

## Carl Dobsky Painting Meanings

### **Blind Leading the Blind (You Can't Stop Progress)**

*72" X 104" Oil on Linen*

In the year before his death, Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted one of his most haunting images, *The Blind Leading the Blind*. Scholars speculate this work was made in response to mounting discord between Catholics and Protestants in the Low Countries, which resulted in the Council of Troubles, instituted by the government of the Spanish Netherlands. The subject for the painting is taken from Matthew 15:14, where Christ condemns the Pharisees, saying, "Let them alone; they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." Although it is not known what Bruegel's religious convictions were, it is obvious his choice of subject was meant as an accusation that those in positions of power, lacking true understanding, were encouraging their people to follow them into disaster.

Clearly based on the painting by Bruegel, this image is a reversal or possibly a development of that theme. Using the same diagonal found in Bruegel's work, here the blind are struggling to get out of the ditch rather than falling into it. The vertical of the church in Bruegel's work has been replaced by the vertical of scientific progress in the form of a rocket launching into space; the clear waters of a rural stream are transformed into an irrigation canal full of consumerist debris. This painting asks us to posit that perhaps the tragic moment is not that we fall into the ditch. Given that we do not possess a "God's-eye view" of the world, the fall into that ditch is inevitable. The real tragedy is, since there is no Archimedean point where things can be understood with certain clarity, how do we get out of that ditch once we have fallen?

### **Blind Leading the Blind (long alt version)**

In the year before his death, Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted one of his most haunting images, *The Blind Leading the Blind*. Scholars speculate this work was made in response to mounting discord between Catholics and Protestants in the Low Countries. Calvinists, determined to purge the idolatry of the Catholic faith, destroyed and defaced artworks in a wave of violent iconoclasm. As spiritual unrest often goes hand in hand with political unrest, the Duke of Alba instituted the Council of Troubles to bring the dissidents of Spain and the Holy Roman Church to heel. Both sides believed they possessed the infallible truth and ferociously fought to preserve it. However, neither could fully know the consequences their actions would bring. The harsh and cruel measures taken by the Iron Duke would eventually unite the Dutch in their fight for independence from the Spanish crown, and the Protestant Reformation, rejecting papal authority for one's own reading of Scripture, would help usher in a more secular world.

Out of this turmoil, the modern age would dawn, and with it the rise of the Enlightenment. Though religious faith persisted, many began placing their belief in man's rational capacity to understand and order the world; some even held that Reason could solve all questions and societal woes through a kind of arithmetic or calculus. Accompanying this clock-like universe would come the autonomy of the individual, the Invisible Hand of the free market, and the inevitability of Progress. But given that the only thing bigger than man's hubris is the complexity of the universe, these wondrous things would come with unforeseen costs. The confluence of technological progress, political equality, and economic freedom would bring with it nationalism, the Terror, the horrors of World War I and II, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and a consumerist society that threatens its own existence through the degradation of the environment. The parable, which provides the basis for Bruegel's subject, assumes that if one places one's belief in the truth, one can avoid disaster; naturally, not doing so will lead to ruin. Christ, possessing the certainty of truth, condemns the Pharisees, saying, "Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." But as Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God has underscored, an Archimedean point

from which all things may be judged is a highly dubious proposition. No one has a God's-eye view of the world. No one is infallible. No one's field of vision is wide enough to encompass the complexity of the universe. Counter to the parable which the disciples listened to attentively, the tragedy is not that the blind will lead the blind into the ditch. That is inevitable. The real tragedy is that once fallen, how will they get out?

## **Luxuria and the Fool (Lipstick on a Pig)**

*Oil on Panel 20" diameter*

The popularity of the court fool as a symbol of man's folly provided the basis for various prints and engravings in the late medieval era and into the early Renaissance. One notable example is an etching from around 1460 by the anonymous Master E.S. entitled "Luxuria and the Fool". In this etching, a fool or jester is depicted being lured into folly by desire, while Luxuria (Lust) holds a mirror, revealing to the fool his own reflection.

Here, the theme has been reinterpreted in a modern context. Instead of a medieval fool, we have a man of means and status. He has all he needs: food, money, social standing and perhaps a modicum of fame. Not only are his needs met and his place in society secure, he also enjoys a certain level of luxury. Despite the fruits of his labor and the blessings of fortune, this man is driven by a desire to reach for more. His transgressive act is met by Luxuria, who defiantly holds up a mirror, showing the man his reflection while smearing lipstick all over his face. The implication being, that although clothed in the trappings of the good life, it's really just putting lipstick on a pig.

## **Keeping Warm (The Gift of Prometheus)**

*21" x 30" Oil on Linen*

Often times, the specific circumstances of a situation can bring our values into conflict with one another, forcing us to choose between them. The fact that we can also be impulsive in our decisions further muddies the water. The behavioral sciences are loaded with clumsy jargon to describe how our impulsiveness gets the better of us; terms like herding affect, sunk cost fallacy, cognitive bias, and hyperbolic discounting are but a few. Not only do these processes affect our personal lives, like many of our choices, they also affect the social and political climate around us.

Another way of embodying ideas like hyperbolic discounting can be found in the myth of the twin brothers Epimetheus and Prometheus: Afterthought and Forethought. In this myth, Epimetheus impulsively distributes all the attributes to the creatures of the earth but forgets to leave some for humans. Prometheus, taking pity on them, steals fire to give them, and for this crime, he is sentenced to have his liver torn out daily by an eagle.

In this image, we find a man sitting on Hollywood's Walk of Fame, trying to stave off the cold of the early morning hours. Suddenly, he sees a way to alleviate his misery. He has matches. He has flammable material. Fire makes you warm. Given the nature of the choices mankind makes, it's hard not to wonder whether Prometheus himself may have succumbed to hyperbolic discounting.

## **Chariot of Fire (Joy Ride)**

*24" x 37" Oil on Linen*

The title for this painting is taken from a line in the poem by William Blake, 'Jerusalem' (And Did Those Feet In Ancient Time). The poem is famously a reaction to the Industrial Revolution and a yearning for greener and more pastoral times. After Blake condemns the factory smokestacks as "dark Satanic Mills", we get an image of the prophet Elijah being swept up to heaven as he cries, "Bring me my Chariot of fire!" Although this painting shares the echoes of the Satanic Mills in the form of oil pumps, the chariot blazing its way to heaven has become one with a combustible engine filled with thrill seekers blazing down the highway.

Another allusion to the chariot is found in Plato's Phaedrus. In this analogy, the soul is compared to a chariot pulled by two horses. One horse represents the rational or moral impulse, while the other represents the soul's irrational passions and appetitive nature. One is capable of self-restraint; the other chomps at the bit.

All of this has been reframed in the wanton abandon of a joy ride. The car speeds along as the driver, while taking photos of the passengers, nearly runs a bicyclist off the road. To add insult to injury, one of the passengers even lewdly taunts the bicyclist as they pass by.

## **Homo Irrationalis**

*16" diameter Oil on Panel*

Throughout the ages, the essence of being human has been considered as man's nature being essentially rational. The ability to consider various sides of an argument so that one may examine it and come to a correct conclusion, free of tradition or authority and based solely only on the merits of the argument, is highly prized. But often times we find ourselves unable to reconcile certain viewpoints.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise." The inspirational note of hope in this is hard to ignore, but there is another way of formulating this concept. Another way of expressing the ability to hold two contradictory ideas at the same time and still function was given to us by another famous author, George Orwell. In Orwell's 1984, the populace is shown, whether through peer pressure or the machinations of Big Brother, to be able to hold on to two opposing ideas at the same time in a kind of self-deception. This is, of course, known as Doublethink.