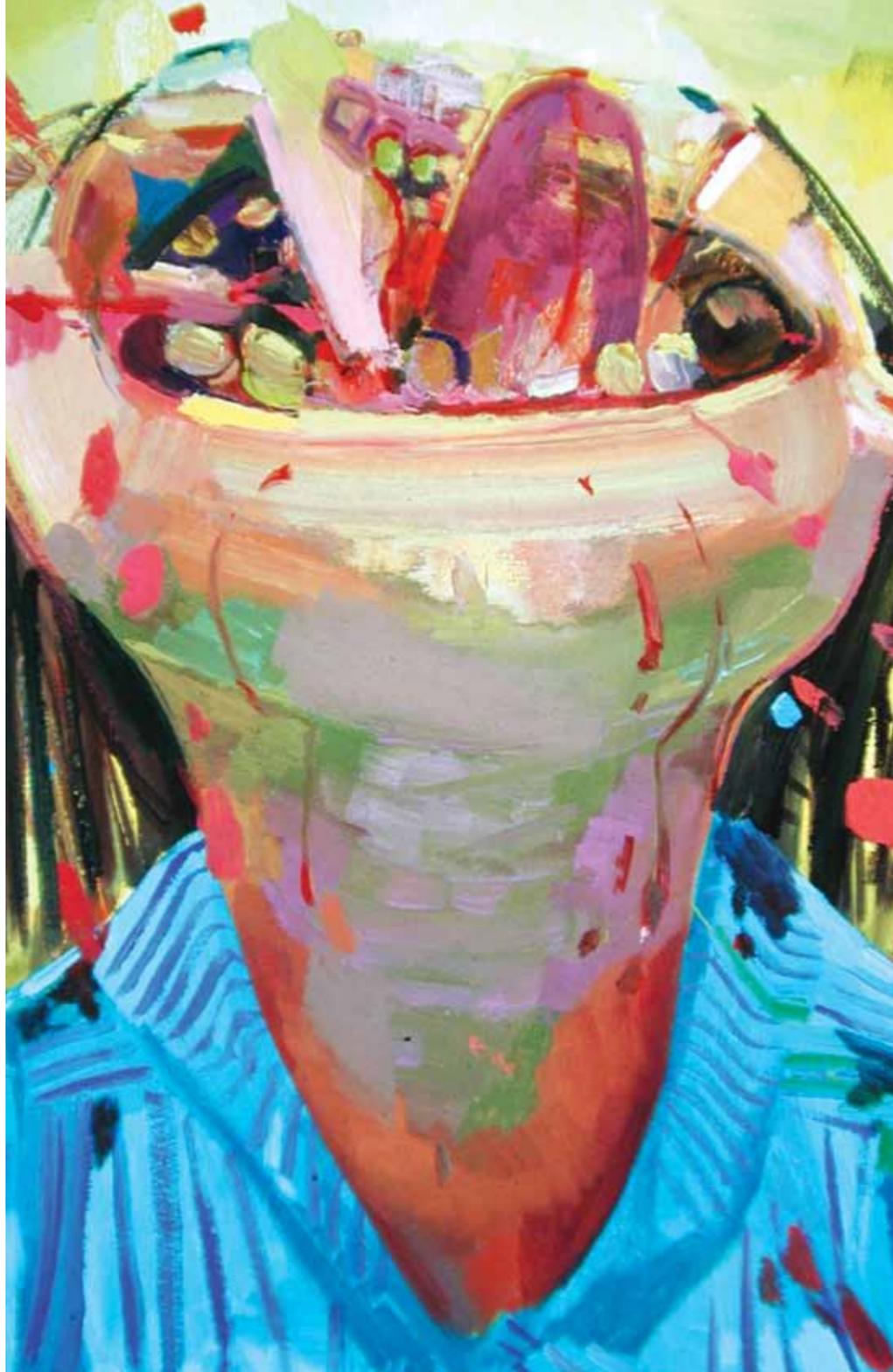




Above: Allison Schulnik, *The Flower*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Mark Moore Gallery, Los Angeles



Above: Folkert de Jong, *Business As Usual: Early Years #4*, 2008. Styrofoam, pigmented polyurethane foam, 70 7/8 X 57 1/8 X 23 5/8 inches. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai



Cryptic: the Use of Allegory in Contemporary Art with a Master Class from Goya

The prominent inclusion of the Spanish artist Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, who lived from 1746 to 1828, in an exhibition of contemporary art is not an obvious choice; but given the questions before us in *Cryptic: the Use of Allegory in Contemporary Art with a Master Class from Goya*—what is allegory in visual art now and how do open-ended allegories produce meaning?—his inclusion is crucial. The works of art in this exhibition are open-ended allegories, that is, they can be interpreted to reveal many different meanings, even conflicting ones, at the same time. *Cryptic* features paintings, videos, and sculpture made in the last decade by six contemporary artists from four different countries, paired with works from two of Goya's series of etchings: *Los Caprichos* (1797-98) and *Los Disparates* (1815-23). Responding to the questions posed above requires some initial grounding in Goya's prints.

Goya, who is revered by contemporary artists, made these prints under the watchful eye of the Spanish Inquisition, a powerful extension of the Catholic

Church in Spain from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries that established a fearsome and oppressive control over the nation. Because of the Inquisition, Goya had to couch his societal critiques in an unbreakable code or risk imprisonment. Goya's need to develop critical commentary on the state of things in Spain in his time led him to develop strategies of representation that were open-ended and encouraged multiple interpretations. Consider a typically bizarre scene from *Los Disparates*, Plate 4, titled *Simpleton* (though not by Goya who declined to title them). From a murky field, several figures loom out of the darkness. The largest, the giant "simpleton" is blind, grinning lewdly, and playing the castanets. Two howling, ghoulish heads stay close behind him. In front of him, a terrified man tries to hide behind a rigid woman, so rigid, in fact, that she seems to be a mannequin. Since the first appearance of the prints, scholars have searched without success for fixed textual sources, such as sayings, parables, or recorded events that might account for the images in

the *Disparates* and *Caprichos*. However, the scholarly consensus today is that Goya deliberately intended to keep them free of textual sources. His allegories had to be developed in this manner to survive the Inquisition, and they are one of the first occurrences of open-ended allegories in Western art, which is one of the reasons he is often cited as the last old master and first modern artist. What seems certain about Plate 4 is that a power dynamic is being enacted. A man has chosen a useless object to protect himself from some dark and heedless force, which seems to delight in causing him terror.

It is the capacity to generate multiple interpretations that concerns us here. Consider that for most of the history of art in the West, visual art was subservient to written text. It illustrated Greek and Roman myths, religious stories, written accounts of famous battles, and the occasional work of literature. One could say it attempted to illustrate "reality" in portraits of famous people, landscapes, still-lives, and scenes from everyday life. However, visual artists did not invent narratives from whole cloth, with no pre-existing story, until relatively recently in art history. In fact, a crucial victory of the avant-garde in the early to mid-twentieth century, was, through abstraction, to create works of art that intentionally resisted the fixed interpretation that those before it had intentionally been designed to elicit. Critic Susan Sontag, writing in 1966 in her famous essay "Against Interpretation," described abstract painting as a "deliberate flight from interpretation."¹ Abstract art

refused to illustrate narratives, and in that sense made the works included in this exhibition possible, which, although they are figurative and narrative, are not *fixed* narratives with *fixed* and singular interpretations. They serve no literary master text.

Dana Schutz, whose paintings are included in *Cryptic*, wrote the following about her own work, but it is true of Goya's prints, too: "Paintings are social. Like their viewers and makers, paintings are composites, playing out their shifting interests, attitudes and desires. Creating a local exchange, a painting needs a witness. You perform it and it performs you."² Her concept of the viewer "performing" a painting is crucially apposite to both the Goya prints and the contemporary works in this exhibition. These open-ended allegories demand that you, the viewer, unlock their meaning personally, and each "performance" will be unique. As she writes, they are "composites, playing out shifting attitudes and desires." It is their changeability that makes room for the viewer. For example, in her alarming painting *Escape Artist* from 2010, a masked supine figure, presumably the escape artist himself, lies in bed with his head propped up, his whole body rigid with tension. He holds a knife in his taut, lipless mouth, possibly drawn from his left arm, which either doubles as a knife block holding three other blades or has been neatly skewered by them. Are they the tools he will use to escape or the trap from which he must escape? Immediately behind him and centered on his head is a red and white target suggesting this



Javier Téllez, *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See*, 2007. 16mm film transferred to high-definition video with color and sound, 27 minutes and 36 seconds. Collection of Jeanne and Michael Klein

scene unfolds on a carnival stage, but the bed locates it in a private space, a bedroom. Perhaps the red rings are not a target, but an emanation from the figure's head, like a thought balloon of extreme alarm, and the whole scene is imagined rather than real. Tools or trap, carnival or bedroom, reality or dream: we viewers must decide individually what is happening in this picture. The Goya prints, Schutz's paintings, and all the other works in the exhibition, by their design, have the potential to be meaningful, and to produce meaning that varies—again by design—with each viewer as "you perform the painting and it performs you."

In order for a work of visual art to be an allegory in the sense that concerns us here, that is, to mean something

by creating irrational, anti-rational, or nihilistic works as a form of critique of those same qualities they saw in the world around them; such works resist allegorical reading. On seeing Erika Wanenmacher's three self-portraits (one as a coyote, one as a Datura flower, one as a starry sky), you intuit the fact that they are the products of a logical system of thought and that the artist's intent is to be understood. However logical the open-ended allegorical work must be deliberately strange, even mysterious, in order to invite the viewer into the push-me-pull-you exchange of creating meaning that Schutz describes. It makes perfect sense within the world of Hiraki Sawa's *Trail* (2005) that a line of tiny camels in silhouette plod placidly along a window ledge, but why they do and what they mean remains for the viewer to decide.

One work in *Cryptic* performs the allegorical process in reverse. In 2008, Javier Téllez invited a group of six blind people to encounter an elephant in a disused Bronx swimming pool. The famous allegory of the six blind men and the elephant is variously cited as Indian or Hindu, but in fact versions of it appear in many cultures. Briefly restated, six blind people, often described as philosophers, touch various parts of an elephant and form divergent opinions about its nature, thereby demonstrating the danger of limited perspective in a perfect closed allegory. But in Téllez's subtle and dignified presentation, the exact opposite is revealed. We hear what each of the blind participants has to say about the elephant and see how they encounter it physically (some tentatively

or fearfully, some boldly and lovingly), and we hear broader musings about their blindness. Rather than presenting an impoverished collective experience to offer a reductive conclusion, Téllez records six incredibly rich, reverberant, singular portraits of these six people as they "perform" the allegory. We see how saturated with possible meaning even this restrictive, pedantic allegory can be when it is opened up in this way. Téllez had this to say about the work: "The real encounter of the people with an elephant for the first time in their lives brought a sense of epiphany to the film that was not present in the ancient parable. I think the recording of their perceptions was the best reply to the parable."³

The open-ended allegories in *Cryptic* similarly offer real, lively experiences for us viewers. They invite us into a dialogue, rather than presenting a monologue. They provide a framework for our insights and interpretations. The intent of the exhibition, like the intent of Téllez's film, is to stage encounters between you and (in this case) a work of art, and to invite, focus and amplify your unique reactions to it.

¹ Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967).

² Dana Schutz, "Stranger Things," in *Dana Schutz: Tourette's Paintings* (Dublin: The Douglas Hyde Gallery, 2010).

³ Javier Téllez interview with Mark Beasley (http://www.creativetime.org/programs/archive/2007/performance/tellez_interview.html).