deadly *and* highly-politicized, Greene's work situates itself alongside work by a number of gay male artists (Doug Ischar, Nayland Blake, Richard Hawkins) whose works indirectly probe the impact of the epidemic on a generation of gay men. Greene's paintings in *Sweet Oleander* evoke abjection and dread; they are about loss. Yet they mark an indirect path to their inherently melodramatic subject, exploring not the events themselves (or their political reality), but the feelings these evoke. The atmosphere of death and doom which weighs, invisibly, on the world, creates their melodramatic effect, their sense of seriousness and despair.

• V •

*Opinion of Silence*

# Dear Tony,

We've been talking our way through the sweet and the bittersweet for the last five years; not chatting, but *really talking*, in such a profound way that now the past tense and third person just won't do at all. I depend on your lucid observations and your wicked sense of humor, on your generosity and radiant presence—so I continue to have this conversation with you. You've been hearing it all, from descriptions of that bizarre antique store in the desert to the foibles of art and life in the late twentieth-century. You say, "You're kidding, room after room of incredible tableaux, none of it for sale? That's *so* great, but Mildred, could we just dispense with the theoretical discourse, please?!" I say, of course we can. What really sustains us are those well-timed, heart-felt phone messages, the hand-made valentines, the surprise gift of some slightly perverse collectible book which so precisely informs a new work, an occasional lengthy complaint session (all true, of course!), a shared, serious magazine habit and, most of all, the day to day exchange of ideas about making our work.

In fact, we began in 1985 by talking about art. I remember distinctly my first glimpse of your work, during a graduate admissions screening. Sitting in the darkened room feeling, I confess, a little glazed-over from reviewing so many portfolios, I found myself suddenly looking with

considerable interest and feeling quite moved by what I saw. The constructions were beautiful and haunting, and in your very articulate statement, you spoke of an aesthetic project informed by the cultural production and lives of gay men. During the next two years, you revised the work materially, allowing it to become more sensual and more wittily stylized. At the same time, the issues in the work became more accessible. I remember that during your graduation review, we said that "Memorializing well is the best revenge," in reference to your device of overlaying the idealized male torso with various decorative motifs, coupled with a floor piece of tiles inscribed with obituaries. But again, you've observed that I'm seriously in danger of overwrought language, as usual, Tony, keeping me honest with your own impeccable truthfulness. Well, the truth is, you were an extraordinary student and are even more exceptional as a friend. Right now I sense that you are experiencing a blush of infinite proportions.

In the three years since graduating in 1987, you have achieved what most of us would consider strenuous work over the span of a decade: solo shows in Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York, numerous group shows nationally, and two important curatorial projects. Through it all you remain a phenomenal support for so many other artists. Every day I discover just how vast your field of influence really is. I have learned much in watching the progress of your work. In countless ways, I feel the impact of your thought on my own practice. Most significantly of all, you have insisted on the rigorous development of your work. You have bent that light through a prism and the effect is breathtaking. Who would have guessed that you would become a colorist, given to outrageous opulence and irreverent montage? In the new work, the melancholy is tempered by a stylistic humor; an eroticism of the abject and the sublime circulates in a dazzling way. Everything that you've been about is there, densely layered, painterly and exquisitely composed. Your stubborn desire to dispense with language was realized, so you ask, "How about chilling

a little with this verbosity?" Okay, I say, you know you really love it, Tony. But what I meant to say is that your paintings are right up there with my favorite 14th century Italian frescoes—how's that for the ultimate tribute?!

Just one more thing before I go—you said not to be surprised if once in a while I notice inexplicable things happening to me, because you have plans to take care of your friends at crucial moments. I said, Tony, you've been doing that all along. There's no reason for us to think that your "divine" intervention will stop now.

# Fucky

I'm in a bathroom. It's tiled and well lit. Glossy tile dirty around the edges. Drippy stains. Some crud on the floor. It smells of disinfectant and whatever the disinfectant tries to hide. There's a window. Three men are standing in front of urinals. Each white porcelain lozenge has a dark hole at the bottom pricked with soaked curly black and reddish-brown hairs. Someone's in a stall. Toilet paper gets wadded up. No one talks. Keys jangle. Someone clears their throat, someone else shuffles, another sniffs; I exhale. Everyone is looking down or straight ahead meditating on the notes on the wall. I wait. Occasionally someone glances right or left. A shirt says Matt. A tattoo pictures W-e-s in a heart with thorns dripping blood around it. Outside the window there are bushes and then a tree. The leaves block the sun and make shadows on the inside walls. The shadows are faces. The guys' faces have mouths. Their mouths are generally shut. One guy pushes out his lips and shows teeth. Another's big front teeth bite his bottom lip. A pink tongue licks darker dry lips wet. Cues. I read clues. I see a nose.

The white frames sink into walls. Inside the frames glow like tv: man, nature, birth, death, infinity. Dream time. Like ivy one think is covered by another. Blossoms harden into skeletons. A thing is a letter; letters form a word. Everything glows. Everything changes. The face is a mask; a smirk

smiles. Sleeper anticipates, waits, and makes. Pour. The puddle is a state. Shoot. There's a hole in the state. A mouth is at the hole. The state of a hole is a mouth. The state of a hole is a puddle. A puddle is a mouth hole. The state of mouth hole puddle is drugged. The white runs into the hole; the white runs out of the hole. The white is a frame. The frame is a hole. The hole is rectangular and the hole is round. The hole is a hole. A hole is the frame. I speak through a hole frame. I see through a hole frame. I eat through a hole frame. I shit through a hole frame. I frame a love hole. I live in a framed hole. I frame a hole and I fill it.

You are separate from me. I am a secret. We are not the same. If you know what I am, if you understand that, you are not separate from me; we are the same. I will fuck with you.

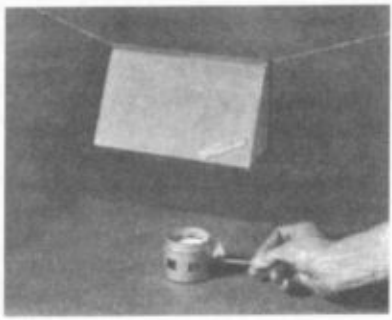
## Jim At Station

Jim is taken ill in small town. Doctors can't diagnose. Taken to big town. Going blind, doctor helpless. Jim knows this. Brave, but often breaks down. Finally blind. People in town decide to take tax money and send Jim to great specialist in New Y/rk.

Jim at station. Prays and hopes for best. Conductor on train takes care of him. Young fellow from home town takes him to doctor. Examination. A costly operation. Townspeople offer to send money. Jim pleads he's not worth it. Successful operation. Jim surprises home folks with surprise visit. What celebrations when they recognized him.

*Adolescent Fantasy*
Percival M. Symonds, 1949

1. MAKING A MELTING POT



2. DISINFECTING A BOOK

# Container

FOR TONY GREENE

The summer I graduated from high school my grandparents paid for a short trip to Amsterdam. I'd read about the cafes where, in place of food, waiters held out trays piled with drugs. Police stayed "cool." Hustlers lined the canals, ubiquitous as street lamps. A worldly friend mentioned some "Houses with Boys," businesses stocked with lascivious teenagers. Cover the cost of their next meal or fix, and they'd escort you into a private room, strip, lie face down on a bed, glance back over their shoulders, and mutter something like, "Do what you want." I still remember the look on his face when he said that.

I found a hotel near the Red Light District. It was clean but cramped. At dusk I peeled an orange and headed into the catsupy stain on my city map. I found myself on a narrow street lined with four-storey townhouses, each charred with several centuries' dirt. Their windows had been enlarged at some point in the past. Instead of the usual living quarters, each framed a bright pink compartment, too petite to be someone's bedroom but larger than, say, a Joseph Cornell box. But where you'd expect a collage, there stood a woman or girl wearing tons of makeup, scantily clad, a seen-it-all look on her face.

I watched a man fix his eyes on one cubicle two storeys up. Its tenant shook herself out of a daydream, stepped behind the pink backdrop. He

pushed a button next to the street level door, was buzzed in. Every few minutes another old guy would follow suit, entering one of the countless doors that lined the street, glancing nervously over his shoulder. I tried the next block. It was identical—rows of display cases with the occasional pink blank. I tried to imagine the scenery behind those vacancies. I saw a woman's closed face, a man's face wrenched open, a puny hard-on, a gigantic vagina.

I found a block packed with porn bookstores, entered one, and started thumbing through magazines. Everything seemed to be legal. Stuff that would've looked slightly ridiculous in the States, like horses fucking men, was just the tip of the iceberg. There was a whole shelf devoted to family orgies, their bodies all different sizes, their faces slight variations on one look. In other rows men plunged fake knives into fake lovers' stomachs at orgasm, young girls licked old women's wobbly asscracks, infants with mousehole-like eyes played contentedly in the spray of a moaning man's piss.

After about a half-hour of browsing the man at the counter yelled, "Make your choice." On a lower shelf I hadn't scanned yet, I saw an issue of *Lad* with a skinny brunette on the cover. He had a few pimples in the predictable nooks, and a blank, washed-out face into which you could read any mood that you needed. "This store is not a museum," the clerk growled as he taped shut the paper bag. I grabbed my purchase, took a deep breath, and asked for directions to "Houses with Boys." His response was a look so contemptuous I couldn't see anything else for an hour.

Back at the hotel I flopped on the bed. I lit my hash pipe and untaped the bag. There was that kid again—pale face, mouth open, head tilted back like a singer attempting to hit an extremely high note. I added up his quaint genitals, plaintive eyes, AC/DC t-shirt, and made a guess he was thirteen, fourteen. He stripped and posed awkwardly for the first several pages, sat down on an unmade bed, grinned at the camera, glanced up, grinned at a fat, balding man who was sitting down next to him.

The man gripped the boy's head, lowered it to his thighs, as if preparing to hike it. Greasy hairs spewed out between his white knuckles. He licked the

boy's nipples like pieces of candy. He held the boy down, fucked his spitty mouth. A wrinkled hand flipped a delicate penis from side to side. The photographs left nothing out from the soles of the boy's calloused feet to the hairs fine as spiderwebs trickling down his nape. But when the man finally got to the asshole, he turned up a kind of gargoyle where he'd surely sought something more rosebud-esque.

It was black from the number and size of the things men had shoved in. An inch of the interior stuck out, forming thick wilted lips, droopy and slick like a panting dog's. The man skinned it back so one could see the extent of the damage. Huge as it grew, I was surprised when I turned the page. The man's fist had squeezed inside. Maybe the boy had passed out, because his face had a peacefulness I still don't believe in. Or he was dead, but I couldn't consider that. Anyway, he didn't change his expression for the rest of the sequence.

I can't remember the details of how I felt. Not completely turned on, though I know I jerked off. Being inexperienced, I naturally responded to the chance to explore someone pretty, and, once the model's amazing resemblance to Phillip sank in, I must have felt overwhelmed by the thought that my friend could have wound up like *Lad*, a mere example of youth at the crux of some stranger's lust. I closed my eyes and imagined my hand inside a teenager's body. I felt out of this world, on top of *Lad*'s, and Phillip looked like he should look—gone, buried, forgotten, out.

I misplaced that magazine years ago, or someone stole it. When I discovered its absence, I felt like somebody had dug Phillip's body up. He was loose again. He possessed lovers, his smirk on their faces the way a lost child's seems to be on the muzzle of the "tame" tiger he was last spotted petting. Phillip hovers just inside my daydreams, unseen but omnipresent. And once in a while I try to kill him off. I shove the knot of my feelings as deep as they'll go into as compact and smoothed-out a prose style as I can build out of what I know. But they don't belong here, any more than a man's fist belongs in a boy's ass.

• VI •

*...ob...*

# Creature of the Black Lagoon

or EXTINCT SPECIES
or THE CRY OF THE WILD

Dripping from upstairs and seeping in from below, the ooze of Tony Greene's canvases muffles the roar of its own extinction. Ornaments become blistering sores, torsos become plants, and fragments become alphabets. Situated in this transformative grammar, Tony Greene's work finds its place (and its displacement) in distinction to the 'critical' work on the AIDS epidemic, as characterized by Gran Fury or General Idea. While Greene's work is not exactly metaphysical, it plays on gnostic mysticism in its rejection of 'rational' aesthetic critique. Referring, even degenerating, to pre-modernist roots, this work challenges critical postmodernism in its capacity to figure illness, sexuality and death. This is work on AIDS that is neither oppositional nor critical. If anything it is integral, inhabiting the mythology of the disease, the echoing corridors and 'interior design' of desire and abjection.

Most of Greene's later work is smothered in swampy imagery, ornamentation, seaweed, decay, encrustation and accretion; the raised center square of "His Groping Hands" (1988), like much in this period, is a decaying medieval 'fortress' that was Greene's square island surrounded by a 'moat.' "Dying of Correctness" (1988) and "Exhausted Autumn" (1988) disclose a fascination with natural history dioramas, specimen animals, and taxonomy, which later become connected to the anatomizing of homosexual

desire. In the Orientalism of ninteenth-century science (its desire for transplanting, displaying the exotic other—plant or animal) Greene found an analogue for his divination of sexual desire. The male torso itself is never nakedly displayed, but always fragmented and submerged under gilded layers of varnish. Greene's cynicism in this regard is further demonstrated in that the torso is most often a xerox or photo pasted onto the canvas, not an oil or a sketch; the photo is both re-romanticized or demystified. This appropriation is usually concealed by covering the edges and by varnishing or further ornamenting the surface, strategies that contrast the torso with the ornament and displace the hierarchy of the body's surface against its higher, 'transcendent' meaning. In sinking the torso into the vaguely vegetal surface, this work takes back the night; the body's seams dissolve within its soggy ground.

Perhaps the key transition in Greene's career occurs in 1987, when his work shifts from a modernist preoccupation with the male figure overlaid by a sort of 'purified' geometric shape; it involves a turn towards anti-modernism, an interest in gnosticism, melodrama, archaicism, and pseudo-science. Once he surpassed the flatness or figure/foreground relationship in the untitled works of 1987, there was no turning back. The concerns of the classic torso (the embodiment of truth, meaning, proportion) and those of modernist geometry, the juxtapositions of the cube and triangle (purity of form, of structure) were both relegated to the domain of ornamentalism, buried as it were under layers of glaze. The traditional relations of form to content and of figure to background were abandoned in pursuit of a new formulation in which the body is neither essential truth nor empty vessel, be it sacred or profane. Around this time, Greene's simmering interest in ornament itself came to a head (as well as the important entry of language and text into the work), but the function of ornament here is no longer constitutive of a supplement to the image, but also a substitute. That these deferrals of the body and this kind of play with ornament emerges after Greene's AIDS diagnosis is hardly coincidental.

Greene's turn from modernist and postmodernist aesthetics also has a parallel trajectory in his relations to homosexual identity, in particular to the conditions of the gay generation after Stonewall. Parallel to the desire for ornament and for painting, for the most painterly (the heavy impasto and varnish on Greene's works will take years to dry fully), this work re-reads both nineteenth-century and pre-Stonewall homosexuality; while the onus of gay sensibility was to represent gay people in realistic, positive terms, Greene's interests turned more toward rereading the pathologizing of homosexuality in the documentation of 'scientists' like Max Nordau, Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis and Charcot. This overlapped with a fascination for French Symbolism and aestheticism, the cultural decadence with which this pathologization was linked, for the writing of Huysmans, Baudelaire and Proust, rejecting all the precepts of naturalism in depicting desire and ennui. It is no understatement to say that this retrogression and indeed recidivism put Greene at odds with the orthodoxy of post-Stonewall gay representations, ranging from David Leavitt's yuppies to 70's disco queens, whose practices were squarely invested in pulling the homosexual body *out* of the swamp.

In works such as "His Desire," "The Grain of His Skin" and "His Ithaca" (all 1988), one is offered an archeology of *Physique* magazines, the locus classicus of veiled homosexual desire in the 1950's, blurring the line between documentation and aestheticism. Greene utilizes these images in a trope of spurious transcendence in the Grecian torso, creating a world of men; this play of false transcendence against the real thing is a particularly poignant motif—a passion play—in light of Tony's diagnosis. In glorifying the male form, British mid-century passions for Greek statuary and Renaissance sculpture had reacted partly against the growing entrenchment of Victorian urbanization and morality, particularly as it engendered the pathologized homosexual. The visit to Italy was classically the voyage for the discovery of one's homoerotic desire (from which characters such as Forster's Maurice emerge reborn afresh); Greene's own trips to Italy and

Greece in the years before his death may be read in this light. Having read the Symbolists and William Morris, Pater and Ruskin, the Aesthetes responded to their social crises with an aestheticization of form, repudiating any utilitarian function in the work of art. This configuration emerges in Greene's work in the *ornamentalized* juxtaposition of *aestheticized* physique with pathologized body, whose treatment indicates a rejection, like the Aesthetes', of any cry for (social) realism. To the celebration of the ornament, of useless form, Greene's work annexes a more continental preoccupation with decay.

Much as in Whitman's poetry, the use of coded sexual language in *Physique Pictorials* was necessary because the explicit was impossible or even undesirable. Trading on this symbolic capital was vital for Greene, who could find an explicit language neither for his sense of desire nor for his sense of mortality. Thus his absorption with the almost medieval encodedness of symbolist art, with gnosticism and archaic scientism, represents a choice of the indirect route over the direct one, rejecting the hierarchizing mandate (the moral positioning of positive over negative imagery) of realistic or "socially engaged" art. Within a particular contemporary gay audience this causes a certain amount of discomfort, with implications that such work was not correct, not "positive" (certainly not spiritual in any New Age way) and seemed to be flirting with the closet. Regarded as the *sine qua non* of gay work by the first generation of gay liberationists, coming out, as a strategy or ritual, is alien to Greene's work, which is always both outside and inside the closet of sexual identity (muscle hunks), representation (the glass display case, the diorama), and mortality (the pathological body). To their onus on positioning and identity, Greene responded with an interest in posturing. The resiliency of self-pity and abjection, a kind of return of the repressed, is what leads Greene's indirect route through the decaying bog.

In its love of the unnatural, of artifice and exaggeration, this work is *like* what Susan Sontag identified as camp, "homosexual aestheticism and

irony," (one of the underpinnings of "modern sensibility"!). Where it differs is in its disinterest in the formation of a "positive" identity, the rhetorical struggle against forces of darkness in the service of rational enlightenment. Greene does far more than see the world "as an aesthetic phenomenon," a construction of style, especially inasmuch as Greene's engagement with gnosticism, just as with pathology, was not entirely ironic. For him it was a matter of life and death.

Dwelling in the netherworld neither living nor dead, the work anatomizes a kind of (gay) necrophilia, or a pathological condition whereby, in Eric Fromm's words, "memory, rather than experience; having, rather than being, is what counts." Individuals are treated as objects which can only be related to in terms of possession: the necrophilous person seeks to kill and thereby control his object of desire, much in the spirit of the taxidermist or the artisan of natural history dioramas. In collision with the AIDS diagnosis, such an aesthetic practice becomes infused with a further abjection, what Kristeva calls "one of those violent revolts of Being...beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable." It is a species of abjection that disrupts identity or systems of order: that which does not respect borders. In facing the unfaceable, this aesthetic would have us gaze at the coupling of desire and disease and at the interlacing of necrophilia and fears of death.

It is in this sense that Greene was fascinated with writing, though perhaps not with the *narrative*, which implies a telos, closure, order. The textual fragments engraved on brass plaques in the "Versailles" (1990) installation are an enshrinement of Greene's bestiary of writers—Gide, Proust, Melville, Cavafy, Firbank, Musil—all great stylists whose works constitute the canon of pre-Stonewall homosexual writing all the way up to Rechy's *City of Night*. The elegiac fragments of these texts, mournfully mounted in a three-by-three grid, write a map to a configuration of homosexual identity not grounded in the declarative closure of coming out. This map is ironically punctuated by two topiary trees with strips of pornographic text looping out among the leaves, weaving together Greene's cherished

theme of nature tamed by culture with a utopian longing for a park full of brilliant, beautiful men.

Connected to this fascination with written fragments is Greene's intrigue with letters, typefaces and alphabets, ranging from their decorative effects to their symbolic resonance. The Rosicrucian alphabet used in Greene's last works as a decorative overlay also functioned on a gnostic level: the alchemist, by learning to write the divine words, wanted to gain forbidden knowledge, to purify "sick" metals into gold which was an analogue to curing oneself of one's afflictions.

Greene's diversions with transfiguration, magic, and gnostic healing are neither trivial play nor altogether serious engagement; to call this camp drains it of its paradox and poetry. Greene's last works, the mouth series shown at Feature Gallery in New York, comments on Rimbaud's famous vowel poem ("A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue..."), whose synesthesia expresses both delirium and consciousness. Rimbaud's vowels testify to his election of indirect discourse over the romantic's direct one, toward a cult of the ego that involves a conscious, intentional disturbance of the senses. Rather than attribute the vowels to colors, Greene gives them to boys: mAtt, Ed, jOe and wEs—reserving only the U for itself alone, floating in the center rather than at the base of the canvas. These generic boys-next-door, the stuff of primitive porn fantasies, collide against the mute U (both a question—you?—and an answer). This dialogue oscillates between speech and muteness, generating a moan of being, the Hindu's primal sound of the universe, onomatopoeic oozing, contrasted to the gay moan of desiring and the artist's moan of mortality. Greene's metaphysics, unlike most, is tempered by irony and play. And since its transformations operate forward and reverse, there is no grand destiny or singular goal. This circularity is motivated by will, or dare I say, desperation. Unlike Rimbaud's quest, unlike Baudelaire's for *the new*, Tony Greene's was to hold on to what was already there.

• VII •

*Untitled, (Ed)*

# Genre

*from* "BATLIKE, WOLFLIKE"

I have always liked the horror genre, its corny good taste and corny enormity, that's why I fall in love so easily. I have always liked to scare myself by not noticing the dubbed soundtrack until too late. Then I hear the throb of the theme that invites and eliminates feelings as though music were memory. My brand of transgression has always been the outmoded, I have always been attracted to ghosts and obsessions, revival architecture, love of the mirror, arousal so traumatic it shatters any other scale, the antique orgasm, lightning without ground, the orgasm that cracks out of time like a walnut from its broken shell—I return like a ghost to the ruins, dwell in them.

Only yesterday I met the good of the bad and the bad of the good. I always thought my idea of beauty would change but I caught a glimpse of the antique face of a young Ingrid Bergman through the black veil of the difference in our positions. His face was a peony of such distinction its petals didn't touch. I mean his face was satiation without thought, boneless and dizzying; I mean a version of beauty stepped forward out of time, its own spirit steps forward from my mind to meet it.

# Ghostwritten

Quoting Marcel Proust:

*"...these landscapes of Moreau's are so patently the landscape where some god walks or some vision appears, and in them a reddened sky is such an infallible portent, and the intrusion of a deer such a good omen, and the mountain so hallowed a spot, that by comparison to a straightforward landscape seems quite vulgar, and as if deprived of its intellectual faculties; as if mountains and sky and animals and flowers had been suddenly drained of their ichor of history, as if the sky and the flowers and the mountain no longer bore the imprint of a tragic hour, as if the light were not the light in which the god walks, or the courtesan came forth, as if nature deprived of its intellectual content forthwith became vulgar and more extensive, Moreau's landscapes being as a rule contracted in a ravine or closed by a lake wherever and whenever an aspect of the divine manifests itself at some indefinite moment that the canvas perpetuates like a heroic myth."*

And again, quoting Proust:

*"...Mallarmé, I will say, speaking of this poet in general, that in all likelihood his 'obscure' and 'brilliant' images are still images of things, since*

*we cannot conceive of anything else, but reflected as it were in a dark polished mirror of black marble. Thus at a great funeral on a bright day the flowers and the sun are upside down and black, as mirrored in blackness. And yet it is still the 'same' spring that 'is kindled', but it is a spring direly preserved in funerary urns."*

I was willed the record collection and stereo. The dance-mix of "Deputy of Love" is exquisite and the extended version of Sylvester's "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" has achieved greater significance merely by being so directly attached to his death. (He quoted from it only hours before). (Morphine can be so divine).

The speakers should have some kind of spooky, constant and ominous hum and the records should serve as an elaborate, cacophonous Ouija board, continually chattering with messages from the other side. His voice should (through Nina Hagen's cover of Sid Vicious' cover of "My Way") continue to guide and counsel the way it did in life. Obviously, it doesn't; that would be too perfect and, of course, way too pathetic. My desire to communicate with the dead or have them communicate through me has to be a displaced wish for financial security, not smoking and a new car. Maybe it's just about being lazy and a weird quest for uncharacteristic medium-ness. My devices for seeing myself, I think, would function really well in a funhouse.

In addition to records, I also have the key to his studio where all his books are housed. That's where the above quotes should have come from. Should've, but didn't. There were many books left behind with dog-ears, seemingly intended for his future projects and I had envisioned a final collaboration in which the spirit world—since it was too esoteric to actually form words of its own—would reflect itself in me. By recognizing a pertinent array of quotes I could illuminate what I felt or thought without having to finger my most uncomfortable regions and releasing my tattered soul's demons which are better left to their lurking and conspiring and

only coming out when I'm drunk or dreadfully in love. I could have, by passively collecting these postmortem hints, become the focus of great dead guys like Proust, Mallarmé, Moreau, him and me and would have taken pleasure in reclining and becoming something vacantly unclouded and merely vehicle-like. Mediumistic activities are not as much substance as they are reflection.

I recently saw on the Discovery channel an episode of that unexplained mysteries show hosted by Arthur C. Clarke. On it was a rickety old British man who, over a span of 30 or so years, had channeled something like 150 famous authors. (Fame seemed to be prerequisite). He had single-handedly finished the last unfinished works of nearly every majorly recognized dead author of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and expanded the scope, voice and style of each so much that it was only by his telling that one could decipher a Dickens from a Balzac. Language differences were, of course, easily surmounted in that each author, no matter what language spoken in life, was more than happy to translate into a vague, halting Cockney for the sake of reaccessing their lost and sadly missed literary audience. The medium himself accomplished his necrodialogistical feats quite deftly by lounging in his cozy solarium each morning, leaving himself "open" and then scribbling his ass off until it was time for high tea. It seemed a most comfortably low-stress mode of creation and one which was as disturbingly imprecise as badly-lit reflections always are.

*"'Have we made the most of our opportunities?' she asked herself doubtfully as they wandered in.*

*Inside, all was candle-light and gloom. The parlour at any other time, and with anybody else, would have been disenchantment, for where was any tapestry? But the simmering wine, and the mellow light were things to be grateful for.*

*After all, one did not expect to enjoy these adventures much at the time; it was only afterwards, from a sofa, in recollection, to the sound of*

*a piano that they began to seem delightful; and just now, the landlord, she was afraid, was likely to be a thorn. He lingered insufferably.*

*Seating herself at the table, she drummed her fingers with impatience.*

*'What a pity,' she murmured desperately, 'that Goya never painted Fans.'"*

Ronald Firbank,
from *"The Artificial Princess"*

EXHAUSTED AUTUMN

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AN EXHIBITION OF WORKS
BY TONY GREENE

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