

Loesser and the Six-Faced Conqueror of Death on a Buffalo

By Gil Y. Roth © 2013

Loesser was caught between two Rothkos. The canvasses were hung maybe 15 or 20 feet apart on partitions in the Contemporary Art, 1945-1960 collection. One was warm, its horizontal bars of color focusing on yellows and oranges. The other's motif was deep blue-into-purple, then white, then red. It didn't feel patriotic, or an ironic statement about patriotism. Not that kind of red, white and blue. It felt cold, especially across from its partner.

He'd left Miranda by the Pollock around the corner, *Greyed Rainbow*. She elbowed him when he mused that maybe Pynchon pinched his title from that painting. He was pretty sure she didn't know who Pynchon was, but she'd been growing irritated with him all afternoon and didn't need to hear another lazy literary pun. She looked totally lost when he pointed out how Gustave Moreau's painting of Hercules & the Hydra looked less Pre-Raphaelite than Pre-Frazetta.

Loesser got close to each of the Rothkos, trying to understand what he was missing. He stared, looking into the paint, to see the layers, the signs of the brush. Once he had his fill, he turned around and took in the other in its fullness, then closed in on it. He was turning toward the orange canvas when he realized Miranda was standing beside him. She touched his arm and gamely smiled. He looked at her, then at the warm canvas. He breathed deeply, narrowed his eyes so she'd know he was thinking seriously about art, and asked, "How do they know they hung it the right way up?"

"What?"

"I mean, how do they know the yellow area's supposed to be on top? What if it's supposed to be on the bottom? What if they hung it upside-down?"

He was afraid to look at her, but did. She wasn't smiling. "You asshole, Abe," she said, walking away, toward Contemporary Art after 1960. He wanted to put his fist through the idiotic Twombly canvas on the far wall. He fumed between the two Rothkos.

Loesser and the Six-Faced Conqueror of Death on a Buffalo

He was no Philistine, or so he told himself. There was art that moved him, and not the dogs-playing-poker kind, but he had to face facts: he'd come to Chicago for 14 straight years to cover this conference, and this was the first time he'd gone to the Art Institute. If it weren't for Miranda, he'd be going on 15 years of just passing by in a shuttle bus on the way to McCormick Place.

Post-1960 was the only section they hadn't seen yet, and he wasn't looking forward to it. He had to admit that he didn't really know much about Miranda's taste in art, but he didn't think she was on board with contemporary work either. Her apartment had photos of her folks, some framed LP covers, and that Sandeman poster, the one with the shadowy guy in a cloak and hat about to guzzle some port. What did that say? That she was a family girl who liked the Who and got smashed on dessert wine?

He probably should have asked her during the walk from the hotel to the Art Institute, except the walk was why they didn't talk. "It's only half a mile. Let's work off some of that breakfast," she said, which he took as, "Move your flabby, disgusting ass and get a modicum of exercise, you taxi-riding piece of shit."

So at that point he was less inclined to ask her about aesthetics than to complain about his shoes and gripe about how if he was going to spend the next three days walking a mammoth exhibit hall, he could use a goddamned break on a Sunday. She countered by passive-aggressively taking in the late-morning sun and letting the wind off the lake drown out his exaggerated huffing and puffing.

He didn't see her as he walked through the Contemporary rooms. Maybe she'd gone back to the Arms and Armor room to grab a roncone so she could stab him six different ways.

Loesser had a thing about non-representational art. Couldn't dig that abstract, conceptual, postmodern work. That is, he couldn't accept it as art. He was fine when it seeped into industrial design or TV commercials, where it was useful, but it all seemed like a hoax or a prank when he saw it in a museum or a gallery.

Passing through a room with a pipe coming out of the wall (too easy), Loesser entered a big, window-lit chamber with a tree on the floor. That was it: a fallen tree, maybe 30 feet long, and a detached limb and another piece that had

Loesser and the Six-Faced Conqueror of Death on a Buffalo

maybe broken off, all in a light putty shade. It looked like wood, but Loesser was afraid to touch it. Could've been meringue, for all he knew, making a statement about America's love for pastries.

He read the description of the piece on the wall. Apparently, this artist saw a big fallen tree in California and was moved by how perfect it looked in the meadow where it had come down. The guy tried sculpting trees to recapture that feeling, then gave up, went back to the meadow, hacked up that perfectly placed tree with a chainsaw, took it to his studio, made molds and built a fiberglass version, then shipped that to Japan and got some woodworkers to carve him a new fallen tree to replace the one he couldn't leave alone. And now it was lying on the floor of the Art Institute, a piece of Contemporary Art. Maybe the gift shop sold facsimile branches. He was glad Miranda wasn't there; she'd have left all over again. Where was she, anyway?

When they had arrived at the Institute, after the half-mile Bataan Death March, Miranda picked up the six-page Visitor Guide. The first spread had a grid of "What to See in an Hour." She flipped past it to the floor maps, hoping Loesser wouldn't notice and push for an abbreviated tour.

Miranda insisted they start out with the ancient art collections on the first floor, to keep some sort of chronology, not to rush to the good stuff, not to let him know what she really wanted. She had come here to see the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. She'd never been to Chicago and didn't want to tell Loesser those paintings were the only reason she said yes to this trip at all. She didn't want to tell him anything nowadays.

So they walked through galleries of sculptures and pottery, jewelry and icons from ancient Greeks and Romans, Indians, Africans, Asians. Loesser found himself most drawn to the southeast Asian stuff, the Ganeshes and dancing Shivas, the mustached bodhisattvas. One of the ornate Siamese Buddhas from the 1700s reminded Miranda to tell him about that Thai place she noticed on East Illinois during the walk over.

Loesser and the Six-Faced Conqueror of Death on a Buffalo

Then they saw Krishna Yamari. It was a foot-high, iron sculpture of a multi-armed, -legged, -faced, scowling, knife-bearing, mace-wielding monstroso sitting atop a cow. The card beside it read, “Krishna Yamari, Six-Faced Conqueror of Death, on a Buffalo.” The sculpture was around 900 years old, out of southwest China. They were both transfixed by the object — Loesser caught up by the raw ferocity of its faces, Miranda by the panicked lowing of the buffalo — and were each about to speak when a flood of kids from a Jewish school came rushing past them, all dressed in identical blue t-shirts. “Knew we should’ve come on Saturday,” Loesser grouched.

They left the ancients and took the stairs up to Europe, Pre-1900. Miranda checked the map to make sure they were heading in the right direction.

Two hours later, they stood together in front of Seurat’s *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*. Her heart was pounding and her mind raced through every Ferris Bueller-related jibe she could think of. But she knew he’d pick something snider than she could devise. She could barely look at the huge canvas, barely take in the shifting light, the nearly faceless pointillist people, the dazzling pulse of the leaves in the trees. Could barely see anything, because she looked sidelong at him every few moments, thinking, “Don’t call me Cameron, don’t call me Gordie Howe, don’t say, ‘Bueller . . . Bueller . . .,’ don’t call me Dot, don’t say anything, please don’t say anything, Abe.”

But Loesser just shook his head, fuming at the Chinese students who kept running up to the canvas and taking selfies with their iPhones. “Jesus, they weren’t even alive when that fucking movie came out,” he muttered. “The fuck does anyone in Shanghai know about Seurat anyway?” He pushed his way past the crush of tourists and walked off to look at the Manets.

She found him later in American Modern Art, 1900-1950, immersed in Hopper’s *Nighthawks*, but for now she was free, and it was the closest she’d get to bliss that day.

“I totally understand what he’s doing here, because it’s all about the process of decay,” the girl said. Loesser was still shaking his head at the description of the ersatz tree when he heard her talking. She must have been by the other entrance,

near the fallen limb. "It's all an organicity, because we're deteriorating every minute of the day. He's trying to preserve this natural form, but he knows it's going to fall apart, because bugs will get in it or it'll dry out and crack. That's why it had to be wood instead of a more permanent medium."

He was afraid to look. She sounded young, a college girl, and the last thing he needed was to lay eyes on some overeager Art School Girl of Doom. He focused on the artist's description of the process of woodworking, waiting the girl out. How long could she spend ranting about a fake dead log?

"This tree is like a zombie, or Frankenstein's monster. It's re-animated as something less dead but not alive!" There was an urgency in the girl's voice that startled Loesser a little. He'd heard nitwits expounding about art all afternoon, but they were usually just pedagogues or midwestern tourists who had picked up half a notion from *The Da Vinci Code*. This girl sounded almost fanatical. He pitied her boyfriend: how long would he have to act interested to maybe get into her pants? And how long was he going to have to console her when she burst into tears mid-sex?

That thought stirred him a little, and he turned to check out the scene. She was a waif with too-heavy eyeliner, stray facial piercings, stringy maroon hair, and a faded floral print sundress. He didn't see her boyfriend or anyone else, but the girl was rambling on about a rotting pigeon in her parents' backyard. Loesser thought she might've been talking to him this whole time, and started to redden, but she wasn't even looking in his direction. Thing is, there were only two people in the room: Loesser and the girl.

And the security guard. He'd stopped noticing the guards after the first hour, when he pointed out to Miranda that they were the only black people he'd seen in the Art Institute. The guard, in uniform white shirt, red tie, and black pants, was getting uncomfortable as the girl kept talking to him. Loesser saw the "save me!" look in his eyes, and waddled over to their end of the room.

"Sir, please avoid the sharp branch!" the guard said, pointing near Loesser's knee. Maybe the artist meant for it to symbolize the absurdity of liability insurance.

"This been here long?" Loesser asked him.

Loesser and the Six-Faced Conqueror of Death on a Buffalo

“Part of the permanent collection, sir.”

“Nothing’s permanent,” the girl said, traipsing past them to the room with 175 pounds of individually wrapped candy sitting in a corner. It was a statement about AIDS, the description said. It also came with a “choking hazard” warning.

The guard looked away from Loesser and walked to the far end of the room, where the windows let out on the Metra rail lines. Mid-afternoon sunlight streamed in. He looked outside while Loesser ambled around the tree. Loesser couldn’t imagine how boring it must be to spend an entire work shift keeping an eye on a log, but he wanted some sort of acknowledgement from the guard, some tacit thanks for getting the Art School Girl of Doom out of his hair.

It wasn’t just this guard. He’d still barely seen any black patrons in the Institute all day, and he wondered what effect that had. He wondered if the guards had any appreciation for the art they were watching over, and immediately tried to reformulate that thought into something less racist.

“Excuse me, man,” Loesser called out. “There another room to this wing? I’m trying to find my girlfriend.”

“Yeah, you go out those doors and make a right, and there’s another entrance further down the terrace.”

Loesser walked past a neon sign, a video installation and some sort of bondage equipment, and found the doors. At the other entrance to the Contemporaries, he saw Miranda. She was standing in front of a 15-foot-high portrait of Mao Zedong.

The Warhol’s placement was designed to overwhelm the viewer. There was almost nothing else in one’s field of vision as the glass doors opened, just a massive, gold-skinned, rouged, lipsticked and blue-eyeshadowed Mao with a blue sky background, some colors on his shirt.

Miranda hated Warhol. But she’d stationed herself there because she knew Loesser hated Warhol more than she did.

It was the last piece of art they would look at, and he had to admit that the scale of it forced him to consider it on its terms, not just with his jaundiced eye.

Loesser and the Six-Faced Conqueror of Death on a Buffalo

Loesser contemplated *Mao*. The silkscreen process really played out in the shadows on the left side of Mao's face and his neck. Loesser started to lose himself in those shadows, the way they contrasted with the brushstrokes of color on Mao's shirt. The gridwork left behind by the mesh of the silkscreen was like the flipside of those Impressionists; it implied how the fabric sees the world, how everything breaks down into warp and weft. He thought about Warhol and his underpaid misfit labor churning out copy after copy of Mao's portrait, and how the six faces of Krishna Yamari weren't enough, could never keep up with all these reproductions. The conqueror of death was conquered by repetitions of Elvis, Marilyn, Mao.

He wanted to share this with her, but he could tell Miranda didn't want to hear another word. He tried to touch her hand, but she pulled it away, folded her arms across her stomach. Maybe he'd talk to the security guard on the stool in the corner, like that crazy girl.

Just then, the waifish girl padded by in her ballet shoes. She was leaving the Contemporary collection through the doorway Loesser and Miranda had entered. Loesser appraised her as she passed by, knowing how far he was already in the doghouse. She reminded him of an old girlfriend from college, but damned if he could remember her name, just the smell of patchouli. Maybe the same girl, but now he was twice her age.

Just as she was about to pass by, the girl turned and joined them in front of *Mao*. Miranda noticed a tattoo on the back of her right shoulder: the boy in the wolf costume from that Maurice Sendak book. She was close enough that they could both smell the stale cigarette smoke in her hair.

The girl stood beside them for a few moments, then said, "People wouldn't think so much of Warhol if he did silkscreens of Stalin and Hitler."

Miranda burst out laughing. Loesser started to shrug, as if to tell her, "It's not like I coached her!" But he thought better of it.

The girl walked away. Loesser asked Miranda, "Did you want to be an artist when you were a kid or something?"