# FrameWork 11/26

## Gabe Seamon on Sandra Meigs

### Facing All of Sandra Meigs

> *The artist's path is close to that of an alchemist in that his/her path is that of a medium. His/Her vision belongs to an altering, of material, and of perception. Through this attempt, the perception of an audience has the possibility of being altered, of being presented a constant change, Re volution.*
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> — Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *PATHS,* MFA Thesis, 1978

I left my home twenty minutes later than planned, heading for Susan Hobbs Gallery. Today is the first day to see Sandra Meigs's new exhibition *Beasts, Clocks, and Popeye*. On route through Trinity Bellwoods Park, I observe a young man painting on a pre-stretched canvas laid on the grass. He is using acrylic gouache and the remaining quarter of his 7/11 slushie to produce a slime green abstraction with his fingers and a two inch wide house painting brush. Pausing my brisk walking pace and the song in my headphones, I watch the captivating interaction occurring between the food dye in the slushie and the water-based paint. The dye resists blending well with the paint until the afternoon sun's rays and friction of the man's fingers melt the ice shavings into liquid form, allowing the dye to meld into the acrylic. The man turns to me with glaring green eyes reflecting his work and I quickly continue on to the gallery. The word *alchemical* flashes in my mind.

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Susan Hobbs has provided an admirable description of the works on view: two thematically linked groups of paintings, a video that circumvents many of the illusionary strategies of video art, and two narrative texts written by Meigs. I walk around, get my bearings. The video is a summa of a life's work complete with Popeye, Meigs larger than life cartoon sculpture, who would seem to act as a spirit guide until the climatic moment when he faces us with facing the end. The existential stakes are clear. The clock paintings also plumb this artistic and personal dilemma. Five faces, three look at us side-eyed, two confront us head on, all tell us that there is a time to see and a time to die. And nearby there are seven crowded groups of "beasts" squished into their panels. They are lovely curvy friends, but they are fixed right on us. How do we face the faces that we meet? *Maybe Popeye has some thoughts.*

Though painting is Meigs's primary medium, and the twelve paintings are the first works we see on the ground floor, I can't help but gravitate towards the oddly edited, disarming video, *Popeye Gets Real* in the upstairs gallery. The paintings have all the things that would draw me to a Meigs show—signature use of colour, inspired brushwork that reminds you of her dedication to painting, ingenious connections between disparate forms and themes—but I start with the video because the video starts with me.

The piece is composed using still images and stop motion techniques superimposed onto handheld footage of a forest. There are three main elements to the video; cut out images of Meigs's larger than

life Popeye sculpture, images of paintings spanning her whole career, and images of the whittled sculptural characters from her 2020 *Little Lost Operas* series. Alongside the visual elements, the audio features Meigs's voice—present as both a narrator and as overdubbed voices for Popeye and her Little Lost Opera sculptures—sound effects such as the ominous ticking of a clock or the rustling of Popeye's feet on the forest floor, and both ambient and melodic music. The video opens with Popeye being invited to participate as a pirate with the opera characters in their upcoming performances. Popeye seems unimpressed by the idea of playing a pirate, and heads out for his "long walk in the forest". Popeye leaves on his walk, with his back to us, as Meigs's voice describes a vision she had on a train ride to Montreal where all of her paintings were out there in the forest, and Popeye was out there too, looking at them all. This is now what we see, stills of her work, quickly appearing and disappearing, including the clock paintings on view downstairs. Meigs's narrative voice returns, this time telling us about her closeness to Popeye since seeing him in cartoon form as a child. Popeye speaks to the paintings, "hey paintings, can I join you in a conversification". Meigs tells us that once she became an artist, Popeye became her "ideal viewer", and she was always curious about what he thought of her new paintings. The vision continues, paintings fading in and out of the landscapes. At one point a baby appears, dressed as popeye, observing the paintings. Some of the beast paintings from below now appear. Popeye wonders where Meigs gets her "insporosity" from. "What keeps her going", he wonders. After some time the landscape eventually arrives at a graveyard. Popeye hears the "graves whispering". As images of Meigs's basement panorama series appear and disappear in the graveyard, Popeye contends with his own mortality and fate. "But oh Swee'Pea, don't you mourn me, cause I'll be around. I'll be in flowers, what grows, I'll be in the clouds, what floats, and in the ocean getting around. Like you all, I'm an eternal being, just being, just being what I am". Through a series of visionary gestures, the video captures her entire aesthetic career and contends with Popeye's and her own mortality.

I am struck by the video. Firstly, by its narrative arc, and the presence of Popeye in this story. Meigs in a sense asks us to sit in the shoes of Popeye, who, as Meigs tells us, hangs out with her as both her 'ideal viewer' and her muse. This doubling asks viewers to reflect on a lifelong artistic practice from the viewpoint of the maker, here masquerading as a very particular kind of viewer. Popeye for Meigs is both the receptor and the activator. This simultaneity seems to meditate on her own mortality via Popeye, while also providing the viewer a narrative avenue through which to engage the work. This narrative avenue is supplemented by the texts that Meigs has written for the show which lay on the desk upstairs across from *Popeye Gets Real*. This is especially the case for *Prescription for My Reverie*, a prose piece that takes us through the narrative journey Meigs follows within herself while making some of the 'beast' paintings we see both below and in her video. Popeye's on the move; Sandra's on a journey; painting would seem to be a kind of picaresque adventure that will consume a life if you let it; a kind of story you love to tell.

And yet, one has to come to terms with Popeye's status as spirit guide and critical interlocutor. What kind of a "conversification" is this? I love how the word fuses conversation and the act of making poetry and how "imporosity" captures the openness required for making art and taking all of this in. The minimal and DIY editing and recording appears as both disarmingly goofy and a deadly serious method of dreamlike representation. Meigs brings together a handful of raw elements (voiceover, photographs of her work, handheld landscape footage, sound effects, music) in a playfully simplistic manner that bypasses many of the illusions and tricks of video and cinema, letting Meigs, and us, see quite directly into her visionary gambit and the transformation it portends.

Meigs has recently parted with her larger than life Popeye, so this is an envoi of sorts. His departure from the video and her studio ultimately poses the same ontological questions facing Meigs's artistic practice. All the stripped back strategies of the video establish a covenant between Meigs and Popeye and us that, in its pace and construction, counters much of our present experience of digitally generated media, where each element is so disparate and unplaceable that connections vanish sooner than they are made. Many of these contemporary video materials can hardly be known: one frame could refer to thousands of databanked images. As Guy Debord foresaw, images "detached from every aspect of life [...] can only be looked at".[1] But through Popeye, Meigs seems able to address us, as through a glass, kindly.

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With Popeye's haunting words resonating in my mind, I descend the narrow staircase to face the faces: clocks and their allusion to the incongruity of time and its relentless movement forward; the beasts with their melted shapes and strangely endearing eyes. The clocks make me contemplative but they also place me as an outsider. The animals draw me in, I wanna be in with them. I get close, attempting to open the world of each painting. I examine the relationships between the beasts, arriving at narratives as to why they are all crammed in these tiny boxes together. The faces of the clocks tell me the time but they also push beyond the edge of the picture plane. They don't seem to need me or anyone, they are fully autonomous forms, like the time they tell, they wait for no one.

I just saw the fleeting digital images of all these paintings in the video upstairs, and I can't help but place them in the career-spanning timeline Popeye has disclosed and in the narrative creative process articulated in *Prescription for my Reverie.* The video and writing points me towards the paintings I first saw, now with two buddies on my shoulders framing the work for me. One is an intimate exploration of painting, character, shape, and colour, and the other places things within a lifetime. The doubled contextualization of the paintings from above creates this entrancing, multidirectional loop.

There is a type of character in two of the beast paintings that stands out, the faces of humanoid figures on the edge of the frame. I start to notice how these human figures intrude into the beast paintings, how efficiently the faces of the animals and the people are rendered, how little it takes to make a face. And yet, everything about this show is about how challenging it is to face the faces that you meet, to face the faces that you make, to face it all. It dawns on me that these figures are like Popeye, barging in from out of frame, from a moment in the past that seems to foretell a future. Suddenly I think about the green-eyed man in the park, remembering how the dye and paint were interacting. An artist experimenting with two incommensurate media and willing to let them misbehave. That's kind of what's happening here, the video and paintings are a mess with each other, but unlike the slushie experiment that could not escape the present of its making, all the elements of this show can face down on one another. What is so remarkable is that the intermingling of video, painting, and text forces a reckoning of sorts — with the past, with the present scene of viewing, and with a future. Because he seems to come from and live in all these moments, it is perhaps time to climb back up that narrow staircase and face Popeye.

[1] Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. trans. Knabb, 2014, 2.