

Fables from Artlandia: The Miraculous by Raphael Rubinstein



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In a 1946 letter to the anthropologist Ruth Benedict, poet Charles Olson articulated what has become a quietly influential conception of historiography in poetry circles. “There has been, is too much of everything, including knowledge,” he contended, quite presciently, “because it has not been winnowed.” Olson believed that the real work of the critic-historian, “if his personality is of count,” takes place not in the critic’s interpretation of the gathered material but “before[hand], in the selection of the material.” “If you burn the facts long and hard enough in yourself as crucible,” he urged himself as much as Benedict, “you’ll come to the few facts that matter. And then fact can be fable again.” And then fact can be fable again: taken in capable hands and turned into story, fact has its fundamental mysteriousness restored to it, its magical properties mobilized.

In *The Miraculous*, the third in a series of delightful para-artistic pamphlets from Paper Monument, Raphael Rubinstein has burned the last half-century of art-

historical facts in himself as crucible and they have come out, reddish and molten, as magical fables. Only, unlike in strict fables, Rubinstein wraps no neat and tidy moral bows upon the tales, refrains from heavy-handed exegesis. The slim volume consists of fifty “micro-narratives” that matter-of-factly chronicle the esoteric exploits of various avant-gardists, especially those working in a performative or conceptual vein. Each narrative, no more than a page or two long, tells a story that, if it weren’t known to be fact, could easily pass for improbable and absurdist fiction: the two artists “tied together by an eight-foot length of rope” for an entire year; the artist who

lived inside a cage with a coyote for one week; the artist who canned his own feces and priced them by weight as though they were gold.

Crucially, the artists' names are withheld from the narratives; this conceit—elegant in its simplicity, powerful in its effects—helps render fact fable. Withholding the name unmoors tale from artist and depersonalizes the narrative, makes it seem more anonymous, fictional. This thin cloak of fictionality causes the narratives' profound bizarrerie to register with the reader more fully than cynical familiarity with the art world *dramatis personae* might otherwise allow.

However, because an index at book's end lists out the artists responsible for each narrative, it can be tempting to read the book as a high-brow game of *Guess Who?*—*that's so totally Marina!*—or else to dispense with guessing altogether and pull back the cloak concealing the names before even reading. But doing either misses the point: it doesn't matter whether the episodes are true or false, real or imagined, attributed to this artist or that. What matters, in the book, is their collective effect: the fevered inventiveness this activity we call art incites in practitioners and audiences alike.

Rubinstein, a critic who has very much got the bug, makes this point with some extremely subtle artifice of his own: into his catalogue of curious artistic actualities he has slipped in, unannounced, a few stories about art taken from works of fiction. Judging by Rubinstein's poetry and other criticism, as well as *The Miraculous*' own contrivances, the ludic novelists—names purposely withheld—whose fictional artworks he describes have been important influences on him. The inclusion of this ontological sleight of hand in the book, hidden but far from impossible to catch, suggests that creation's liberating powers extend even to the critic, if only she were clever and brave enough to exercise them.

As with so many of the artworks the book renders parable (such as “a successful German painter” who “buys an out-of-the-way service station in Brazil and renames it in honor of a notorious Nazi long rumored to have escaped to South America”), Rubinstein's own ruse has about it the artistic prankster's impish, but ultimately harmless, spirit. Too, like all pranksters, Rubinstein wants his prank to get detected, go noticed.

Once noticed, pranks typically sow discord, consternation, speculation, rumor. Rubinstein gives gossip and scandal their due place in the narratives, particularly for how they stoke the anxious fires of artistic commerce, but, cumulatively, you get the sense he's less interested in the pranks' celebrity afterlives—less interested in causing a scandal with his own book—than in the wily machinations of the pranks themselves. Bluffs, gimmicks, angles, schemes, Hail Mary ploys: whatever their immediate motive, eventually one sticks and becomes, improbably, art. Again and again, in Rubinstein's telling, artistic success, if it arrives at all, happens always as accident, afterthought—a byproduct of honest engagement with the Rubik's Cube of craft.

The book makes apparent the way in which success—of whatever kind, material or aesthetic—is an accident as unlikely to transpire for the individual artist, lost in the labyrinth of creation, as it is inevitable for the species as a whole. Lucky for us, *The Miraculous* cubes together its own panoply of bright colors clean and true.

Raphael Rubinstein's [The Miraculous](#) (2014) is published by Paper Monument, New York.
