

Muted Playfulness:
the Opera not quite Minora of
Sam Chamberlain

Sam Chamberlain's early collage work echoes to some degree the oeuvre of the two masters in the genre, Max Ernst (1891-1976) and Jacques Prévert (1900-1977) whose preferred starting off materials consisted of late 19th and early 20th century copper engravings, some drawn from scientific (zoology, chemistry, ...) or pseudo-scientific (utopian/untested Victorian inventions) publications. But the grand favorites were invariably extracted from the news weeklies of the period. Those illustrations covered the sensational murders and robberies to which the titled and the wealthy often fell victim; and the no less sensational solutions of these crimes following investigations by some detective ancestors of Thompson & Thomson,¹ or by Britain's very own Holmes, Sherlock of Baker Street.

In Ernst's case, the dominant mood, based on bizarre combinations of these materials, is always dark and suggestive of unsolvable mysteries. There is something profoundly disturbing in these unexpected encounters of often composite figures amidst scenery drawn from vastly different contexts. The fantastic and the dreamlike invade everyday reality, imposed with photographic proof for what is being depicted; a nightmarish ending of the scenario awaits the protagonist, just around the corner. This common denominator of Max Ernst's pictures turned sequences thereof into what he called a "novel" [cf. Bibliography sub Ernst (1934) 1976]. If barely qualifying, today, as even the softest of porn, it was highly daring stuff for the times, especially as it was presented as Art.²

In Prévert's case, collage becomes a carnival, a riotous festival of parody and irreverence.³ As in the earlier work of Sam Chamberlain, Prévert mocks the highbrow seriousness of sure values for the doing of which he needs nothing more than the stream-of-consciousness monologue of a child who, at a glance, sees every emperor's inherent nakedness:

In Paris

those Men About Town talk gold

those gentlemen talk finance

those gentlemen talk numbers

those gentlemen talk art

those gentlemen talk plenty

those gentlemen talk metaphysics cars and politics

those gentlemen make high talk

and to talk of ladies, those gentlemen talk low

Those low ceilinged gentlemen in top hats

those gentlemen talk reason

Their ladies' voices squeak turkey when they speak of serious music, fine cuisine,
high fashion, higher dusters

In the streets of Paris

the child speaks big black man and pitter patter

the child speaks sun

the child speaks marvels

the child speaks silence

the child speaks unbearable noise

the child speaks poverty and suffering

the child speaks terror

the child speaks beauty malice whims and pain

the child speaks love

the child speaks happiness

the child speaks desires
the child speaks hunger thirst and sleep
the child speaks delirium and family affairs
the child speaks sad and crocodile tears
the child speaks learned dog erudite parrot chinese folding screen
the child speaks scandal hospital carnival worldwide cataclysm
the child speaks heartbreak and disconcerts
the child speaks shocking and unpleasant mystery
the child speaks incongruously
to its prohibited body

In the streets of Paris
the child speaks disguise
and nude

In the streets of Paris
the child speaks sparrow
speaks horse manure tetanus and bicycle
the child speaks devil
the child speaks odious
the child speaks dream speaks true speaks good
and speaks evil speaks iron and speaks fire

In the streets of Paris
the child speaks image and magic
and
in the innate images of its imaginary language
the child discovers the world
and the world is not proud
And when it is this world's hoity-toity
the world makes the child shut up. ⁴

All the things the gentlemen talk about are solid, substantial and real, not subject to the shadow of a doubt. As the child pronounces or calls out every single thing by its (superimposed) name, or calls out the names while trying to imagine what sort of things, contentwise, they could possibly cover, the very sounds of these names carry their own magical potential. This just is, forever, the young child

Marc, in the Morning, Saying Hello to Things

(as in the Dutch poem, *Marc Groet 's Morgens de Dingen*, by Paul Van Ostaijen).

This is how they work, Sam Chamberlain's collages and papiers collés.

A sober artist

Artist Chamberlain

- for starters selected, then cut out figures, which he found reproduced in black and white, after genre paintings in oil.
- These he then juxtaposed with an early 20th century portrait of a courtesan, from one or the other *Folies Bergères*, here shown in her after hours' overtime.

[When photography was still new and technically an elaborate procedure, models were ordered to freeze in awkward postures; and often had to pose for up to half an hour, so that the last bit of expression had long left their faces by the time of the definitive "click!" Hence there is a sense of the unreal already present in supposedly erotic postcards of the times. Add to this that our sense of what beauty is and what it is not, has evolved greatly over the last hundred years and it is no wonder that the model in the collage is about as erotic as a Georges Braque's *Violin and Jug* (1909/1910)].

The two figures on the left and the one on the right could be 18th century bankers or, for all I know, Benjamin Franklin & his colleagues. The one in the background is entranced; the other two remain indifferent to the performance of the stripper.

Everything, thus far, is reproduced in black and white; even though color reproductions are no longer hard to come by. I find this choice to be a sober artist's deliberate restraint: holding back, making it difficult for himself, restricting himself to a set of minimal means as a preliminary, self-imposed condition. If we now turn to the nature of the collagist's subsequent interventions, we notice that they, for the most part, consist in building up a non-flamboyant décor, with bits of wallpaper of tame patterns or wrapping paper in drab shades—the first touches of color to make their entrée in this grey world. Further, they stretch across the picture frames on the wall, seemingly in line with Andy Warhol silkscreens of *Daisies* and cover the wall itself, creating a vertically oriented non-ceiling, as if to reduce the entire composition to a two dimensional world. The same applies to the semblance of a floor

- where another courtesan is teasing a King Charles spaniel under a chair (or are they playing the game of who will blink first?). And where
- some sort of Christmas tree is posted in the foreground, made up of what looks like Moghul garden motifs on a reddish background.

bordello (1989) is an exercise in depicting a paradise narrowly missed. As with the Italian name which sounds so much less humdrum than the word in our own language, the artist is in the first place out to add a touch of color to a colorless existence. Yet these additions look utterly non-intrusive and remain at their most basic, possibly made up of throwaway stuff.

Yet the more one observes what at first appears to be an old-fashioned, anti-*bourgeois* parody in the vein of Prévert's men about town, the more the *bordello* itself turns into a *bolero*. Some expression of Sam Chamberlain's warmth towards the thus displaced and exposed.

Notice, finally, how the upper corners of the image have been snipped, as if they fit in an old-fashioned family album, right in the middle of the births and marriages, the fêtes and first communions—as a commentary about the true state of affairs. Show me one single family without its dysfunctionals, at the sight of whom one can only sigh, *quel bordel* ! This is the sort of *bordello* to which he alludes.

Flashbacks of an Introspective Gardener

In (I, 2.) **sorrows of the student** (1989), there is part of a caption,

The End of the,

and below it—but apparently also on the other side of the door partitioning this work—a full caption,

The Severe Censor,

so that it looks as if the author of the caption is actually st-stuttering out the title, thus suggesting that it was a hard thing to do. I

further surmise that “the student” in the real title is the figure in the center, whose shapeless egg-head surmounts a body, the left half of which has sunk two degrees lower than the right half—so that the figure appears to be going on a Silly Walk à la John Cleese.

We see that this egghead has hatched a motley brood of biblical and unbiblical figures, who seem to float in invisible clouds. The one on the left below could be God handing the Commandments’ scroll to an invisible Moses, but the heavenly crowd also includes a washerwoman and some unknown young bourgeois (is that an imperial helmet he is holding at his side?) besides an older bald and bearded figure who is adjusting his spectacles.

There are curtains behind and at least one emblematic relief that could be part of a stage backdrop.

If **bordello** called for Prévert’s *À Paris*, the ideal poetic evocation to accompany **sorrows of the student** might be the lyrics of Frank Zappa’s *Dancing Fool*.⁵ **Dancin’ Fool** could be an alternative title for this composite collage “sight” because, as an artist, one is

- either overconfident, in public—able to *dance* along in the most unexpected situations;
- or awkward in public, a total *fool* when it comes to the most elementary manoeuvres.

This is so for no other reason than that the process of self-discovery in the studio elicits both a Midas touch where every stroke turns to gold, and some occasions when not even the most elementary drawn line works. This is the price of becoming an artist.

Another alternative title that comes to mind: **baroque selfportrait: before, after and midway**. Isn’t the work about the all-consuming desire of an apprentice taking a course on the Art of Living [Theatre]?

before: The young Napoleon-like figure on the left clutches his left hand at his heart, while his right hand still holds a rapier, suggesting involvement in a duel. A bystander has caught him, as he was about to fall, mortally wounded. But what is *really* going on is what escapes from the fly of his trousers, somewhat resembling a dialogue balloon, expressed in an indecipherable scroll of architectural language.⁶ In case an onlooker gets it wrong, a female arm appears from beneath a curtain on the left, holding up a crystal bowl, ready to receive.

after: in an adjacent panel on the right, something similar occurs. The “student”, now bearded, is—judging by his rucksack—about to set out into the wide world. The woman next to

him, though also bearded, looks like the student's mother saying a tearful farewell. And the dialogue issuing from his fly again is now half-disguised as a bouquet of ferns. Separated from this 'compartment' (as if it were part of a revolving stage with different backdrops) is the scene on the right, with some old lady listening at a door—no doubt the “censor” of the secondary title, for whom this composition means The End.

midway: it will not have escaped the scrutiny of the viewer that the less-than-heavenly assembly, floating above the faceless **sorrowful student**, in fact continues beyond the frame, as often occurs in Persian miniature painting (see for example Farhad & Ba.,ci 2009: 47, fig. 3-7). Is it the choir of 'the neighbors' pointing the finger at him and whispering “guilty! got you!” and who view themselves as a law unto themselves? Has the sorrowful student broken free from them at last? I don't know and it's none of my business. Still, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if one day the artist changes his mind about the title of this work and replaces it by: **Couldn't get no | Satisfaction.**⁷

From collage to *papiers collés*

The artist, by now, might sigh, “What is all this learned fuss about my collage amusements? It is like playing [the cardgame] Solitaire. I just mess around a bit.”⁸ In (I, 4.) **the watcher** (1990) we cannot but notice the shift since **bordello**, of the same year. At that time, for the sake of ‘brightening up’ the location and its inhabitants by means of different non-figurative elements, these seemingly ‘decorative materials’ were entrusted with the task of lifting an all-pervading grisaille. We now notice that the *recognizable* elements have receded and have gradually been replaced by material samples that signify merely as a juxtaposition of various *textures*. Sure, there may originally have been a picture of a couple dancing closely (the faces are hidden by a blur of seemingly random *papiers collés*) on a section of staircase that has all the exalted properties of a pedestal—the swooping bird, like a fish belly up, notwithstanding. The game has been one of rendering a once perfectly clear image *unreable*.

Some white paper has been deliberately torn off from an ordinary piece of lightbrown corrugated packing carton. Elsewhere the tearing off process has been done more delicately, so as to produce most of the frame. The contrast between, on the one hand, the remaining black-&-white elements—they include a piece of newspaper *glued on the picture*, which leaves the hands & arms from the original photograph intact—and, on the other hand, a random cut-out, displaying graduations of red that hide both faces as with a shawl, produces an unexpected result. The color of the corrugated carton starts to sing like the golden background of a Byzantine mosaic.

Something of the kind clearly developed as Sam Chamberlain’s aim, in the course of his procedure.

One wonders how he pulled it off. I imagine the artist, without a moment’s hesitation, replying, “don’t ask *me!*”

If there is a transition from collage to papiers collés, it is certainly (1, 4.) **venus in furs in the desert** (1990). The piece is mainly of interest because it provides a clear example of a reject re-used in an apparently random fashion. Perhaps the good bits of an earlier painting that did not quite make the grade were saved. Having cut away the weaker sections, Chamberlain re-enhanced it all till a fresh creation sprang up. The title is bound to be an in-joke.

And still among the older works represented in the December 2009 London exhibition, there is also that enigmatic (I, 5.) **college** (1987). This is an oil painting. The first time I saw it, I misread the catalogue title and mistook “oil.college” for “oil.collage”—taking it to mean “a combination of oilpainting and collage”. But look as I may, nothing could be recognized as a collage addition of any kind. Later, in the course of a long conversation with a friend of Chamberlain’s, I learned he was an Oxonian.

There is a tiny light burning inside the building or a moon being reflected by the window—the fine point (*l’astuce*) of this otherwise well-behaved oilpainting.

The more recent opera: the 1990s

It is a very interesting point that nobody has experienced that we can actually sit on a cushion without any purpose, none whatsoever. It is outrageous. Nobody would actually ever do that. We can't even think about it. It's unthinkable. It's terrible—we would be wasting our time.

Now there's the point—wasting our time. ... Buddha did it. He sat and wasted his time. ... The very idea of aggression and passion could be tamed by sitting practice. Just sitting like a piece of rock is a very important point.

Chögyam Trungpa 1995: 9-10.

Although there is no formal resemblance whatsoever, (II, 1.) **lizard** (1993) reminds me again of Max Ernst, his series featuring *the Bird Loplop*.⁹ Chamberlain's title for this piece is simply **lizard**, even though the fantastic fetishistic creature depicted has precious little of a lizardly nature (*lemur* might've been closer to it); the upright ears could even be a giraffe's tiny horns. Perhaps the author—when determining his titles, the artist is an “author” in the act of lifting a corner of the veil—meant relaxed, like a lizard in the sun. Art, like meditation, requires periods of “time-wasting”, regular sessions dedicated to doing strictly nothing. The trick lies in doing so attentively, without distraction. Hence perhaps the idea of a lizard, seated upright. Then again, it might be an in-joke, calling the creature of his imagination by an endearing diminutive that is simply unfathomable to anyone else.

Technically the stunt was to superimpose a drawing, thickly outlined in black, onto a cheap shawl-like cloth that imitates leopard skin. The viewer (at least an online viewer like myself) is unable to detect where the ersatz leopard skin stops and the painterly intervention begins. Most of the creature is thus delineated, in color wavering between spotted orange, red and brown. This holds equally true for the divan or bench (?) on which it is perched—different from the spotted golden yellow (with some light green accents, hard to account for, meaningwise) of the surroundings. It's a sort of reverse camouflage, with the surroundings adapting to the “lizard's” hues. Which leads me to suspect that Chamberlain here proceeded somewhat like Max Ernst in his *frottages* series, letting certain coloration irregularities guide his hand toward tracing a silhouette, come what might out of it.¹⁰ After the stage of a minimal figuration has emerged, allow an image to impose itself; and only then ‘help a bit’, this time consciously, into further developing it.

Perhaps I, who examined the picture online, may indulge in one more piece of speculation. If this was indeed painted upon a commercially printed leopard skin design, then that horizontal thing down below (a river? riverbanks in brickwork?), is that a zipper, and thus a deliberate trick or optical illusion?

Then there is also that (II, 4) **freaky vase** (1994). Thus called, one presumes, because it took shape thanks to playful alternations between a largely accidental collage layout (of parts from “rejects,” discussed before) and the pursuit of a *predetermined* image, conceived well beforehand. This collage painting is special precisely because of the balance maintained between the two approaches to art, the freely improvisational and the painstaking elaboration of what was half-visualized. Where the one leaves off and the other takes over is hard to tell. Its comical aspect lies in the suggestion that the flower is shown twice, once *de face* and once in profile, like a suspect’s photographic double portrait for a police file. And if either flower, upright in this vase, bears any sort of “facial” expression, it is a grimace.

This shows the artist’s honesty. For your birthday, what can I offer but flowers that, a priori, can be no other than freaky?

If any other artist could’ve created **freaky vase**, it would again have been Max Ernst—who else might even conceive of a Surrealist still life? But it is doubtful that he would ever have indulged in risks such as the ones taken by Sam Chamberlain. In reality, this is a very complex puzzle with an intricate mix of glued on cut-outs and painted design. As so often in his work, *trompe l’oeil* is part of the game, and it has a particularly uncanny quality, seen the sort of effect achieved.

An east-west pictorial translation

I watched Akira Kurosawa's "The Shadow Warrior" (*Kagemusha*), last night; and so how can I not be moved, the next morning, by Sam Chamberlain's (II, 5.) **pond life** (1994)?! And how can I not consider it as among his greatest achievements to date? He accomplishes the best in Japanese wood prints, instantly recognizable as such, while maintaining the fluency which only brushwork can achieve—a Hiroshige woodcut *effect* by different means. And look at the technical restraint again, with application of minimal means. It is as if a young kid had decided that he would try to get an overall effect of the painting he had in mind, but had dared himself to use only three color pencils. The result is amazing.

When we realize that Chamberlain's entire production of the '80s is, in this exhibition, 'boiled down' to a mere five pieces, and that of all of the '90s to no more than six, we can assume that he is his own most severe judge with regard to what works, what is worth keeping, and what is allowed to survive. Hence my earlier guess that rejects are recycled, either as background paper or as material for cut outs, as with Matisse's *papiers collés*.¹¹

A pond's surface is horizontal; and the reflections in the water demand perfect verticals. I can only guess at the nature of the material underneath on which "pond life" eventually materialized. But how did he proceed next? Somehow, perhaps with a razorblade, he eliminated vertical bits of green, so that the remaining green, against a dark blue background, becomes the reeds—elsewhere alternating with the leaves of waterlilies. The lilies are not in season, for Sam Chamberlain's landscape is eternally autumn. And yet, his grey days are shot with so much hidden, inner joy—a celebration of that miraculous and incredible privilege of at times achieving true artistry.

All this to say that, actually speaking, I don't have the slightest idea how Sam Chamberlain pulled it off. And much as I would've loved to be at the show, it is also ideal, in another way, to *not* see through the technique[s] involved. Didn't Ananda K. Coomaraswamy write (somewhere in *The Dance of Shiva*) that

Music is that which you are reminded of by the instruments

The technique is none of my business. But if I had succeeded a piece like **pond life**, I'd be as happy as Hiroshige on *his* best day.

Current works, recent challenges

A new period, mature work, more and more of it. Rejects are less common nowadays. We are here with the work (III, 1.) **avoca bird** (2009) amidst a play with shapes derived from, or reminiscent of, an avocado fruit. But if the assembled parts suggest one thing, it is that something is afloat or a-flutter—hence (this is just my guess) the avoca *bird*. What here intrigues the eye is the sheer impossibility of determining what has been added on, superimposed, collage-d, as opposed to what has been removed, torn off, torn out or, say, decollage-d.

The primary contrast is between the gold of the background (only visible as a narrow frame, reappearing at the cut outs) and the handmade paper that is the supposed ground. It is extremely ingenious and has the freshness of something pulled off effortlessly, in a manner of minutes—Coomaraswamy’s “art that conceals art” again.

One of the most common ways of belittling early abstract art and one of the most insulting things to say about a painter engaged in such work was to compare it to wallpaper. Typically making things difficult for himself, Chamberlain, in (III, 13.) **for a dutch tulip** (2008), gives us forms that to a greater or lesser extent 'represent' tulips, but then (dis)orders and displays them in a formation such as they might well appear, if they *were* a wallpaper pattern. And the effect—one could've guessed—is of course the exact opposite of wallpaper (like the exact opposite of elevator music, which Miles Davis once defined as music only perceived when it stops). Looking at this ode to a Dutch tulip (a single one, depicted or half-depicted as though observed from different points of vantage), one almost catches oneself exclaiming, *passa la primavera!*

Forever hovering, ostensibly, between actually painting and puzzling together bits of pre-painted surfaces—in order perhaps to grant a more important role to “objective chance”, so dear to the Surrealists—Sam Chamberlain is a very fine artist indeed.

Hubert Decler
Kathmandu, 20 XII 2009

Bibliography

[Anonymous] (1989) 1990, *Braque (Discovering the Great Paintings series, vol.22)*, London: Fabbri Publishing.

The painting referred to, *Violin and Jug* (1909/1910), now at the Basle Kunstmuseum, appears therein on pp.10-11.

Chögyam Trungpa 1995, *The Path is the Goal. A basic handbook of Buddhist Meditation*, Boston & London: Shambhala.

Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. (1957) 1965, *The Dance of Shiva. On Indian Art and Culture*, New York: The Noonday Press.

The quotation is after Walt Whitman, pp. 49 & 179, and occurs in the essay, "That Beauty is a State".

Ernst, Max (1934) 1976, *Une Semaine de Bonté* ['A Week of Goodness']—*A Surrealistic Novel in Collage by Max Ernst*, New York: Dover Publications.

Essers, Volkmar 1993, *Henri Matisse (1869-1954), Master of Colour*, Köln: Benedikt Taschen Verlag.

Farhad, Massumeh & Serpil Ba.,ci et al. 2009, *falnama The Book of Omens*, Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery & Smithsonian Institute.

The picture referred to is "The Prince and the Hermit," *Subhat al-abrar* of the *Haft awrang* ("The Seven Thrones", by Jami), Iran, 1556-1562.

Farr, Michael 2001, *Tintin. The Complete Companion*, London: John Murray.

Gasiglia-Laster, Danièle & Arnaud Laster (eds.) 1992, *Jacques Prévert. Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. I, Paris: Gallimard.

Prévert, Jacques (1976) 1977, *canto di primavera* ['Grand Bal du Printemps'], Paris: Gallimard & Roma: Newton Compton editioni (original French version with Italian translation by Bruno Cagli & Raffaello Delfino).

Trungpa: see —> Chögyam Trungpa.

Zappa, Frank w/ Carl Weissner (German transl.) 1996, *Zonx. Texte 1977-1994*, Frankfurt/Main: Zweitausendeins.

Endnotes

¹ See the illustration in the magazine *Le Miroir*, as reproduced in Farr 2001: 46, taken from a weekly serial in which the heroes consisted of twin detectives, ... exactly like the Thompson & Thomson duo of *The Adventures of Tintin*. Hergé stuck to his claim that this was one of those strange coincidences where reality challenges the imaginary. He himself had been inspired by another pair of twins: his father and his uncle. Turning them into a pair of bungling detectives had been his own idea.

² I am of course referring to Max Ernst's 1934 stunt, *Une Semaine de Bonté* ['A Week of Goodness'].

It is extremely hard nowadays to imagine the impact of Ernst's collages at the time of publication, long before Surrealist collage tricks had become a common sight and featured in the ads of conventional products. When I first saw, in 1957, some of Ernst's collages (in the French art magazine *L'oeil*, special "Dada & Surrealism" issue), the mood they conveyed was what one feels on reading forbidden literature (on the Vatican's "Index"), and that of sheer panic.

³ As mentioned by Michel Leiris (quoted in the introduction to Prévert's *Collected Works* [Laster & Laster (eds.) 1992: xii], Prévert, together with Robert Desnos, is

the creator of an original branch within the Surrealist movement, one that introduced a popular tone to it, such as no one had been able to come up with—including a sense of humor that was uniquely his own.

We will have more to say about an identical element in the oeuvre of Sam Chamberlain, where it translates in the first place as a 'light touch', akin to what Trungpa referred to as "an expression of basic goodness."

Prévert first met the widow of Boris Vian at the latter's funeral, then married her soon after. This anecdote is almost a perfect evocation of the feeling tone in Prévert's collages: the discovery of that dimension of playfulness without which life is all too easily reduced to an absurd. It is about the intrusion of the outrageous that, to children, makes perfect sense, in daily life.

⁴ Prévert 1977: 105-106. This translation is more or less literal and far from satisfactory, for it ignores an essential dimension: poetry's randomness as regards how meaning is conveyed because of concerns with consistent rhythm and sound. Thus, in

ces messieurs parlent métaphysique voitures et politique

politique is there in the first place because of its half-rhyme with *métaphysique*. Only in the second place is it there because of the absurd humor involved: the *messieurs'* "metaphysics" does not rise above their Peugeot's, nor goes beyond a world view that includes politicking and *me getting what out of it?* If as much is reflected in the corresponding line in English:

those gentlemen talk metaphysics cars and politics

such is not the case with what comes after, where the adverbs *haut* and *bas* ('loudly', 'softly') become balls for juggling with, switch meanings and associations. Impossible here to remain faithful to what they literally signify, otherwise the parallel randomness which makes up the poem's inner logic, would unravel or collapse. Indeed, the translator has been a bit lazy here, when, upon coming across:

*ces messieurs parlent haut
et puis pour parler femmes ces messieurs parlent argot*

he settled for:

those gentlemen make high talk
and to talk of ladies those gentlemen talk low

Had Prévert intended that, he would've written *ces messieurs parlent bas*, ('softly'/'low') or, perhaps *parlent bas-fonds* ("talk slums[' talk]"). He writes *argot* because it rhymes with *haut*, even though the expression *parlent haut* means the exact opposite of *parlent argot*. Rhyme words possess their own logic, because they have a way of proving things, especially when sung, or for a child when it first learns to speak. When at the age of five, as a

temporary refugee in Switzerland, I, for sheer survival, was forced into learning French, one of the first inscrutable mysteries I encountered in that language was why *malade* ('sick') rhymed with *salade* ('salad'); and how people could live by that.

Needless to say that, after verse *g* in the Prévert poem, with its 'high' and 'low' it only gets worse.

I only indulge in these seemingly irrelevant annotations because this is also how collage works, especially in the case of someone with Chamberlain's acute sensibilities. At times it is the meaning of the imagery as such that dictates the procedure, but just as often it is sheer, formal, pictorial necessity. Imagery may tend to impose one thing, but every so often is unable to argue back against the need for a radically different intervention, a tacit argument from the field of esthetic form. Out of a clear blue sky, a color combination takes precedence and proclaims a sudden "checkmate", impossible to undo. Chamberlain's painterly collage work involves the same strategies that Prévert deployed in his poems.

Poetry works by allusion, through the *barely* outspoken. So in translation we think up approximate equivalents, as close as it gets, getting one parallel rhyme right or one parallel pun out of two. But under no circumstances can we integrate an actual explanation in our evocative translation; as this Italian one does:

Quei signori alti di condizione e corti di cervello

—['high in society and short on brains'] which is almost as if one were to fix a sticker with an explanatory caption beneath every third word—and thereby 'give it all away'. For me, the line falls flat; it deprives the reader of "audience participation" which is why they came to the show. It is the kind of mistake which Sam Chamberlain, in his collage work, will never make [When within an upcoming piece, **sorrows of the student** (1989) discussed below, two halves of a written caption appear, they do *not* constitute an actual title or explanation, but are very much part of the game].

⁵ Which in itself provides a comment on the range of Sam Chamberlain's expression—never mind that his entire production comes under the poorly defined collective term of 'glued things' (*collages*).

As for the *Dancin' Fool* lyrics, cf. the opening stanza, here quoted after Zappa w/ Weissner 1996: 116-119:

Don't know much about dancin'—
(That's why I got this song)
One of my legs is shorter than the other,
'N both my feet's too long—

('Course now, right along with 'em,
I gots no *natural rhythm*),
But I go dancin' ev'ry night,
Hopin' one day I might *get it right!*

I'm a dancin' fool! (x 4)

... ..
When they see me comin',
They all steps aside!
(They has a fit while I commit
My *social suicide!*)

... ..
The beat goes on and I'm so *wrong* (x ...)

I may be totally wrong, but
I'm a dancin' fool! (x 2)

... ..

A further reason I'm adding these lyrics is to avoid being misunderstood. If supra, I defined Sam Chamberlain as a "sober artist", I did not mean to say that the artist is nothing but. Judging by one photograph I've seen, where he reminds me of the young Modigliani, he might even be something of a Night Tripper. And, by turns, a very Constant Gardener.

⁶ Such unintelligible bits also make their appearance in **bordello**, for instance on top of ... (an anachronistic t.v. with an unclear black-&-white image? A mirror that reflects more distortedly than a mere reversal between left and right?) and in the upper left of the non-ceiling.

⁷ I believe Magritte was in the habit of inviting a group of friends for whom, after dinner, he would unveil his latest painting. He then challenged them to come up with a title. At several of these sessions, someone would write down *every* suggestion, then put these up to a vote.

⁸ Literal translation of the comment by the Dutch painter Karel Appel when he was asked about the deeper contents of his work: “*Ah, ik rotzooi maar wat.*”

⁹ Cf. Bisschoff (1987) 1994: 46, *Loplop Introduces a Young Girl* (1930, plaster & various materials on wood) or *ibid.*: 49, *Loplop Introduces Loplop* (1930, oil and various materials on wood).

¹⁰ It seems obvious to me that this is also how some of Ernst’s paintings came into being, in particular *L’ange du Foyer* [‘The Angel of Hearth and Home’ (1937); cf. Bischoff (1987) 1994: 61]. The procedure of *frottage* consisted of ‘tracing’ the natural design in the wood of, for example, an ancient floor, the way children cover coins with paper and gently rub a pencil over the entire surface. Guided by the spontaneously emerging patterns, Ernst would outline and fill in the shapes that imposed themselves by the natural contrasts in the wood and would thereby achieve a pictorial equivalent of the Surrealist technique of *écriture automatique*.

I surmise that Sam Chamberlain—like Max Ernst—was always too much of an artist to let himself be *exclusively* guided by such techniques (even though these theoretical definitions were Ernst’s own). He here, in pictorial terms, echoes the early warning of Louis Aragon, who was not going to put up with *anyone’s* nonsense and spoke out:

Arrant nonsense, even if derived from [the technique of Surrealist] automatic writing, *remains* arrant nonsense.

De tristes imbécilités, même obtenues par écriture automatique, restent de tristes imbécilités.

A child may learn how to make collages. Yet even the most superficial familiarity with the work of Sam Chamberlain will convince the viewer that not a single one of his works was ever the result of frivolous games.

¹¹ Cf. Essers 1993: 78, *Blue Nude IV* (1952) (Musée Henri Matisse, Nice) where it is obvious that the background is a piece of excellent drawing paper with traces of various attempts at a drawing in pencil or charcoal, each one later erased, because it has not been up to Matisse’s expectations. Not only is the background paper a reject, but the same applies to the cut outs themselves, at least two of which reveal more than one shade of blue *painted* on that paper. Most other cut outs consist of either combinations of different kinds of blue or one tone superimposed on another. None of these appear to have been cut out from commercially available, ready-made colored paper. Hence we may well refer to them as “**temporary rejects**” that eventually found an unforeseen application.

By contrast, the *Blue Nude II* (1952) (Estate Henri Matisse) on the cover of Essers 1993, appears collaged together from uniform readymade paper (no brushstrokes are recognizable on it). The background, too, is here a fresh blank sheet.

All of which goes to show that there are no hard and fast rules. A muted playfulness—this is the definition—belongs to both Matisse’s and Chamberlain’s *papiers collés*. It is about producing something out of this world, as if with one’s hands tied.

à

suivre