

Robert Lostutter

Derek Eller Gallery

By Donald Kuspit



Robert Lostutter, *Untitled*, 1971, watercolor on paper, 5 1/2 × 5".

Robert Lostutter, a Chicago Imagist but more broadly a latter-day Surrealist by reason of his perversely hybrid figures—often a combination of a colorful tropical bird with an expressionless human figure—would be better characterized as a Neo-Decadent. After all, he is clearly an artist with “twisted and precious ideas,” to borrow the words of Jean des Esseintes, the dark aesthete of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s 1884 novel *À rebours* (Against Nature). Decadent art is devilishly perverse, as Lostutter’s oil painting of a muscular armless male, *Untitled*, 1972, suggests. The subject’s head, missing both mouth and chin, hovers over his naked torso. A large blooming rose, floating behind an angry blue snake curled around a dagger, sits where his neck should be. He is not a Saint Sebastian manque—the ten green-and-pink arrowheads flanking his body point away from the flesh. He does, however, seem to represent a contradiction between good and evil (or love and hate), as the flower and serpent implicitly symbolize the biblical Eve and Satan, respectively.

Lostutter's modest but exquisite show at Derek Eller Gallery—his first New York exhibition in more than thirty years—featured the oil painting alongside eight works on paper. While the graphite drawing and seven watercolors were considerably smaller than the sixty-by-forty-nine-inch canvas, they were nonetheless executed with the same level of scrupulous care. *Untitled*, 1971, depicted a monstrous leg with a metal brace stabilizing its knee. Another armless man, this time upside down, sprouts out of the limb like a foot; a spiked belt holds the two radically incommensurate parts together. The hybrid figure, a kind of mutant performer in a little theater of the absurd, calls to mind the so-called sarcastic laugh of the Dadaists. One also wonders if the picture somehow illustrates Theodor Adorno's negative dialectic in theatrical action.

Untitled, 1970, presented a man whose face is partially obscured by a sadomasochistic mask. He points to what looks like a bundle of limp colored pencils, rising from the bottom of the composition. Emerging from the picture's left side is a group of flaccid paint tubes. The artmaking materials are presumably emblems of inspiration, but they just sit there, misshapen and unused—perhaps suggesting creative frustration or inhibition. Maybe the most dramatic and complicated work in the exhibition was *Untitled*, 1971, a five-and-a-half-by-five-inch watercolor of a strapping male. His body is tied up and bisected by a huge dragon-like form with crocodile teeth and a flaming tail. I believe that this fiery creature is also an inspirational symbol. It serves as the guts of the Herculean figure, which is heroically large but blind—incapacitated like the other men in Lostutter's show.

The artist's maimed fetishists might all be self-portraits. According to psychoanalyst William Gillespie, fetishism results from castration anxiety, represented here by Lostutter's many damaged and dismembered subjects. Critic Edmund Wilson compared the modern artist—rootless, alienated from society—to the embittered Greek hero Philoctetes, whose “fester[ing], odor[ous] injury on his foot . . . [led] to his isolation on an island.” The one comparatively hopeful piece in the exhibition was the pencil drawing *Kyōsei* 5, 2016, whose title references the Japanese philosophy of working with others toward a common goal. The figure's eyes are gently fixated upon the viewer—he appears to be some kind of mythical sage, with feathers (or are they petals?) growing out of his face. He seems to be beckoning us to follow him, asking us to do something for our collective well-being. And perhaps we can, bodies both strong and sick, together.