



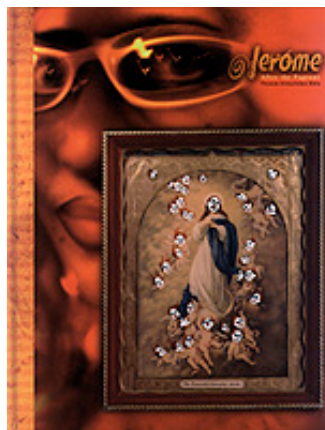
Queer Arts **interview** by Barry Harrison

Thomas Avena & Adam Klein on Jerome Caja, guilt, pornography, HIV, and the food chain.

Avena and Klein are the authors of **Jerome: After the Pageant**, recently published by Bastard Books, distributed by D.A.P.

"To **enter** into **Jerome** Caja's world is to **risk** one's own **innocence**."

Thomas Avena



It's **all nature** and **no nurture** with him."

Adam Klein

BH: I understand that you met Jerome when you were working together at the Lumiere cinema. What was your first impression?

AK: I thought "who is this hippy?" I didn't think much of Jerome when I first met him. It was at the Castro Christmas party that I saw him all dolled up for the first time, wearing his used condom earrings. And I have to say, I looked at those for a long time and I thought this is an intriguing person. He used to marvel at my laziness and how I would manage to get people to do things for me. He was very hard working.

BH: In the book you mention that he was working seven to eight hours a night.

AK: That was towards the end, at the Lumiere he had recently graduated from the Art Institute and was beginning to discover his vision. A lot of the Institute stuff shows signs of it, but you can see that the work isn't fully formed. He was doing a lot of abstract things, ceramics. He went to school as a ceramicist. He had these ungainly, very large scale pieces; a deteriorating cash register, this other piece a flood with houses being swept away; everything looked rotten. He used dead birds and bones and things like that.

BH: What strikes me from reading the book is his honesty and courage. Jerome just did what he wanted to do. Where did that come from?

AK: I think it is genius. By the end of my knowing Jerome, I really believed that not only was he a genius, but in a lot of ways very saintly. He had a real vision that he stuck with, unlike anyone I've ever known. He did not allow relationships to get in the way of his creative process, he knew very well who he was.

BH: Who was he painting for? Was he hoping to establish a mainstream audience or was he painting for queer viewers specifically?

AK: I don't think he lived in hopes at all. He lived very much in the present, with an appreciation for the process. He loved to produce work; that is what he did best. And that's what he loved to share with people. By no means was he one of those artists who sits at home and collects work in a drawer waiting for that moment when they are going to be discovered. His work was discovered the moment that he laid eyes on it and

fell in love with it. And then it went out. The work being so small and portable, he was able to give it to people to look at in their hands. It was really important to him that people be able to touch the surface, that they not feel afraid.

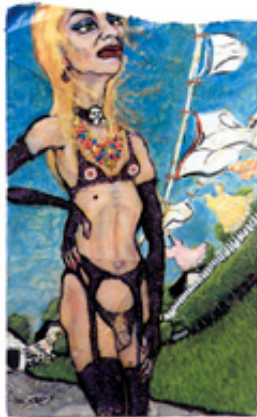
BH: Which is very unusual in itself.

AK: Exactly.

TA: In the book, Adam writes about Jerome's method for rendering cracked and burned surfaces, putting pieces in the toaster, crumpling them up in his hand.

AK: He would do that in front of you: it was horrifying.

Venus in Cleveland, 1995
Nail polish, enamel and white-out
on paper
7 x 4 in.
Smithsonian Institution,
The Archives of American Art



BH: The title of the book is Jerome: After the Pageant. Could you explain what you mean by pageant?

TA: In trying to understand some of these iconic images that kept recurring, I came to see that Jerome was reasserting a religious spectacle or pageant, where rites--generally of sacrifice--are enacted, and a hierophantic figure, a priest, perhaps a cross-dresser, would preside over certain mysteries. Jerome's pageant and icons investigate the shaming and the spilling of blood--its worthlessness in our world. They ultimately bring forward the notion of self-creation and self-consumption being unified. These are ideas I can strongly relate to as a person with AIDS.

There are other artists who represent such a pageant: Ensor, and in literature, The Bacchae. The representations can get very strange. In Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights" you see a man bending over, with another man putting daisies into his anus.

BH: They don't show you those details in art history class.

TA: But they are in art history books, and we block them out. The details are there; this wild spectacle.

BH: Which Jerome celebrated.

TA: He represented them with intention, passion. If that translates into celebration, then, yes, he celebrated them. Adam adopted the notion of the beauty pageant, one which Jerome would physically lead us through.

AK: Whenever someone would be looking at his work, Jerome would want to find out what their favorite piece was, and the approach he had was to turn it into a beauty pageant. He would lay out several pieces in front of you; he always had so much work available. I would come over after a month and he would say "Oh, you've missed all these great works." He would spread out so many paintings and I'd say "Jerome, I can't even look at all this." He'd say "Do a beauty pageant." It was a way of focusing people's eyes on the work, and having them evaluate it. On some level, that kind of subjective singling-out was the way that he saw people looking at his work. There were so many variations; he has the silver pen drawings, the nail polish paintings, then he did the make-up paintings, then the velvet paintings...

TA: Then he did sculptural works, the pistachio shells as checker pieces...

AK: Or the 'Bitch Ball.' The 'Bitch Ball' was a beach ball that he attached eyes and lips and a cigarette to, and it looked like this bitch.. It sat in the corner at the Paule Anglim show.

BH: Were these done in a sequence?

AK: It depended on the materials he had available. Sometimes he would get flocked paper, and he would do a whole series on that. There was a period when he had lead, so he did all these drawings that he would mount on lead. He loved the fact that it was poisonous.

TA: Or a period when he was obsessed with white-out: the white period. Then there were the tarot cards he called the "terror-rot" cards. That seemed to occupy him for a long time. But finally his vision was fading, so he began working in multiples of objects that could be more simply rendered.

BH: How did his work change as a result of his learning his HIV-positive status?

AK: He never talked about it much; he would never engage his friends in what was going on with his health, until it got so bad that we had to intervene.

TA: He did talk to me several times. He trusted me to talk about it.

AK: That was near the end, but he was positive for quite a while. I don't think that any of it came from denial, it is just that he was living in the present.

TA: He wasn't going to anticipate the degradation of the body. He would say: "When my body can no longer process food on its own; when my hands cannot take care of my needs, then I shouldn't be here." But when we were alone, he would add: "Is my thinking crazy or clear? Tell me, because I really don't know."

BH: But how was it expressed in terms of his subject matter or iconography?

AK: You see it in several of the paintings in the book: "The Last Hand Job," the series he did with Charles' ashes, "Pompeii Salad," "Ascension of the Fruit Bowl," these are all works that address not just death and the ravages of the body but also notions of caretaking, the kind of denial one has to be in in order to care-take.

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