

***It's very hard for me to look
at my work and understand
what it looks like to someone
else. Because I was so there.***

David Gilbert

There he is. The artist is present—not there in front of you, posing or preening, but there, invisible but indivisible, among the holy accumulation of the stuff. Or there he goes, just out of frame, having shaped, by accident and design, the picture before you. Having stalked and captured the wild picture in the 30 second passage of sunlight before it passes, until the next one. The camera never catches him, but it never catches anything else.

For those of us stamped with the collector's compulsion—we “lonely and resistant rearrangers of things,” as Joan Didion put it, “afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss”—the stuff stands in our stead. It's a comfort; it's a bulwark. Nothing's hidden—on the contrary, Gilbert is a consummate squirreler of set pieces, and the studio is a stage. “What signifies a theatre?” wonders a young scamp in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*—that is to say, what makes a room a theater, said scamp looking to make one—and the answer comes, “a few yards of green baize for a curtain, and perhaps that may be enough.”

There are a few yards of curtain here, a curtain that is both a border and a featured player, an actor in a piebald troupe that includes cut-paper flowers, the rude, gleeful surprise of a Renaissance foot, a ribcage, stars, the sun, other suns. Which sun is the sun—the one that, for a brief, pinned-down instant, illuminates the scene, or the one borrowed from the emoji keyboard, cut and colored and instantly recognizable from its yolky, Lisa Simpson spokes. It's the Platonic

ideal of “sun,” a hieroglyph of “sun,” as the kids would say, *it’s giving “sun.”* Which is the thing and which is the reflection—which is to say, which is heaven and which is earth? (The Celts called the porous borderlands between Heaven and Earth “thin places.” Is the studio one?)

As always, Gilbert’s work is distinguished by a gentle, open-hearted wit. His isn’t the faux-profundity of the raw. It’s the real profundity of the artifice, the sets and the costumes that testify to their own making and their own plucky music—David Gilbert & Sullivan. But these new pictures are in a more minor key. Their colors are quieter, their spaces airier. They document a difficult year in the life of the artist, one in which he had to reckon with the loss of his mother. Impermanence haunts these pictures, freights their presence with absence. *Some presentiment of loss....* Still as they are—I think of these as some of Gilbert’s stillest photographs—they manage to register the anxious tick of the clock, the ebb of the light. Think of another great dada miniaturist, John Ashbery, in his “Still Life with Stranger”: “Come on, Ulrich, the great octagon / of the sky is passing over us. / Soon the world will have moved on.”

Yet they aren’t grim or glum. They’re performances of the possible. What David sees—what is *there*—is all of this, the slow work of making the paintings, building the sculptures, trimming and tacking and moving. The pictures grow by accretion and then, providentially, the stars align and the moment arrives and the shutter

clicks. These tableaux can't be too arranged, or the mixture spoils. They repel intention—the titular *Foot* and its fluttering cloak became neighbors by chance, that cloak the off-cuts from making of the flowers of *Wildflowers*—and tell the story of their own meandering journey into being. Meandering still: That yellow foot, borrowed from the Sistine Chapel's Delphic Sibyl, is the only thing that touches the ground (is it peeking out from a mess of bedsheets, or a shroud?); the rest floats. The sun glows, but its edges curl and flicker.

An empty room is an invitation, to ghosts and to viewers alike. If these pictures are numinous, they're also generous. They are open; they welcome our projection, our participation. So we also see what we see, when the light breaks in and the artist sneaks out. Or not out. So *there*. With us—the strangers in the still life—here and elsewhere, one foot on the ground, one free to wander. The great octagon of sky is passing over us, it's true. But for a capturable instant, the world has not yet moved on. Sunrise. Curtain rise. Scene!

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