

Andrej Dubravsky  
By Miciah Hussey

Andrej Dubravsky loves cock. While it was only in the summer of 2017 that he brought a brood of Dutch Bantam and New Hampshire chicken to his farm in rural Slovakia, this love has been apparent in another sense since he first began showing his paintings as an art world *enfant terrible*. The punctum *was* the prick in his paintings of bunny-eared lost boys exposed and cavorting, self-sucking and pucker-fingering—images filed under the banal slogans of internet porn argot. And yet, these new paintings demur metaphor of phallogocentric predilection alone (though, what, unfortunately in Western culture isn't always just a cock in new clothing?)—roosters that are the subject of this recent body themselves sign for an array of affective postures, sexual solicitations, and environmental calamities. Sex and death, of course, are tattooed across the haphazard notations of paint that belie a conceptual and formal complexity intent on collapsing the hard and fast rules of European easel painting with the urgency and enlarged confidence of the hard-on.

On a 2016 trip to the Philippines, Dubravsky became fascinated with cockfights of another kind. He noted that the tenderness local men favored upon their feathered friends was a mere preamble to brutality—leaving one rooster dead after just a few moments of bloody racket. The instinctual rivalry played off of the birds plays off and magnifies a cross-species homosocial competition—violent and sexual—soaked in intoxicating plumes of testosterone. In much the way that queer relations in recent years are forged within the grids of GPS-based hook-up apps, Dubravsky found in the roosters a potent symbol for the primal urges cooped up—destined to be hung low in defeat or erect in victory. Two paintings entitled “one rooster for you” swing between vulnerable offering and indecent proposal. With the obvious metonym of the member sliding out from homophonic suggestion into the signifying compositional gesture, these cock pics present the artist in fauvist war-paint with the studied indifference of abstracted over-exposure—easily enough to imagine slinking back into the anonymity of nearby twinks as thrusting forward in hormonal domination. The tame tenderness in these images of sweet farmhands and their pride of a 4H summer screens the complexity of brawling sexual identity that extends across species and scents the stage of pheromonally charged conflict.

The internet's reach in molding the millennial angst of young gay men—especially in the rural countryside of this Eastern European milieu—sticks to the raw canvas, coloring the pastoral inter-species romance of these portraits. In a series of smaller paintings, the subject becomes refigured in various gestural experiments. Slightly improvised—as if conjured from affect not image logic, the spaces and relations between the figures bob around each other before dissolving in murky stains of drab olives and greys. Smashed up against the surface, the roosters curl and bend around apparitional heads of even younger boys, drowning in the subaqueous half-light of inchoate urges and

self-conscious reflection. The lack of any courteous nod toward dimensional space casts a surreal shadow over the awkward, and perhaps disorganized, relations between desire and identity. Insecurity and shock, as the titles claim, force a quasi captivating estrangement between boy and bird—is it mere curiosity for the animal kingdom that then reveals its teeth, or the querying skepticism of youthful bodily exploration. Their postures—less trussed and presentable than the more polished presentations of self one uses to entice the world (or the local chickenhawks)—sign for a seesawing psyche, always already in moody throes between head and cock.

These portraits—like many of Dubravsky's works—not only echo the image repertoire of the “selfie,” but perhaps indulge in its determining construction of representation with less ironic detachment than those of the post-internet age would have you believe. The oblique skewering of the cheekbones, the jaw—torqued against the conventional fronto-parallel angling of historical portraiture—shifts point of view away from another and into an ever perverting *mise-en-abime*. Chin up, hand down; arm raised, eyes lifted: The face is remade successively, but only insofar as its own limbs can frame it. The effect is as self-eroding as it is self-fulfilling—what distortions of navel gazing, what certainties always remain in arm's reach? In these paintings, the bodiless heads float up, up, and away into a formlessness of mannerist perspectival contortions. Dubravsky's anti-futurist collision between sex and self-doubt perhaps signals the self-destruction of the subject. In other words, you do not have a face until you take one (from) yourself. While sounding the anthropocene's death knell on the stakes of the selfie may seem presumptuous, the rooster paintings that comprise the most monumental and commanding canvases in this cycle do in fact mark a violent rending of ecological hierarchies.

In these large paintings, “feathered dinosaurs”—to use the artist's own words—arrive puffed and in full plumage, far more the mythological Phoenix than the leitmotif of cute French country decor. These cumulus nimbus masses of streaked, stained, and power-washed paint on raw canvases appear more powerful than their contours can contain. Striking poses with the serpentine circumflexes of an Odalisque, they hen-peck the space until all territory lays claimed. Wings enflamed and beaks bloody, these more monstrous birds appear as outsized counterparts to those held in the arms of naive young boys. Boys, it must be noted, who seem to have fled the scene or, perhaps, have been devoured. What threats to affection, to physicality, to displays of connection are harbored under vibrant wing? In one painting a rooster bounds with rapacious determination at the flimsy twists of chicken wire, shredded in half by preternatural talons. These knotted webs of flected twine have been presaged in Dubravsky's earlier works—as the chain links of urban containment and the syntax of pastoral captivity—to register the inherent flatness of the canvas. However, here, he takes pleasure in destroying the canvas—as he has before when treating yards of fabric as cast off refuse to force collects to rummage through piles for masterpieces. With the roosters, Dubravsky he rips painting to shreds. Unknowingly caught up in the cockfight, the viewer may wish to escape into the tender embrace of the boys in paintings past; however, instinct calls for fight or flight. But arms

stretched to selfie lengths are of no use now. The chickens, as they say, have come home to roost.