

BOMB — Artists in Conversation

LUKE BUTLER: "The Body that Doesn't Belong to You Anymore"

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Bhanu Kapil interviews Luke Butler, with ancillary notes on vertigo, citizenship, and Gerald Ford's penis, in the fifth installment of BOMBlog's reprints of [2nd Floor Projects]'s editions.

Since 1974, when I first saw one, I've seen approximately eight. Well, somewhere between eight and twenty-four, including my stint as a volunteer in the geriatric ward of Mount Vernon Hospital in Northwood, Middlesex, when I was seventeen. My father wanted me to be a doctor and so, in an effort to bulk up my pre-med C.V., I spent most of late March 1985 swabbing the blackened remnants of diverse genitalia. It was the worst job in the place, but the nurses would share their chocolate digestive biscuits with me on tea break, which came at 10:30 sharp, and during which they told me stories I became addicted to, stories about anatomy, about an old person's clothes being removed for the first time in years and what was underneath. It was horrible—though I could not, for the life of me, not listen. My heart would nearly burst and when I went back onto the ward, the two genders separated by a massive grey curtain, I felt relieved that it was me doing this work and not the nurses, who would tell a person to their face, glancing down between their legs: "Look at this. Disgusting."

No, I think it's best to begin with Gerald Ford's penis, with the proviso that I was born in England to Indian parents and thus stared for a long time at Luke Butler's *Leader of Men 37: Self Portrait*, a collage of President Nixon shaving without his underpants on, and thought that he, Nixon, was Ford, until I realized my terrible mistake. Gerald Ford is the one in the redwoods, toweling pine tar off his left foot as he stares at something on the forest floor. The trees above him accelerate into the sky. Here, in *Leader of Men 38: Wolverine Towel*, the casual public nudity of a figure no longer in existence combines with the convulsive effect of a speeding, vertical landscape to make you, automatically, cock your head.

Though I became accustomed to Gerald Ford's dizzying genital prospect, I cannot say the same for President Nixon's, with its side-view presentation, dark red hue, and its position in the image next to that iconic 1970s bathroom fixture, the bulky chrome tap. In considering the community of penises in Luke Butler's archive of public servants, a sequence that includes a naked, coastal Vice President Agnew, whom I had never heard of in my life despite recently becoming a US citizen, I thought of them (the penises) as replicant, as somehow in alliance. It was at this point that I recognized the need for outside help and dialed the Immigrant Assimilation hotline. It was disconnected, and so I called Luke Butler's cell instead.

Luke Butler Hi . . . Can you hear me? I'm in some kind of wind-tunnel. I'm trying to find a little shelter. Okay. That's better. Hi!

Me Er . . . Is this the Gerald Ford Library?

Luke Butler Yes, it certainly is. Can I help you?

Me I hope so. Okay, I can talk in a normal voice. Luke. Luke Butler, I've been trying to write about the kind of figures you're making in your art, the way so many of them are captured mid-grimace, or in a moment of imbalance or crisis, like Chekov pricking his fingers on the yellow flowers, or Captain Kirk collapsed and insentient on a pile of grey rocks. Or Gerald Ford wiping himself off with a towel while standing on one foot, and then the one where he's slathered in shaving cream.

Luke Butler The shaving cream one? That's President Nixon.

Me [Trying to sound as if had made casual mistake]. Right, right. Nixon. All this surplus energy, excessive nudity, men in power . . . as if their bodies form the repository of a powerful, latent force that doesn't go anywhere, it just loops back into the domain of the images, to make another one. Another President, or Vice President. Like these dead but living creatures that just keep coming. Like zombies.

Luke Butler Monsters . . .

Me Do you think of your work as monstrous?

Luke Butler Well, I think of a true monster as an unleashed natural force. Like a tsunami, which is an inextricable event. Did you get the image I sent you of the ocean, "The End"? I look at that and see a wave that lurches out of its natural firmament. I look at Nixon and Ford and I think what fascinated me about them is that they've got this tremendous ancestral power, but they're somehow buried in our collective memory. We don't think about them anymore. Especially Ford, who was actually, apparently, this modest, decent person. And then there's Agnew. Agnew is Nixon's first Vice President, who resigned over bribery/tax evasion. Nixon appoints Ford to replace him, and when Nixon steps down a year later over Watergate, Ford becomes the first and only man to hold both offices while being elected to neither. They were these average people who became emperors, these indelible figures, but at the same time are completely obscure. Like these ghosts, ghosts more than zombies I think, who have sort of collapsed inside our shared memory, and when you look at that it's very strange. They're so isolated . . . like valueless, lonely, forlorn abandoned houses. And then the naked pictures . . . emphasize that loneliness. They're like a toy that no one wants to play with anymore, and at the same time they're this common American property. Their bodies don't belong to them anymore.

Me And then there's your work with outer space . . . Captain Kirk splayed on an alien outcrop, surrounded by all that wet grey paint, which I love. I saw the photos from Jessica Silverman's studio visit, for *Whitehot* magazine . . . and how your "characteristic grey background," as she described it, drips and smears onto the wall, extending the abstract, unpopulated matter Kirk and his crew are wandering in. Define: grey paint.

Luke Butler Built-in obscurity.

Me I used to work in the KFC on Birmingham New Street. That's separate. Back to you. *Star Trek*. Did I hear you say when you were a kid, you liked action figures?

Luke Butler Yes! Toys, action figures, all the tiny heroes . . . My work really is about the people on the other side of monsters, the heroes—I both venerate them and see through their imperviousness, trying to make them at least partly small, like me!

Me Okay, then I'm still thinking again about the way you collate these contracted, yet explicit male bodies. The way you put the penis that is not their penis but is nevertheless a penis on the body. Luke Butler, what is the definition of a penis?

Luke Butler [Laughing in wind tunnel, but because of the wind it's a completely supernatural sound, all crackled and echoey]. A penis has a blunt, natural, reproductive presence in our lives. And at the same time it's a monster, it's incredibly unwelcome. There is no more common or ordinary yet despised figure than the penis. As a male in this world, you're surrounded by men and so, there are all these penises but you never see them. You don't see them anywhere . . . and there's so much loneliness connected to that. I'm fascinated by the illogical convention of the penis—this symbol of American sexuality—and yet, it's such an unwanted thing. There's no room for the image of the penis in our world. It's like, as a male, "What am I supposed to be doing with this?" You can't really put it on display. The only way your sexuality is safe is if it's never touched. So, because, as an artist, I want divergence, it's really funny and interesting to me, to see these rigid, masculine, static figures—these heroes—completely, naturally naked. It's a way, also, of claiming and manipulating this history, which high school students don't even know about, they can't even recognize Nixon's face . . .

Me That's terrible—

Luke Butler And at the same time, there's this unpredictable erection.

Me All this intensity. But for what? I'm looking at "Leaders of Men 37: Batman and Robin" and, specifically, I'm curious about Spiro Agnew's erection. It's more dominant than Nixon's. There's something about it that implies pleasure, coupling, though, like all the other leaders, Agnew's face is totally blank. Why is his face blank?

Luke Butler Because he's a ghost. In a way, these men really are like giants, or monsters, these ultra-masculine figures who were once so powerful and are now all but forgotten. It's amazing to me how little anyone talks or thinks about them (in the Bush era it may be very comforting to imagine a day when he is no longer thought of). But they are like monsters to me in that they sit in our collective histories doing nothing, and to look back and find them and their stories can be very, very surprising. Ford especially, he has a very low profile, nobody but me ever talks about him. And they are naked—male nudity is still rather shocking in this culture, monstrous even—the penis is a terrible dragon! So why not have the old presidents lead us to it?

At this point in our conversation, the wind picked up and we said goodbye. If you are reading this, perhaps you are looking at Luke Butler's collages, or did, earlier in the evening, or yesterday. Perhaps you, too, have become obsessed with Gerald Ford and notice that people mention him in conversation more frequently and randomly than before you encountered Luke Butler's art. For example, I was recently sorting muddy scallions into cardboard boxes at Cresset Community Farm, a biodynamic farming cooperative on the high plains of Colorado. There could not be a simpler place, more gelled with brownish-silver clods of dirt. There, as I was passing the bundles of onions to a woman who had come up from Denver to barter physical labor for vegetables, I said, being a polite person originally from the United Kingdom: "So, that's a long drive. Do you listen to books on tape in your car?" She said, "How did you guess?" And proceeded to narrate the contents of a book she was currently listening to, about the history of the CIA. She said, "But Gerald Ford . . . he wasn't too bad, actually. He wasn't too involved in all that stuff. He wasn't like those other nasty men." Me: "Do you think Gerald Ford was sexy?" Woman from Denver: "Oh my word. I turned nineteen the first year he was President. I thought he was so handsome.