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TO BE A PILGRIM: WALTON FORD

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO Walton Ford was making small illustrations for the diary of an ancestor of his who had lived on a Southern plantation. The stories were about slavery and slaves; the diarist was a woman, so not quite a slaveholder, just confusedly complicit. The atrocities revealed in her diary were of the everyday, common, complicated sort during slavery times. She wrote, for example, that when her father sold off the two little girls she used to dress up like dolls, she missed them very much. Her last name, Walton, was included in the images along with Walton Ford's own.

Photocopied as black and white posters and plastered around downtown Manhattan, these pictures were quietly stunning. Their statement was in the realm of art primarily because it was in the larger realm of U.S. culture, not because they'd invented some new art style or trick. The posters weren't graffiti, and weren't slick and adlike. They seemed confessional, in an intelligent way, and honestly humble.

In the South, it's still not unusual to hear defenses of the plantation system. And it's normal to hear defenses of the South itself, in ways that mix nostalgia and fantasy monstrously. But it is rare for a white Southerner to look disinterestedly at the South's legacy. Ford did, and implicated the rest of the U.S. at the same time. He didn't pretend to an attitude of superiority, nor to one of undue guilt. His position seemed that of a thoughtful person who, having perceived some typically avoidable truths about the U.S., didn't try to escape the realities but instead straightforwardly proclaimed them, showed them.

Of course it's easy to poke at the U.S. opportunistically in one's art. It's even within an American tradition to do so; to point at the agreed-upon follies of "less-enlightened" Americans for the comfort of some elite or another. Ford, though, seems to have placed himself (or to have recognized his place) not as an observer but within American culture, which he treats with intelligent and analytical perception—and intolerance. It is a valuable and rare combination.

FORD IS A TRUE ICONOCLAST. As an insider he knows where the icons are kept and what sorts of beliefs they hold in stasis. His recent work is a series of paintings, begun in late 1990, which take on the beginning of American painting, its "spirituality," the country's history, the little house on the prairie, and John James Audubon, all from the perspective of unediting the imagery of the American story. One picture is worth a thousand words in our knowledge of the past. We tend to believe the images, the paintings, simply because there is little acknowledged discourse in which to argue. Especially in the U.S ., where we are constantly told a complex lie as though it were history and also told that Americans have no use for history, visual portrayals of the physical land and of Americans doing things on it have a strong hold on knowledge and imagination.

Ford seems to know early American art as though constantly aware that he grew up with it and needs to engage it. Not only do his paintings look like their older models, there is a stiff quirkiness in his style that makes his canvases seem as though there had actually been some dementedly honest early-American painter. I say "honest" because Ford includes everything the original artist omitted. Maybe at first his paintings might have said to the artists of those days no more than "You forgot the flies; there must've been many flies." Then flies became for him the same type of symbol that eagles and bluebirds were for them, except that flies symbolize not nobility and peacefulness but putridity.

I've heard it said that Ford isn't such a good draftsman, but most of the paintings he addresses in this series weren't at all well painted themselves. They're part of history's large body of art in which the picture takes precedence over the techniques of painting. Probably the largest part of American painting, taken as a whole, falls into this category. If Ford's work does so too, we must say that his primary interest is his subject matter; he is presenting visual narratives. If he painted with greater virtuosity the pictures might lose their power and also their

"authenticity." This authenticity that does not come from technique looks more as though it came from rage.

IN AN EARLIER group of paintings in a very different style, Ford portrayed the realities (instead of the sentimentalities) of adolescence. In a work called *Lunch Break with Nature Boy*, 1986–87, some boys are sitting around in a room. A slightly older boy bursts through the door holding a long black snake. "Nature Boy" is fearless at catching wildlife and then using it to scare kids. You may have known him when you were a child.

Audubon, who seems to be a special project of Ford's, was not exactly Nature Boy. He was a full-grown monster who for years made a living by killing birds and animals and shipping their skins to Europe. A perfect American type of the very bad sort, he had to have taken a special joy in death and conquest. Audubon's bird paintings, often touted for their "lifelike" accuracy, actually look quite strange, the postures weirdly distorted, as in some painful ballet. This is because the birds were all dead and arranged for display, like puppets. Once Audubon had a live eagle and wanted to kill it so he could paint it. To have a bird entire, rather than mangled and shot full of holes, was an opportunity too good to pass up. Audubon tried to kill the eagle with poison and with gas, and it took days.

Walton Ford has a painting called *A Spasm for Audubon*, 1991. Audubon, wearing an Indian robe that could also be a Napoleonic cape (one of Ford's favorite metaphors), sits with his easel, brushes, rifle, tomahawk, and calipers in a clearing in early America's impenetrably dense forest. A dead eagle is posed, if that's the right word, on a once magnificent tree that has been cut back to a stump as though with a chain saw. Audubon looks sickly; perhaps he has poisoned himself killing the eagle. The beautiful early-American sunset beyond the forest—there are many sunsets in this series; the artist faces us west—mixes the Hudson school with Caspar David Friedrich. But the forest itself looks kind of burnt, and high in the air, almost invisible among the trees, a ghostly Iroquois "false face" mask, an unsettling spirit, stares out from it, in a symbolic haunting. The host is keeping an eye on the destructive guest. Ford takes the tradition of symbolism in classical European painting and with a funny twist on American bravado exaggerates it by going it one or two better. He does the "stage spotlight" lighting of heroic painting to the point of absurdity, but the humor is incredibly sad.

In the Field with Audubon, 1991, shows the three bears (but they are all cubs). Audubon and

other thugs, with attendant dogs, have driven them up into a tree. Though the gang carries rifles, the point isn't to shoot the three bears, but to set the tree on fire. The men are having their sport. To kill animals for pleasure has of course a long aristocratic tradition in Europe. In America it obtained its democracy, and in one form or another it is almost compulsory here. It is part of the American religion, which makes it patriotic.

Killing animals is also scientific. The buyers of Audubon's skins were European museums and scientists. In the brightly lit foreground of *The Naming if Names*, 1990, some empirical zoologist holds in one hand a dead bird and with the other writes in a notebook. He faces a large pile of animals killed for his interest. Behind him, in the darker part of the painting, two men are gutting and skinning more animals. The investigation of life in process and in whole relationships is a relatively new idea in science. It's vivisection that's compulsory in many U.S. schools as the proper way to impart knowledge about life. Ford's paintings show us the historical background, the known but almost unconscious construct, of American culture's feelings about the physical land on which it sits. They also illuminate (that silly spotlight!) America's confusion of science with conquest, and how we are educated into such attitudes through images.

IN *FALSE FACE*, 1990, a European-looking family on horseback rides out of a painting by Bruegel into the land of the Last Mohican. Another Iroquois mask grins at them from deep within the forest primeval. Perhaps they have not noticed this false face, but the horse maybe has, for it has stumbled in panic, throwing its riders. Just as well it did, because they were all about to kill themselves galloping over a cliff. The spotlight shines brightest on the baby, which is flying through the air toward the abyss. In its white gown and with its appearance of pleasant unconcern, it looks like a prophetic little diving angel; an involuntary suicide.

The painting is very like the jokes American Indians tell each other about "whites." Its metaphoric heavy-handedness works as humor, but the humor is about American self-destructiveness and obliviousness. Ford accomplishes American Indian jokes often, and they are remarkable. He portrays Native Americans without seeming to appropriate either the images or the "plight." Often it seems that Americans have no way of accepting the kind of joke that contains truths that seem obvious to anyone else. They may outright refuse to hear (or to tell) such a joke, or they may exclude themselves from one—tell it on the "other

Americans." Tom Wolfe, say, in his 1987 novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, tells a lot of basically untrue jokes on everyone except himself and the readers who are to be considered his peer group. This is also the kind of joke told by H. L. Mencken, Johnny Carson, and George Bush. Naturally it is a seductive and comforting position. It also promotes a superficiality of perception that keeps the state's agenda on a smooth track.

Most Americans (whether or not it's most humans does not concern us here) are too defensive to laugh at a joke in which they themselves are implicated. Like an adult with a recalcitrant child, Ford tries to josh us out of our meanness. There is a maturity of thought in these paintings. Not all the jokes are funny—*Princess*, 1990, for example, which tells a joke about the early American paintings of American Indian women, is actually entirely sinister. It is an illustration of a crime. In America's discourse about itself, the crime is covered up with a romantic story.

Sometime early in the 17th century, the geographer Richard Hakluyt translated into English a tale about a Spanish soldier in Florida who was captured by the Indians but was saved when the chief's daughter fell in love with him. The story followed an existing archetype: in the Middle Ages, there was a whole genre of "enamored Moslem princess" stories revolving around the Crusades, and long before that there was Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and the Egyptian princess Cleopatra. A writer rather than a traveler, Hakluyt was still enough of an exotica expert that he briefed the Virginia Company on where its colonists should land when they arrived in the Americas. Among the new colony's proto-Americans were Captain John Smith and John Rolfe—Smith, who would later be rescued from the Indians by Pocahontas, their "princess," and Rolfe, who would marry her. Between them these two men supposedly had pretty much the same experience with Pocahontas and her father, Powhatan, that numerous crusader captains seem to have had with Arab princesses and sultans. Actually it appears just as likely that Smith based his part of the Pocahontas story on the Hakluyt tale about Florida, which may itself be a version of the enamored-Moslem yarn.

But Pocahontas was a real person. The British kidnapped her and Rolfe took her as his wife to London, where she promptly died after giving birth to Rolfe Jr. Today much of the upper class of Virginia claims Pocahontas as an ancestor.

The colonists arrived with script in hand. They invented the story of Pocahontas, and made it

replace her own history, as a way of owning her and her people. This is a problem, but the more serious problem for her was that she was physically owned to death. Today we tend (appropriately) to interpret the story of Pocahontas as a kind of American fairy tale. Often, though, we still believe the pictures—we remember seeing Pocahontas saving some white guy's life. (Miles Standish? Daniel Boone? It doesn't matter who.) All of the early colonies had laws against marrying Indians, none against the rape and murder of Indians. The massacre of the Indians began with the colonies and continued as long as possible. (The hunting decreased with the supply of game.) Early American portraits of Indian women also began simultaneously with colonization, but the kidnapping, rape, and murder weren't shown. When we see pictures of the Indian maiden, can we remember the history of her death? Visual images tend to recall other visual images, so we are more likely to remember the next picture, which shows a savage Mohawk man carrying a white woman away into the dark forest.

In *Princess*, an Indian woman sits for her portrait. Beside the painter stands a second man carrying a rifle; behind the "princess" stands a third white man, also with a rifle, keeping the woman in her seat by holding onto her hair. All this is happening "in the dark," in the background of the picture. Spotlit in the foreground is another victory, another trophy—a pile of dead animals, with flies. We have needed this image. It could hardly have been done except as a comment on early American painting: as a joke. There is no escape from the joke, we cannot accuse it of being a bad joke. We cannot complain that it is not funny because it is so obviously meant to be not funny. Yet there is no bad taste here, no dead babies or human gore. The magnificent dead animals are the same ones we see in sporting paintings and *natures mortes*.

Humor ("the best medicine") is given too much place in the U.S. It is as revered as ice cream. America is funny and likes to have fun, but the country is so *mean*, so aggressive. Seen from another planet we must look like that movie *Night of the Funny Dead*.

IF WE DO NOT remember the past are we condemned to repeat it? If the past is history how can we remember it? George Bush claimed that having learned the lesson of Vietnam, we gave ourselves absolution for that war by achieving our stated goals in Iraq, or almost achieving them. Others say that Bush misinterpreted the lesson of Vietnam. There are many interpretations, and opinion is divided. If we have to argue over history, how can we remember

it?

Many people these days seem to feel a need for a strong nationalism, but also to forget the history of this century, let alone the ones before. Maybe they have to forget so they can get on with business. If they have any troublesome doubts or memories, they can always say Look at the Russians, who have never known either business or the democracy that business is said to require. In other words, Those other countries have trouble, and so do I, but basically the U.S. is OK. It's funny, a little weird in the sticks and the boondocks, yet it's generous. We are normal people. The fact that Grant Wood's *American Gothic* couple were our grandparents is only a little bit problematic. They were stiff and puritanical, true, but their lives were hard and they worked hard so that was understandable. Surely no other American painting has been so parodied as *American Gothic*. The parodies are usually soft and nice; making fun of our grandparents.

In the 1960s and '70s American Indian, African-American, and Puerto Rican activists said, as loudly as they could, This country was founded on the genocide of one people and the enslavement of another. The statement, hardly arguable, was not much taken up by white activists. *American Gothic* is American history, genocide is not. If a little genocide was committed in the Wild West (there, not here), Kevin Costner can erase that memory by giving us *Dances with Wolves*. If you'd been alive then, of course you'd have been like Kevin Costner. You wouldn't have been involved.

Walton Ford is really abnormal. His remembrance of the past has no important dates, no proofs of what actually happened when big decisions had to be made, no arguments. He is not painting mustaches on *American Gothic* (though indirectly he does an incisive job on the Marlboro man). Ford's subject begins with America's encyclopedia/ bible of visual images. With intellectual honesty, he enters new data into a cultural program that makes imagery stand in for historical knowledge. Maybe his pictures will act like computer viruses.

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