

*life is a limbo dance*¹
kate o'connor & cara levine

The exhibition's title *Jail Break!* puzzled me and still somewhat does. A little. I like titles that might be nonsensical, that may be absurd or prosaically fanciful titles and would be satisfied with a sort of humorous meaninglessness. I think it is probably all of those things but Cara Levine and Kate O'Connor do have more elusive matters in mind.

The title does seem so out of sorts to my easterner's sense of where the exhibition in fact is – a garage attached to a California bungalow. But then, art always disadvantages everyday facts and realities as it works to persuade us to see things differently. The exclamation mark, of course, gives the title a spoken word immediacy as if overhearing a Hollywood soundtrack as the prisoners have just been discovered – “Jail Break!!” and accusatory hands point toward the offending offenders in their bid for freedom on the other side. A Looney Tune Saturday morning TV cartoon came to mind as well as the Coen brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* with wonderment of what exactly happens after the great escape?

Surely, with the title, Cara and Kate wish to put into our minds thoughts of escape that we all experience, of yearning for things that are elsewhere and otherwise, and, perhaps more personally, a sense of their feelings of artistic impoundment that like all reservoirs is full of potential? Their use of a simple grammatical punctuation warns us, I'd say, that we should be wary of becoming sententious about all this, because they are not! There is after all something fundamentally, if excruciatingly, comic in the essence of things whether its art or life, a theme that cuts across their two bodies of work.

It's 51 years and a new century since Warhol began exhibiting his now iconic works and almost that long since the likes of Lewitt and Nauman established their aesthetics. On first seeing Kate's “heads” I thought of Warhol's pop portrait heads. I became aware of Kate's interest in Philip Guston's roughly sketched heads, seemingly slap dashed, from the 70s. Cara titled a recent sculpture *Experiments in GhostBox for Ghost of Sol Lewitt*, and in conversation made several passing references to Nauman.

It is not that these men are especially important in the personal art histories of either O'Connor or Levine, but they seem to be a *presence*. Partly it is

that the aesthetics impulses represented by those artists – aesthetics that are to one degree or another minimalistic - were washed away before their time by the returning tide of a grossly baroque expressionist impulse. Both Cara and Kate seem aligned in thinking that less is more, that simple is better. And partly the presence of those artists is a social negative. As Cara put it, she feels “up against the big white guys.”

Perhaps it is a truth that all artists, if they are at all serious about their practice, are attempting to escape to new territory, into new territories, to break away from what has been and what is toward what could be?

Warhol’s images of Marilyn and Elvis did come into my consciousness on seeing Kate’s heads. And, honestly, I also thought of the vaguely silly but ubiquitous “happy/smiley face” with minimal information, the least needed to “represent” a human face. Equally, I thought of the talent-driven graphic illustrations with their limited capacity beyond the moment that are in publications everywhere; and here I thought too of the American artist who was remarkably effortless with pen & ink illustration, Ben Shahn.

That is a lot of conflicting thoughts and references. Maybe it is precisely in that confluence that the strength of Kate’s somewhat flippant drawings lies?

Like Shahn, and for that matter Warhol, Kate has great capacity to render with a delicate and a sure hand and, like the two big white guys, works many sides of the creative fence. The garish sprayed colours that give a flash of body to the skeletal features sketched with the lithe lines of ink bring the kind of social realisms that Shahn could achieve in his day right into the often cartoonish realities of 2013. Ours is hardly the same black and white world as those pre-post-modernist years of depression and war.

Thinking of that smiley face image when looking at Kate’s sketchy heads is, in part anyway, an acknowledgement that her work is firmly grounded, not in Warhol’s pop culture, as in today’s mass culture wherein a viewer has but a nanosecond in which to attend to...anything. Yet with such minimal materially Kate can catch so much that is human and often droll.

Of course, with Cara’s video *RoyGeeBiv* (2013) time is essential-12 minutes and 58 seconds. Shot in colour in winter, it portrays a grey almost black and white world reminiscent of early b/w art videos. But behind Cara are 40 years of artists’ experiments with video and of corporate technical developments. The weather looks raw but the representation is not. In fact,

although the video achieves more, it is also a terrific portrait of the beautiful and slightly banal winter landscape up here in the northern, but not too northern, parts of the continent.

The title refers to the acronym for the sequence of hues that commonly describe a rainbow, red through violet. In the video Cara womanhandles her sculpture *Greybow* through the wintry landscape, up hill and down dale. The sculpture is big enough and heavy enough but mainly awkward enough to make the viewing experience a little funny, a little sad, a little frustrating, a little maddening. In the end it seems a futile effort: she found a setting she liked for *Greybow*, left it only for it to soon fall over. Rainbows induce fantasies about pots of gold and the fabulous “somewhere” over the rainbow. For me it was uncertain what fantasy maybe invoked by Cara’s compelling mythic adventure, both herculean and sisyphean.

¹ Early in Jim Jarmusch’s jail break saga *Down by Law*, a camera shot briefly reveals an assertion scratched on a wall:
Life is a limbo dance but it’s a question of where you get down, not how low you can get.

John Murchie
Upper Sackville, New Brunswick Canada