

Tom Dean: *Desire*

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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GIL MCELROY

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The dog days of August can make the Toronto Sculpture Garden (TSG) a place of almost unbearable circumstances. Hemmed in tightly on two sides by buildings, and blocked on the third by another, this tiny parcel of land can become ferociously hot and airless, especially so in the midst of an early August heat wave. In such circumstances, visiting the TSG is akin to making a kind of pilgrimage. It follows, then, that it is also to say “yes” to what one sees there.

What one saw and said yes to in the stifling heat and humidity of this past summer was an installation (commission to celebrate the TSG’s 20th anniversary) by senior Canadian artist Tom Dean. Comprising a series of figurative bronzes scattered across the TSG’s minute parcel of grass, *Desire* paired five small (though larger-than-life) bronze castings of cherubs — those half-naked mythological babes — with five bronze swans.

Now, one of the more obvious contexts encompassing cherubs and a site like the Toronto Sculpture Garden would be biblical. Any garden, sculptural or not, is unavoidably girded with Edenic allusions and connotations. Cherubim were the scripturally appointed guardians of this prototypical Ur-garden, there to keep fallen riff-raff like Adam and Eve from getting back into the place once they’d been evicted. However, as apparently pliable as the biblical context might initially seem here, the cherubs of the Book of Genesis — the “great winged creatures” of one translation — have little real relation to the chubby naked babes adorning the TSG lawn. Scratch one metaphor.

Dean’s cherubs, instead, have the familiar stink of popular culture. While they may owe allegiance to Baroque depictions of Cupid’s mythological descendants, these cutesified creatures

swaddled in baby-fat have come to epitomize the Victorian idealization of love. More recently, they have been co-opted by New Age marketing types and given a prominent place on greeting cards, second only in importance to full-fledged angels. The metaphorical baggage attached to these beings likely lies at the heart of Dean’s critique. The buck would seem to stop here.

But it does not, for Dean’s five cherubs, after all, are not plunked down in artistic isolation out on the TSG lawn. Rather, it is the pairings he has made with an equal number of bronze swans — themselves creatures burdened with erotic associations, also courtesy of Greek mythology — that figure largely here. The TSG teems with their dialogues.

Perhaps “dialogues” isn’t the right term. These cherubs and these swans are more like two sides of the proverbial coin, one (cherubic) side a romanticized idealization of love, the other a feathery invocation of unadulterated carnal desire and all that is sensuous and erotically charged. Dean himself calls the swans “libidinous shells” and the cherubs “seed and fruit of the erotic body.” In five separate pairings spaced out across the lawn within the confines of the TSG, they now regard one another across an amatory chasm in a range of poses and attitudes that runs the gamut from indifference to outrage.

Here, its head and neck stretched out along its back feathers, a swan apparently sleeps. Beside it, a cherub crawls across the grass, its bare bum sticking in the air. Nearby, another swan thrusts its neck high in the air, presumably trumpeting and apparently annoying a nearby cherub, one arm raised against its head to ward off the commotion. Elsewhere, another cherub lies on its back in the grass, the swan nearby busily preening its feathers. Near the centre of the lawn, a cherub seems to have just thrown something toward (or at) its companion swan, the latter ostensibly outraged with its neck

stiffly arched and its wings raised high. And the final cherub, seated on something (a rock?) and looking for all the world offended, is half-turned away from its swan, who, neck high and wings spread wide, contemplates the fleshy little babe.

So it seemed in the torpor of the dog days. Maybe it was all just the noonday sun. If pairing off bronze swans and cherubs on the grass of an urban sculpture garden was indeed Dean’s take on the tortuous dynamic between the carnal and spiritual, it was mightily subtle and ambiguous. *Desire*, then, seems capable of generating as many readings as there are viewers of the piece, hot sun or no. The bronze sculptures scattered across the TSG lawn were paired, babe to bird, to function as kinds of synaptic gaps across which jumped arcs of possible signification, lines of tenable meaning, leaps of the imagination. The inert lumps of cast metal were themselves of little interest. What mattered was the multitude of possible relationships between them.

That, of course, is as it should be; for the ossification of this amalgam of figurative bronzes into a single relationship, a single possible arc, would have resulted in failure. Such singularity would have ensured *Desire* grow no larger than the propagandistic sum of its possible parts. The damnation of the decorative would have been a fate preferable to that of such tunnel vision.

Thankfully, Dean’s *Desire* takes an amply oblique tack. Now, there is obviously nothing new about enigmatic work, nor with making plenty of room for the interpretative imperative. Yet the need to fix meaning hard and fast, to indulge in a kind of artistic fundamentalism, to make an interpretation adhere to the exclusion of all else, is a temptation difficult to resist. *Desire*’s impermeability to such attempts at closure made saying “yes” to it well worth the noonday sun.

Tom Dean: *Desire*
Toronto Sculpture Garden,
Toronto
May 30–September 15, 2001



TOM DEAN, *Desire*, 2001. Patinated bronze. 5 cherubs and 5 swans. Approx. life-size. Photographs: Isaac Applebaum. Courtesy Toronto Sculpture Garden.

