

Claudia Bitran: *Be drunk* Walter Storms Galerie, by Samuel Anderson

One can view Claudia Bitran's body of work as not singular but as *bodies*, plural. This is not to imply caprice; said bodies spring from lifelong absorptions, e.g. James Cameron's *Titanic*, which Bitran has been doggedly recreating shot by shot since 2014. The paragonic scale of her fascinations simply necessitate custom frameworks. The *Titanic*, or Britney Spears, to name another particularly salient "body," come with unique sets of demands and objectives.

If rent was no object, I could imagine Bitran's bodies filling a row of separate but linked ateliers. Behind door number one, I'd find steamship dioramas alongside attachés of yellowing Rose Dawson nudes. Behind door number two, a latex reproduction of the "Oops...I Did It Again" catsuit, ticket stubs from a Las Vegas meet-and-greet.

Of course, in reality, Bitran's practice isn't so literally diffuse. But her interest in the multiplex theater of late capitalism coupled with her DIY methods conjure a kind of double exposure: the uncanny imagery and its sprawling, clandestine means of reproduction. In the long double-shadow of these dueling projections, Bitran is seen, or half-seen, rapidly shape-shifting to meet the demands of her outsized fixations. For instance, in her ongoing *Titanic* reproduction, Bitran plays Rose in every scene. Out of frame, she's storyboarding the next shot or filing grant applications. She's director and star, registrar and head of development, master and muse.

Painting and drawing, besides being Bitran's first artistic mastery, comprise a discreet body of their own. My introduction to Bitran was a painting show at the Spring/Break art fair entitled "Frenzy," wherein I gravitated to a stop-motion video of a young woman succumbing to some strong drink. I would learn the video was derived from a painting displayed nearby; below the hardened surface of the corresponding painting were hundreds of layered, incremental variations of the inebriated subject. Before painting over them, Bitran digitally photographed each variation, as well as the still-visible top layer. Looped sequentially, this palimpsest construed the woman's drunkenness as never-ending, her downward mobility inevitable. The paired works—which, in some sense, are one and the same—as much encapsulate Bitran's layered, labor-intensive practice as do *Titanic* or Britney. Here, again, Bitran's generative composition is equal to more than the sum of its parts.

The inspirations behind Bitran's recent paintings are of a different and newer visual economy than *Titanic* or Britney—both of which were late-stage exports of a pre-online Western monoculture. By contrast, said paintings, like that of the drunk, falling woman, are reproductions of videos sourced from faddish mobile-driven sites like TikTok, Vine and World Star. Yet Bitran's wandering lens helps us distill certain truths embedded in our seemingly ever-evolving visual culture—a stability, or lack of stability, pushing it along. Visual innovation, whether in the excesses of the monoculture, or the excesses of the algorithm, must comport to long-running modes of storytelling—namely that one dating back to the Book of Genesis: the Fall. Failure and falling drive the plot forward, and also drive Bitran's multi-pronged practice: "The fall enchants us and is fundamental to storytelling," Bitran herself writes, "because we feel a voyeuristic safety

when looking at a tragedy from afar—a morbid curiosity that entertains us and allows us to experience that pain without having to feel it.¹

The ways in which Bitran reenacts the Fall are manifold, yet she, and by extension the viewer, is always positioned as a modern flâneur, bearing witness to that inevitable destabilization. At “Be drunk” at Walter Storms Galerie, we are the online flâneur: The show’s inspirational crux is a cache of viral or long-circulated videos implicating humans and animals alike in the grotesquerie of consumption and expulsion. Shirtless teens emit berry-colored vomit, while seagulls attempt with blind ambition to swallow invertebrates whole. However wide-ranging, the subjects fall under a recognizable online paradigm: the Epic Fail. Life online is merely the original sin on a loop. Sensory overload careens into mortification.

The Epic Fail, a kind of web-coined brand name for the Fall, was among the first forms of online schadenfreude. In such videos, someone or something is almost always falling, or is at least on the verge of doing so. One recalls the early example of the collapse of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge. (If not, Googling “bridge fail” brings it up.) The video captures a just-completed bridge cartoonishly yielding to high-powered winds. Its linear slab of suspended concrete twists and warps to physics-defying degrees, helpless as a bedsheet.

Such videos offer a crude visual metaphor for the cycle of construction and destruction by which the modern worldview is oriented—the subject of Hito Steyerl’s text “In Free Fall.” Steyerl draws a link between linear perspective, or the way in which humans are inclined to see and interact with the world, and modern constructs like capitalism: “The use of the horizon to calculate position gave seafarers a sense of orientation, thus also enabling colonialism and the spread of a capitalist global market, but also became an important tool for the construction of the optical paradigms that came to define modernity, the most important paradigm being that of so-called linear perspective.²” An overarching link between these phenomena is fallibility. And yet we cling to them, just as a videographer watches a bridge plummeting beneath the horizon and into the underlying river.

In the free market economy, even failures are reinforcing. Watching a spectacular failure reinforces our belief in success. Ginned up by pro-capitalist promises, we view the Titanic sinking, or Britney’s breakdown, or any given person or thing bottoming out in self-injurious fashion, through the same framework. Modernity has made the Fall a capitalist parable and thus entirely viewable; we may flinch, but we must ultimately laugh. The attendant schadenfreude all trickles down from a common source: our inbred desire to see the Fall to its conclusion, which in turn allows us to orient ourselves. Our shared belief in opportunism, in the American dream, justifies and neutralizes the pain.

But Bitran is determined to press on the bruise. To not only reproduce but magnify our perceptual afflictions. Amid the disorienting new realities of the pandemic, she began to trace

¹ Claudia Bitran, “Never Let Go,” (2020)

² Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective” *e-flux journal*, issue 24 (April 2011).

the historical arc of our visual culture—from its familiar, smutty excesses, e.g. drunk videos, to Baudelaire’s aforementioned archetype, the flâneur.

In addition to reenacting the modern mode of flânerie—surfing the net, rather than wandering through a physical landscape, “Be drunk” at Walter Storms Galerie channels a competing Baudelairean impulse: to be inebriated. Each painting in the series shows a freeze-frame from a different video, each of which is a bastardization of an image from Baudelaire’s poem, “Be Drunk.” In the poem, a series of images, “the wind, the wave, the star, the bird, the clock, everything that is flying, everything that is groaning,” evokes the passage of time and the accretion of progress. But the speaker names these stimuli only to disengage with them, evincing his desire to stop time, to recuse himself from the machine of progress:

You have to always be drunk. That's all there is to it—it's the only way. So as not to feel the horrible burden of time that breaks your back and bends you to the earth, you have to be continually drunk.³

He seems to hint at a lament for the flâneur—that which Benjamin would later forcefully bestow on Baudelaire. Benjamin saw the flâneur as not a free agent enthralled by modern life, but as a lonely prisoner of circumstance; a “prince, who is everywhere in possession of his incognito.”⁴ Baudelaire’s prescription to be drunk foreshadows the unhappy compromise of modernity: That in whelming our senses, we also dull them. And that over time this leads to an effacement of the self.

The videos and corresponding paintings in “Be drunk” multiply the paradox expressed in the “Drunk” speaker’s lethargic flânerie: “The wave” takes out a woman posing on a rock. “The bird” is now eating “the star.” In collapsing these polar inspirations—Baudelaire and online videos—Bitran may be suggesting that in buying into a visual economy, in going so far as to fuse our own likenesses to it, we have prophesied the epic failure of our imagined self. She may also be once again borrowing that ever-reverberating line from Ms. Spears: *They want more? Well, I'll give them more.*

³ Baudelaire, C., & Hamburger, M. (1973). *Twenty prose poems*. London: J. Cape.

⁴ Baudelaire, n.d., as quoted in Benjamin, 1940/69: 40.