Comedy, Tragedy, History
Duplicitous language and deceitful narratives
in the burlesque worlds of
MARY REID KELLEY and PATRICK KELLEY

by Harry Thorne
Mind plays body, body plays soul, and soul, succumbing to frenetic contradictions, hurls itself from a bridge.
deployed at an ironic remove. Under a metahistorical guise, they pounce upon the various hidden tyrannies of the contemporary age and, in making them equal parts legible and ludicrous, unveil their deep-set problematics. Call it Brechtian distancing with a burlesque twang. In 'The Minotaur Trilogy' (2013–15), this estrangement sees us re-acquainted with the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. In the original tale, King Minos refuses to sacrifice his prized bull to Poseidon, who, in turn, curses the King’s wife, Pasiphaé, to forever yearn for the bovine brute. With a little help from a friend (the master-craftsman Daedalus and his wooden heifer), this lust finds its outlet and unto the world a beast is born: the Minotaur, a gruesome composite destined to forever moulder in a labyrinth and feast on Athenian sacrifices. Enraged by this programmatic slaughter, the mighty Theseus travels to the labyrinth and, with the assistance of Minos’s neglected daughter Ariadne, slays his foe. Women: abused and overlooked; men: cleaning up after other men. Oh, the truths that tales conceal. 'The Minotaur Trilogy'—comprising Priapus Agonistes (2013), Swinburne’s Pasiphaé (2014) and The Thong of Dionysus (2015)—re-imagines these various small tragedies as a hallucinatory drag act set within mischievous monochromatics. Theseus, re-incarnated as Priapus, wears a belt of foodstuffs, a fish over an eye and the irritating bravado of a sexually frustrated teen ('O Queen, I’m at your cervix'); Dionysus writhes, dick out, on a chaise longue, bemoaning humanity’s preoccupation with the non-alcoholic; Venus has the face of a pug. Mary and Patrick’s Minotaur also stands apart from convention. What for Ovid was a ‘hybrid monster’, here is piteous. She (for it is a she, replete with outlined breasts and a pubic shrub) scuttles through her labyrinth with a bag on her head. She chases her tail, searches for a lavatory, searches for a family, aping the tragic Minotaur of Jorge Luis Borges’s 'The House of Asterion' (1947). Stricken with loneliness, Borges’s outcast yearns for death. "Would you believe it, Ariadne?" a bloodied Theseus exclaims at the story’s close. "The Minotaur scarcely defended himself."

Swinburne’s Pasiphaé, which visualizes the scheming of Pasiphaé and Daedalus that enabled the creature’s conception, takes as its script a poem by the 19th-century writer Algernon Charles Swinburne. Swinburne was a poet enveloped in taboo. He wrote on cannibalism, necrophilia and bestiality, drank excessively, was partial to a beating and boasted about copulating with a monkey. But, even for Swinburne, ‘Pasiphaé’ was too salacious a beast to publish. The work remains unsettling, as when Daedalus foretells that the queen will be saturated with ‘Sweet stings & pleasurable warm violences’, with ‘shoots of fluid flame through the aching blood’.

Swinburne’s language renders endearing to his readers a queen tormented by aberrational desires and, in doing so, reclaims said desires from the clutches of taboo. The poem is, as historian Catherine Maxwell notes, a ‘pleasurable violence’ itself; an artistic conduit through which the reader can experience the liberating potential of licentious pleasures. With ‘The Minotaur Trilogy’, Mary and Patrick follow suit, puncturing the normative identities proposed by the original myth and allowing us to acquaint ourselves with their grotty undersides: with bountiful ‘selfs’ that are fluid and erratic, riddled with luscious urges and digressions. They also forewarn against the repression of such (ab)normalities. We flick back to our Minotaur, fly-ridden and motionless.

In contorting the didactic system of this archetypal Grecian apologue and using it as a vessel through which to champion all that it is not, Mary and Patrick proffer a cautionary case study. Just as Swinburne’s ‘Pasiphaé’ is...
“Words are deceitful little things. Letters, violent. But stories are the worst of all.”

not — to lift Mary’s words — a straightforward ‘boosting [of] artistic freedom’ but a ‘dramatization of its risks’.

so, too, is this Bacchanalian trilogy an admonitory nod towards the seductions of artistic creation. For, while Daedalus’s ‘marvellous handicraft’ facilitated the gratification of carnal urges, it was deployed for one purpose: to deceive. And while Mary’s ability to slide between bodies jabs at the conventions of comedy, tragedy and history, she remains an artist in drag — a form that screams, to invoke anthropologist Esther Newton, ‘appearance is an illusion’. Words are deceitful little things. Letters, violent. But stories are the worst of all. In bringing up these bodies and tragically bastardizing their ghosts, Mary and Patrick not only give voice to those omitted from official histories, but demonstrate the possibility of such resuscitations. They exemplify how historical plot-lines and the words of those populating them can be co-opted and cut loose; how the language that defines us is only ours until death do us part with the right to control it. In this, they call for both an enacting of artistic violence against sanctioned narratives that promote convention and ‘morality’, and an increased suspicion of artistic agency itself. For, while these bodies rest six feet deep, the words that animate them bounce freely on the surface, their looping arcs determined by anyone who thinks to reach out a hand, snatch and throw.

1 As told to the writer in conversation, 1 November 2017
3 Mary Reid Kelley, ‘Notes on Swinburne’s Fragment’, 2014, exhibition catalogue

HARRY THORNE is assistant editor of frieze and a contributing editor of The White Review. He is based in Berlin, Germany.

MARY REID KELLEY AND PATRICK KELLEY are artists based in upstate New York, USA. This month, their exhibition ‘We Are Ghosts’ travels from Tate Liverpool, UK, to the Baltimore Museum of Art, USA. Their film This is Offal (2016), which won the 2016 Baloise Prize, is being screened as part of ‘Blind Faith’ at Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, until 4 July. Their work is included in Flying Too Close to the Sun (2018, Phaidon), a survey of myth in contemporary art. In September, they will have a solo exhibition at Susan ne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, USA, and will produce a new work for Studio Voltaire, London, UK, in 2019.

“The Minotaur Trilogy”, 2013–15, video stills, from top: Priapus Agonistes (1), Swinburne’s Pasiphaë (2) and The Thong of Dionysus (3–4)