

## THE INNOCENT AND THE ADULT: THE COLLISION OF TWO WORLDS IN THE WORK OF MARCEL DZAMA

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This paper focuses on an approach to childhood within the work of Marcel Dzama, a Winnipeg artist born in 1974 and now working out of New York City. The first section considers Dzama's childhood and its impact on his artistic practice. Central to this discussion is *The Ghost of Picabia will Corrupt the Souls of the Youth* (2007) in relation to Dzama's understanding of history and its often terrifying impact on the younger generation (fig. 1).

Dzama's artistic vocabulary is heavily influenced by his own youth, with which he maintains a strong connection even as his style continues to evolve. His work references his Winnipeg origins, where he grew up, went to university and eventually attended the Royal Art Lodge collaborative with several friends, launching his career. While certainly on the periphery of contemporary art production, an upbringing in Winnipeg provided a unique perspective on the world. It has variously been described as isolated, remote and blank, mainly because of its endless, cold winters. This sense of isolation, combined with the fact that geographical remoteness meant that, during his childhood, Dzama and fellow Winnipeggers received news mainly by radio, created a sense of distance from the world at large.<sup>1</sup> This is conveyed aesthetically throughout his work. His floating characters seem beyond any particular place or time, existing only in the blank, white space of Dzama's imagination. Living in New York City since 2004, Winnipeg has become an almost mythological place for Dzama. He explains, "It feels like you're telling stories that are already mythical. You don't realize until you leave how different it is from everywhere else."<sup>2</sup> In interviews Dzama likes to explain just how significant his experiences as a young person were in creating his artistic approach and his visual vocabulary. In an interview for *Border Crossings*, a cultural quarterly published in Winnipeg, he recounts some examples:

"When I was quite young, our school was being expanded, and they had these trailers with a railing on the bottom so kids couldn't crawl under them, I was in grade five, and one recess me and a friend removed some of the railing and these bats came flying out. That image really stuck with me. I didn't even know there were bats in Winnipeg, I guess I had never stayed up past nine o'clock and had never seen them. I'm sure there were only four or five bats, but it seemed like a cave had just sprung open...With the octopi, someone was telling me about a pet store or an aquarium where fish were mysteriously disappearing, so they set up a surveillance camera to see what was happening. What they saw was that the octopus would come out at night and go into the other tanks, eat the fish and then crawl back into its own tank. After I heard that, I had to start drawing them."<sup>3</sup>

In another interview, with Spike Jonze, Dzama talks about his initial relationship with drawing: "as a kid, I had a dark period and started drawing to escape my life. That's when I started inventing my own world."<sup>4</sup> In 2003, Dzama collaborated on the book *Bed, Bed, Bed*, with the band 'They Might Be Giants'. In the book he illustrates the imaginary and the everyday world as several children, accompanied by a troop of fantastical

creatures, prepare for bed. One of the four stories features a sister and brother as they ready themselves for sleep, recalling all the exciting events of the day (from practicing the guitar to hanging out with friends). In one image, the sister, brother and their pink octopus companion brush their teeth together before settling in for the night (fig. 2).

Dzama consistently maintains a child-like visual vocabulary, channeling the irrational, imaginary and often silly or uncanny universe, rather than attempting to depict a rational, ordered version of the physical world. Referring to the vast repertoire of re-occurring characters that make up his imagery, Dzama writes, “they’re just images that pop into my head...I don’t really know what they are.”<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to look at Dzama’s work in conversation with fellow artists who have tried to connect with this child-like sensibility. We can consider his collaboration pieces while a part of the Royal Art Lodge, from 1996-2008, where the aim seemed to be a temporary reversion to childhood through “low” art forms, in a shared reconnection with childhood (fig. 3). The focus was on letting the wandering, melancholic mind and its re-occurring thoughts dictate what will be on the page.<sup>6</sup> One series by The Royal Art Lodge focused specifically on children, in an attempt to access their universe. There works can be read in light of Baudelaire’s ideas on the genius: “genius is nothing more than childhood regained at will - a childhood now equipped for self-expression with manhood’s capacities and a power of analysis.”<sup>7</sup> The importance of the innocent eye is constantly being enforced throughout art history. In the words of Matisse “The artist has to look at everything as though he saw it for the first time: he has to look at life as he did when he was a child and if he loses that faculty, he cannot express himself in an original, that is, personal, way.”<sup>8</sup>

Using his child-like visual vocabulary, rife with make-believe characters, Dzama manages to engage with some serious, adult themes. His last few series, *The Course of Human History Personified* (2005) and *Even the ghost of the past* (2008), speak to his fascination with history and its effect on the younger generation. Specific events in humanity’s past have “prompted Dzama to broadly consider history, its state of inevitable repetition, and whether subsequent generations are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.”<sup>9</sup> Dzama explains:

“I began to think about generations of people as a collective unconscious and how at important events, such as war, people always ask the same questions, like how could this have happened - the same type of people generation after generation, with different faces but the same questions. They felt like antiquated pictures of time frozen in history.”<sup>10</sup>

The same narratives of history - war, exploitation, and abuse - keep getting re-played, and become almost mythological rather than educational. For Dzama, the victims of these cycles and our re-committing atrocities of the past are the now innocent children, the adults of the next generation, who will inevitably make the same mistakes as their predecessors. In *Bloomsday* Dzama references James Joyce, his oversized head floating at the center of the image surrounded by a ghoulish dance of walking trees and a ring of liquefying white skeletons (fig. 4). Five bodies dangle from flying bats while half-horse, half-men charge across the scene, raising sinister red banners. The title of the drawing refers, at once, to the day on which the events in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* take place and, also, to “doomsday: an unleashing of savage, mythic, anarchic violence.”<sup>11</sup>

“Dzama’s fascination with James Joyce seems to come from Joyce’s sense of human life and history as governed by the patterns of myth.”<sup>12</sup> Dzama’s works play on a collective visual vocabulary, from uniforms to weapons, in order to comment on this phenomenon, the clash of the adult and child’s worlds. He presents exaggerated pseudo-historical scenes like episodic childhood memories or scenes from a dream.<sup>13</sup> While they refer to history they exist outside any recognizable time and space. Jason Tougaw describes Dzama’s approach: “The images are simultaneously horrific and absurd, their metaphors less ideological statements than philosophical observations of the collective responsibility for atrocity.”<sup>14</sup>

*The Ghost of Picabia will Corrupt the Souls of the Youth*, from 2007 is a strong example of these evolving themes. In this piece Dzama references art history more specifically and a troubling pattern of male artists exerting power over their young female models. This can be understood more broadly as a comment on the uneven dynamic of power between men and women over many generations and, the often-terrifying implications

On his artistic journey Dzama develops what he calls “weird obsessions” with the work and ideologies of other artists.<sup>15</sup> One such obsession is with the Dada movement, and consequently the surrealists. He remembers encountering Marcel Duchamp’s *Etant Donnees* (1946-1966), a sculptural piece featuring the nude, lifeless body of a woman in a grassy setting, seen only through a pair of peepholes in a wooden door. When he was approximately ten or eleven, he recalls, “I didn’t think much of it; I didn’t understand it. It definitely went over my head. I do remember the girl lying there and being disturbed by it, not knowing what was going on.”<sup>16</sup> Dzama was also intrigued by the imagery in some of Dada artist Francis Picabia’s work that responds to the development of prosthetics for World War I survivors. Picabia approaches themes of the hybrid man-machine, as seen in *The Child Carburetor* from 1919, which speaks to the idea of the mechanical child (fig. 5). The image is of a series of mechanical parts that make up a machine with an unknown use. In this work, Picabia seems to comment on the mechanization of human life, speaking about the younger generation who are living with the sometimes dehumanizing realities of the post-war technological boom. “With irony, cynicism and anarchical nihilism, The Dadaists engaged in provocative behavior to shock society out of a state of complacency.”<sup>17</sup> Dzama found he related to this feeling of anxiety surrounding modernity and a desire to awaken people to it.<sup>18</sup> Art history became a point of access for him. In *The Ghost of Picabia will Corrupt the Souls of the Youth* he is paying direct homage to Picabia, although as the title suggests this may not be an entirely positive recognition. The work visually references Picabia’s *The Fig Leaf* (1922) (fig. 6). His painting is of a nearly life size male all black in silhouette. His nose and white eye socket are the only detailed features other than a large prominent green leaf which covers where his genitals would be. His leg rests on a black sphere encircled by the words “Dessin Francais” in bold black text. In this work Picabis references Ingres’s *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, 1808 (fig. 7).<sup>19</sup> Ingres’s work is considered a revolutionary and modern depiction of Oedipus. The prominent use of nudity, of both Oedipus and the Sphinx, references ancient traditions and adds a level of eroticization. Some have suggested that Oedipus’s gaze, directed at the Sphinx’s breast, penetrating it, is in fact a representation of the vision of Ingres himself.<sup>20</sup> For both Ingres and Picabia, the nude body takes on additional meaning and speaks to their individual understandings of sexuality and the male/female relationship. In *The Fig Leaf*, Picabia references both Christianity (the fig leaf) and ancient

mythology (Oedipus) to discuss the loss of innocence. A fierce proponent of sexual freedom, and a follower of Marquis de Sade, Picabia also comments on sexual censorship by positioning 'the leaf' prominently in both the work and the title. It is precisely this aspect of Picabia's lifestyle, as the "divine Marquis de Sade,"<sup>21</sup> Picabia as sexual exploiter that Dzama is commenting on. There is a definite tension as Dzama both honors and condemns one of his greatest artistic influences. We can compare Picabia's *Star Dancer with her Dance School* from 1913, an example of the artist's depiction of dancers, to Dzama's piece: while the style is different, both pieces approach the theme of young dancers, although to very different ends (fig. 8). Both pieces speak to the lifestyle promoted by Marquis de Sade, a lifestyle of 'Libertine sexuality' and thus devoid of most moral restraints. While Picabia's piece celebrates his unrestricted relationship with these young dancers as models, Dzama's work questions it and analyses it precisely from the perspective of morality and the young girls' lived experiences.

The formal elements of *Dzama's The Ghost of Picabia* speak to his opinion of Picabia's infamous behavior. The larger all black male characters, on the periphery of the image, are physically controlling and confining the young female dancers who are dressed in something between military garb and a schoolgirl uniform. No one looks directly at the viewer, creating the feeling that we have happened upon something secret. The blank setting evades specific time and location. What we see are a group of eight girls and one masked woman being encouraged, by whip, to dance for their male onlookers. There are also a dozen red birds (one decapitated by sword), a dog and a disembodied oversized head in the scene. The scene is bleak: what was once dancing feels more like military drills or boot camp. The black mask on the adult female could imply adopted anonymity, likely because of her shameful association with the violent male characters and the chauvinist dynamic they represent. In this piece, Dzama is again referencing a negative pattern within history: The power that the sadistic male (or the male artist) exerts over the girl (or in this case models and dancers). Regardless of whether or not the male characters are a direct reference to Picabia, Dzama's use of this artist's name is apt considering his reputation. The subtle becomes overt. In Dzama's depiction, the emotional power exerted by these men becomes physical and violent. The reference here is likely to Picabia's reputation as womanizer as he was known for having affairs with his young female dancers, who appear as nudes in his later work (figs. 9 & 10). Dzama explains his take on this power dynamic that often put young women at a disadvantage and explains, "I find that I relate to the feminine side of things, mostly because of the terrible things men have done in history and how badly they have gutted it. It almost feels like it would be a relief to have females in charge. I think a lot more progressive things could happen from that."<sup>22</sup> Specifically referencing Picabia's legacy, and the chauvinist stereotype he falls into, Dzama is commenting on how careless, selfish adults are continually wounding children by subjecting them to traumatic experiences (in this case sexual exploitation) that shatter their delicate world. Dzama's work is unsettling precisely because it collides these two worlds. Generations of innocent youth are being abandoned in an explicitly adult world of smoking, drinking, sex, emotional abuse and physical violence. Dzama's *The Ghost of Picabia will Corrupt the Souls of the Youth* is unsettling and effective precisely because it plays on this delicate tension between the child and the adult world.

## FIGURES



FIG. 1

Marcel Dzama. *The Ghost of Picabia will Corrupt the Souls of Youth*. 2007. Ink, watercolour, graphite on paper.



FIG. 2

Marcel Dzama. *Untitled from the series Bed, Bed, Bed*. 2003.



FIG. 3

Royal Art Lodge. *Untitled*, from the series *Women and Children*. 2007-2008. Mixed media on wood.



FIG. 4

Marcel Dzama. *Bloomsday*. 2005. Ink, watercolor on paper.





**FIG. 5**

**Francis Picabia.** *The Child Carburetor.* 1919.

Oil, enamel, metallic paint, gold leaf, graphite, crayon on stained plywood. 49 ¾ x 39 7/8 inches.



**FIG. 6**

**Francis Picabia.** *The Fig Leaf.* 1922. Oil on canvas.



FIG. 7

Jean August Dominique Ingres. *Oedipus and the Sphinx*.

1808. Oil on canvas. 56 x74 inches.

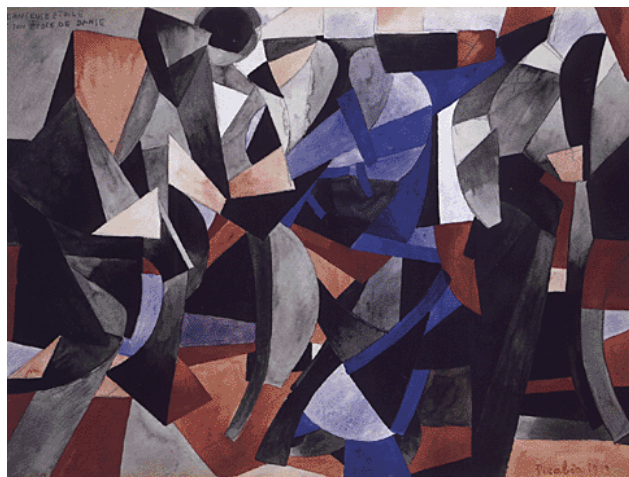


FIG. 8

Francis Picabia. *Star Dancer with her Dance School*.

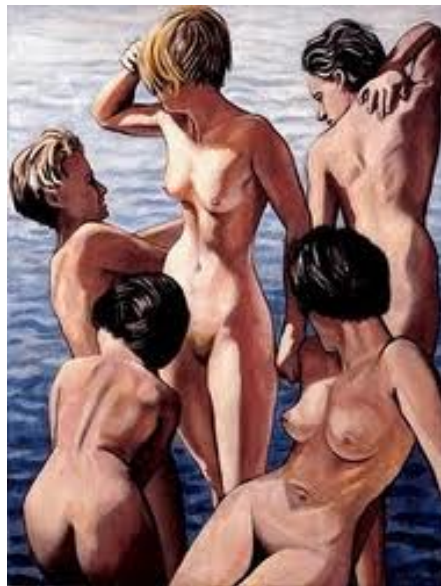
1913. Watercolour on paper. 22 x 30 inches.





**FIG. 9**

**Francis Picabia.** *Two Women with Poppies.* 1942-44. Oil on cardboard. 105 x 75 centimeters.



**FIG. 10**

**Francis Picabia.** *Five Women.* 1941-43. Oil on cardboard.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Tree with Roots: Exhibition Guide," *Ikon Gallery*, 24 May-16 July 2006.
- <sup>2</sup> Robert Enright, "The Gallery of Ingenious Inventions: An Interview with Marcel Dzama," *Border Crossings* (May 2010): 30.
- <sup>3</sup> Enright, 31.
- <sup>4</sup> Spike Jonze, "Interview," *Even the Ghost of the Past*, ed. Julia Joren and Cameron Shaw (New York: David Zwirner, Steidl, 2008) 1.
- <sup>5</sup> "Tree with Roots."
- <sup>6</sup> Guido Bartorelli, *Royal Art Lodge: Women and Children* (Petra: Pavoda/Emploi, Italy, 2008).
- <sup>7</sup> Jonathan David Fineberg, *The Innocent Eye: Children's Art and the Modern Artist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) 5.
- <sup>8</sup> Fineberg, 18.
- <sup>9</sup> Jonze, 2.
- <sup>10</sup> Jonze, 2.
- <sup>11</sup> Daniel Baird, "Marcel Dzama: The Course of Human History Personified at David Zwirner and Jon Pylypchuk: I have though deep into this trouble at Friedric Petzel Gallery," *The Brooklyn Rail* (Oct. 2005) <<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2005/10/art/marcel-dzama-the-course-of-human-history>>.
- <sup>12</sup> Baird.
- <sup>13</sup> James Patten, *Drawings by Marcel Dzama: From the Bernardi Collection* (Windsor, Ont.: Art Gallery of Windsor, 2004) 8.
- <sup>14</sup> Jason Tougaw. "Marcel Dzama's Notebook" *The Course of Human History Personified* (New York: D. Zwirner, 2005) 24.
- <sup>15</sup> Enright, 34.
- <sup>16</sup> Jonze, 6.
- <sup>17</sup> Patten 8.
- <sup>18</sup> Cameron Shaw, "Even the Ghost of the Past: Dzama's Odeum of Imagination," *Even the Ghost of the Past*, ed. Julia Joren and Cameron Shaw (New York: David Zwirner, Steidl, 2008) 4.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Fig Leaf by Francis Picabia*, Tate Collection (July 2008) <<https://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=11848>>.
- <sup>20</sup> Lowell Edmunds, *Oedipus* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 107.
- <sup>21</sup> Paul Eluard, "Dada's Dada," *The New York Observer* (22 Jan. 2008) <<http://www.observer.com/2008/dada-s-dada>>.
- <sup>22</sup> Enright, 39.

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