



Rotten to the Core



Paul McCarthy

BY MICHAËL AMY

Paul McCarthy's exhibition at Hauser & Wirth's gigantic 18th Street space included sculpture carved out of blocks of walnut that were pieced together from dark and lighter segments of wood. From these composite blocks, McCarthy produced medium-size to colossal tchotchkes (a genre that is dear to him), thereby entering the arena in which Jeff Koons has been working for more than 30 years. Koons, the come-back kid who has been getting a huge amount of attention recently, is the man to both paraphrase and beat. His sensibility, though, is very different from McCarthy's — aiming for immaculacy and perfection. McCarthy's carved imagery was drawn from Walt Disney's 1937 animated film version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* — funny, sentimental, sexual, and at times frightening children's stuff, and Koonsian territory, *par excellence*. However, McCarthy — like his friend Mike Kelley, with whom he occasionally collaborated — takes us from childhood longings back to the darkest recesses of infantile behavior.

Opposite: *WS The Prince*, 2013. 4 stills. Above: *White Snow, Flower Girl*, 2012–13. Black walnut, 304.8 x 152.4 x 96.5 cm.



BOTTOM LEFT: JEREMIAH MCCARTHY / TOP AND BOTTOM CENTER, RIGHT: JOSHUA WHITE / ALL: © PAUL MCCARTHY, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

GENEVIEVE HANSON, © PAUL MCCARTHY, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

As we age, some of us hold on to imagery that transports us back to a time when we believe we were happier, even if only momentarily, inside the movie theater or in front of a TV screen. We have all seen the embarrassing, age-inappropriate objects flecking certain interiors (*Hello*, kitsch). McCarthy's work is always about taste and decorum. What is appropriate? What is acceptable? What are we repulsed by? What are we secretly drawn to? Who draws up the rules? Can you spell *hypocrisy*? What about *inhibition*? Where do these primal urges come from? What are we repressing? McCarthy's project is important because he constantly pushes the envelope, forcing us to rethink the very nature of art.

A performance artist steeped in process, who often uses liquid or malleable food-stuffs to allude to other viscous materials, McCarthy directed the virtuoso carving of the walnut so that it achieves the roundness and softness of wet clay—thereby reminding us of the Baroque exuberance of late Bernini, grandfather of kitsch in the opinion of some critics. Significantly, in light of the role played by nostalgia, some figures fuse together, increase suddenly in scale, or are doubled—memory is imperfect—

creating monstrous apparitions and hybrids fit for this age of genetic manipulations. The huge *White Snow, Bookends* (2013), with its unnaturally smooth and mellifluous handling of the wood, is a stand-out, collapsing too much visual information in its two sections—one upright, the other tilted back by 90 degrees, providing just the right amount of optical ambiguity and mental confusion.

McCarthy's exhibition "WS," at the Park Avenue Armory, delved much deeper into the story of Snow White and the—largely invented—life of Walt Disney. This entirely different affair made optimum use of the late 19th-century building's gigantic drill hall while reaching into the corridors and cells along the hall's longer sides. A blast of noise mixing repetitive instrumental music, overlapping talk, cries, groans, sighs, screams, panting, and endless laughter greeted viewers as they approached the hall. These sounds (coming from speakers lining the sides of the hall) accompanied four images projected side by side on huge horizontal screens suspended high above the floor on both of the shorter walls (four-channel, seven hours, drawn from circa 100 hours of footage). In *The Feature, Armory Edit*, WS (White Snow, played by Elyse Pop-

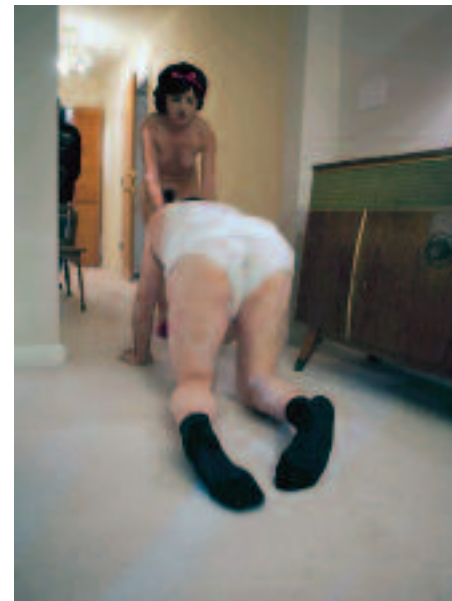
pers) first appears alone in the forest, then entering the house, meeting the dwarves, sleeping, partying, drinking (the latter two are Koonsian subjects), and eating—in short, a Bacchic revelry, until things spin horribly out of control, both WS and WP (Walt Paul, played by Paul McCarthy) are killed, and, finally, the young Prince arrives.

Few people saw this long film montage from beginning to end. Instead, visitors walked into and out of the hall as the movie continued to roll on, just like the world outside. *The Feature* offers all the messiness of life, with its tedium, ugliness, stupidity, and endless repetitions, as one and the same scene (shot from different angles) and scenes shot in different rooms are shown side by side, occasionally slipping in and out of focus as the camera pans in and then out. The actors, not all of them particularly attractive, are further deformed by huge noses. The situation is complicated by the appearance of two other White Snow figures, wearing bouffant skirts in primary colors, and hyper-realist silicone sculptures of WS and WP in the nude, which are sub-

White Snow, Bookends, 2013. Black walnut, 2 elements, 14 ft. high.



GENEVEVE HANSON. © PAUL MCCARTHY. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH



WS Olympia, 2013. 3 stills.

jected to all manner of violent handling. It all becomes impossibly perplexing when one sees WP—brilliantly played by McCarthy made up beyond recognition—forcing objects down the throat of his silicone counterpart. The silent, pliant figure is eventually raped by the dwarves with the stick of a broom, so violently that the broom's handle exits the figure's mouth—this in a city where not so long ago a black man was raped by a police officer with a club. (The exhibition was off limits to persons under the age of 17.)

The center of the hall contained the ranch-style house and strange garden where the movie sequences were filmed. McCarthy's garden, a realm fraught with artifice and illuminated by luridly colored stage lighting, is part Hudson River School painting, part San Fernando Valley, part Graceland, part sick sublime, and part Pollock's assertion that "I am nature." It is fascinating how McCarthy—who has lived for so long in the shadow of Hollywood, and who came of age during the early years of TV broadcasting—exposes the process by letting us see the stage sets, left almost exactly as they were at the end of shooting, and allows glimpses of the cameramen, who walk in and out of the frames in the films. Where does reality end and fiction begin?

JOSHUA WHITE. © PAUL MCCARTHY. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH



"WS," taken as a whole, constituted a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which sound, moving images, sculpture, architecture, light, and smell joined forces to create a cumulative impression, as viewers navigated the sprawling suburban ensemble. When peeking into the furnished rooms of the firmly middle-class house—some in an appalling state of disorder, with coagulating food and drink denoting filth in the broadest possible terms—one object looked strangely out of place (that is, if one overlooks the silicone corpses of WS and WP, the latter still kneeling over a metal tub). Lying on the floor was a copy of *Artforum*, with a drip painting by Pollock on the cover. This detail

served as a reminder of the importance of the tormented Abstract Expressionist master to the development of the younger artist. McCarthy has also received much from Bruce Nauman—particularly, use of space, repetition, boredom, dreariness—and it was fascinating to see how McCarthy used this legacy as a springboard to leap into the void.

"WS" is profoundly troubling—as troubling, in its way, as Pasolini's splendid last movie, *Salo*, which is likewise steeped in culture and politics. It is also profoundly sad. Witness the scene (shown in the corridor off the drill hall) in which WS and WP stride in slow motion, wailing and nude,

across the garden, with gestures and expressions borrowed from Masaccio's *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence. Or, witness WP on his knees approaching WS, the archetypal mother figure, who lies nude on a couch in the superb video-diptych *WS Olympia* (shown in a room off the drill hall), suffering from a splitting headache: "Walt, did you do your homework?...Did you do your homework Walt?...Are you lying to me Walt?...Are you lying to me Walt?" She then proceeds to pull at Walt's ear and wash out his mouth with a bar of soap. Disney's relationship to his hysterical, abusive, and incestuous mother was, if I follow McCarthy correctly, rewritten and transformed into the story of the loving and caring Snow White and the child-like dwarfs in the animated film. Significantly, WP is portrayed in the rest of the "WS" films as an increasingly dysfunctional and tormented tormentor in his own right. Walt Disney, as perceived by McCarthy (and other critics, including the artist Llyn Foulkes), is a sly manipulator—Mr. Wholesome U.S.A.—who delivers what is allegedly best for our young ones while brainwashing them in an effort to keep the white, puritanical, imperialist,

capitalist worldview very much alive. Mickey Mouse Club, anyone? There is a huge amount of violence, nudity, tediousness, loneliness, and despair in "WS," particularly the terrific hour-long film *Living with Walt* (shown in the corridor off the drill hall). There is also desire, which few, however, get to fulfill. In the film *WS The Prince*, male porn actors penetrate the silicone semblance of a hairless woman in the garden and climax (think Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*, and Koons); the sculpture was displayed in a retail refrigerator display unit, in the drill hall, for individual titillation. WS fellates a microphone held by WP at the end of a long, phallic pole in the film *WS Microphone Dream*. Most of us are deeply repressed, and food, or the rubbish that passes for it, becomes a substitute for sex, gore, and human waste in the 90-minute film-diptych *WS Walt Paul Cooking Show*. McCarthy's art is an art of excess. Everyone experienced various states of arousal while negotiating "WS." And then, there was the humor, scatological or otherwise, which enabled us to make some sort of sense out of it all, just as it allows us to make sense out of life. We would not be able to survive without it.

In "WS," McCarthy takes a well-known and highly structured narrative and sees how far he can stretch it, load it with tangents and digressions, and layer it with meanings both explicit and subliminal, so that the whole, with its endless repetitions, spins like a carousel, seemingly veering wildly beyond all control, though not quite. McCarthy is a grand master at making the familiar look terribly unsettling. The story of Snow White, as pure as snow, is about innocence and perseverance in the face of ill fortune, the ultimate triumph of good over evil, and the rewards such victory brings along with it. It belongs to the genus of the fairy tale, which aims to instill good habits and strong morals in young children. McCarthy, however, has little patience for ethical lessons, wherever they come from, and proceeds to turn the whole thing on its head. The corruption of youth is one of his preferred subjects. Who can forget the tawdry tableau of *The Garden* (1991–92) in which a father initiates his son in the joys of sex? The deliberately ugly rendering of the scene almost surpasses the unpleasantness of the subject itself. McCarthy has great fun

WS Walt Paul Cooking Show, 2013. 4 stills.



LEFT: RYAN CORRELL / RIGHT: NAOTAKA HIRO / ALL: © PAUL MCCARTHY, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH



The Garden, 1991–92. Wood, fiberglass, steel, electric motors, latex rubber, foam rubber, wigs, clothing, artificial turf, leaves, pine needles, rock, and trees, 2 views of installation.

in making us, the supposedly perfectly blasé observers of the contemporary art scene, feel more than a little squeamish.

Children are quasi-sacred territory, deemed innocent because they lack an adult understanding of good and evil. In short, children are off limits. Because they will determine the future of humanity and thus the very survival of our planet, they are considered our most precious legacy—though McCarthy might intone that you wouldn't think them important at all, judging by the state of our school systems and healthcare systems, the ubiquity of money-driven food conglomerates, our treatment of the environment, and the number of children living in poverty in what is claimed to be the greatest nation in all of history.

Our children, we proclaim, need both nourishing and protection, since they are so terribly vulnerable. This world of pre-conceptions concerning what lessons (and literature) are best shared with children is what McCarthy profanes with such gusto.

His hallucinatory scenes, using the story of Snow White as their launch pad, are enacted by adults who perform as if they were retarded—or at least under a situation of tremendous stress. McCarthy aims to surpass reality itself in terms of outrageousness.

The sweetness and innocence embodied by Snow White also characterize the heroine of a late 19th-century story about a young girl who goes to live with her grandfather in the Swiss Alps. Her almost transcendental goodness and the supposed purity of her cliché-ridden Swiss environment were too tempting for McCarthy and Mike Kelley to resist taking down in *Heidi*, *Midlife Crisis Trauma Center* and *Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone* (both 1992), thereby exposing the hypocrisies buried in the worldview that comes to life in Johanna Spyri's 1880 novel, a story that has found many ways into 20th-century popular culture, worldwide.

Pinocchio, the protagonist of Carlo Collodi's 1883 children's novel, is a far more mischievous, multi-dimensional creature. An animated marionette made of wood, Pinocchio has all manner of adventures and ends up in all kinds of trouble, which he lies to get out of, which causes his nose

to grow longer. This story, with its many adaptations in popular culture (including the 1940 animated Disney movie), offers enormously fertile terrain for an artist intent on exposing our basest instincts like McCarthy (*Pinocchio Pipenose Household-dilemma*, 1994).

"WS" is insane, but no more than so much of what we see, hear, or read about, reaching from the reality of our bedrooms and backyards to the highest levels of government. As McCarthy's previous critiques of idealized fantasy demonstrate, his is clearly not an optimistic worldview. The American way—which Walt Disney championed—is corrupt and corrupting. Despite our pretensions, we are all rotten to the core. We embrace what is base—just look at our entertainment industry, McCarthy declares. We purport to love God, family, and country, but are driven by hate, lust, and greed. We are frauds—as fake and ugly as those preposterous noses. There is a huge amount of food for thought in "WS," which—interestingly—remains a work in progress.

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