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Art

Scott Hanson

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Art

ARNOLD YAWNED AND GLANCED OUT ACROSS THE guests in attendance at the annual Greerson Art Show. The room had polarized, pushing the art makers away from the art buyers and art critics. Against the far wall, the painters and sculptors stood in bunches of three and four or sat around a coffee table littered with paper plates, crumby napkins, and left-over toothpicks. One of the artisans had swept the crumbs off a corner of the coffee table and was building a slender pyramid from plastic champagne glasses. The noise of other conversations overwhelmed their words, but Arnold could see them carving masterpieces in the air with visionary gestures.

The artists were separated from everyone else by an empty space, an invisible moat that outlined their territory. Periodically one would cross this trench to gather hors d'oeuvres, slowly pushing through the crowd of dark blue business suits, loading up a plate, then weaving their way back. There seemed to be no other interaction between the two groups; however, the conservatively dressed mob of agents and reps, critics and collectors made up for that

lack by exchanging business cards with frantic energy. The sounds of introductions and reunions bubbled over the serious talk about commissions. Under this enterprising buzz, the scholarly drone of art critics saturated the room.

At Arnold's left, a gentleman was explaining the direct connection between Byzantine iconography and the Pop Art movement. After establishing a background for his listeners, he was just beginning to articulate the ethereal conviction manifest in Andy Warhol's later productions. Arnold, though, watched rather than listened as the man repeatedly smoothed isolated wisps of brown hair back down on his scalp. Arnold yawned again.

Excusing himself from the treatise, Arnold set out for the hors d'oeuvres table, carrying his paper plate and napkins in front of him like authorization papers. He traced an awkward path through the obstacle course of dark blue suit coats, winding around the thickly packed discussions, sidling between back-to-back conversations until he reached the caterers' fashionable display.

At the table, he exchanged blank stares with the white linen and shiny platters and parsley garnishes. He sighed, then began to pick at the food mechanically, placing selections on his plate without really paying attention to them. He looked up to see a woman step out of the crowd, her loose-fitting orange dress in sharp contrast to the background of navy blue polyester. She began to harvest the trays at the other end of the buffet, piling hors d'oeuvres onto a napkin spread open in her hand.

Arnold turned back to the cubed turkey. He hesitated over which piece to stab until the fuzzy bit of green cellophane that topped his toothpick caught his attention. Then he dropped the toothpick on the table, quietly cleared his throat, and shuffled along the table towards the woman.

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“I couldn’t help but notice your enthusiasm,” he said. “Are they that good?”

“I’ve tasted better,” she muttered.

Then she laughed a party-guest laugh, flicking the garnish off a Townhouse cracker covered with cream cheese, and placed the snack on the top of her pile. Arnold looked at her more closely.

“I hope you won’t mind my asking, but aren’t you Bethany Mills?” he asked.

“Yes . . .,” she said, without quite letting go of the word.

“Arnold Baumgartner,” he supplied quickly. “I wanted to compliment you on your work. Your showing last season was tremendous.”

“Oh, really? You liked my sculpture that much?”

“I thought it was fabulous. Out of all the . . .”

“Why?”

He blinked, then stared for a moment. A memory of Bethany’s contribution to last year’s show squirmed its way into his mind: the sculpture dangled several inches above the floor—a mannequin held upright by the thick wire armature twisted around his throat. The arms and hands stretched out into the air and dozens of washers, spray-painted gold and silver, dangled down from fishing line tied to the fingers. The back half of its head had been sawed away and the eye sockets were drilled out. A length of neon tubing had been implanted to replace the missing cranium; in sickly, yellow light, it spelled out “a-r-t.” Its arms and torso and legs were layered with patches and strips of dark blue cloth.

Something about the memory gave Arnold a nasty, prickling sensation in the back of his throat, like he had swallowed a fish bone.

“It . . . choked me,” he muttered, still gazing at the sculpture.

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“What?”

“Well, when I saw it, I . . . that is to say, it captivated me. The juxtaposition of such diverse elements was bold and daring. It simply demanded consideration. The manner in which you employed twentieth-century-America miscellany was a keen translation of your vision of the culture. Your mannequins reached out to the audience and forced a reconsideration of life; or rather, they revealed life. In fact, I would be so bold as to say that the mannequins are us—they are America. And . . . there is an ethereal conviction manifest in your productions.”

“Hmm,” she said, smiling. “Thank you . . .”

“Arnold. Arnold Baum . . .”

Coughing suddenly at the prickle down his throat, he turned his head to the side and covered his mouth, worried that he might have swallowed a toothpick splinter or something. At his apology, Bethany just smiled. Another fit of coughing distracted him, and while he struggled to keep his composure, she collected several glasses of champagne in her free hand. Then she turned and walked back toward her companions. Arnold stared after her until a set of dark blue, double-breasted jackets cut across her trail.

“You’re welcome,” he mumbled.

Looking down at the plate still in his hand, he wondered why he’d bothered to collect such an assortment of appetizers. He set them down on the table and picked up a glass of champagne instead. After making sure nothing had accidentally fallen into the glass, he took a drink, trying to tilt his head so that the liquid would wash down whatever was stuck there in his throat.

Loud laughter suddenly burst from the artists’ division. Arnold shuffled to the side of a tall, blue-clad corporate representative so he could see what had happened. Conversations hushed as other curious guests also turned, hoping

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to be included in the entertainment. Through the crowd, Arnold could see Bethany sitting amid the laughter. Then she turned and smiled at him and he suddenly felt the splinter in his throat again. He wished he could reach down through his ear and scrape the irritation away, but instead he gulped the rest of his champagne.

The artists didn't bother to explain their humor, so the other guests returned to their discussions. Arnold retreated back along the serpentine path to the critics' gathering place, letting the drone of their commentaries soothe his ears and throat.