



JON HADDOCK • *Vintage Mouse Porn* • November 6, to December 18, 2009

Jon Haddock was born in Sacramento, California in December of 1960. He received his BFA in Drawing from Arizona State in 1986, and his MFA in Painting from the University of Iowa in 1991. In 2001 his work was included in the Bitstreams show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Since then he has exhibited in North America and Europe at multiple venues, including ZKM Karlsruhe, the Yerba Buena Art Center, and PaceWildenstein. His work is included in several collections, including the Whitney, and Western Bridge, Seattle. He currently lives in Tempe, Arizona, where he is an instructor of Intermedia at Arizona State University.

<http://whitelead.com/jrh/index.html>

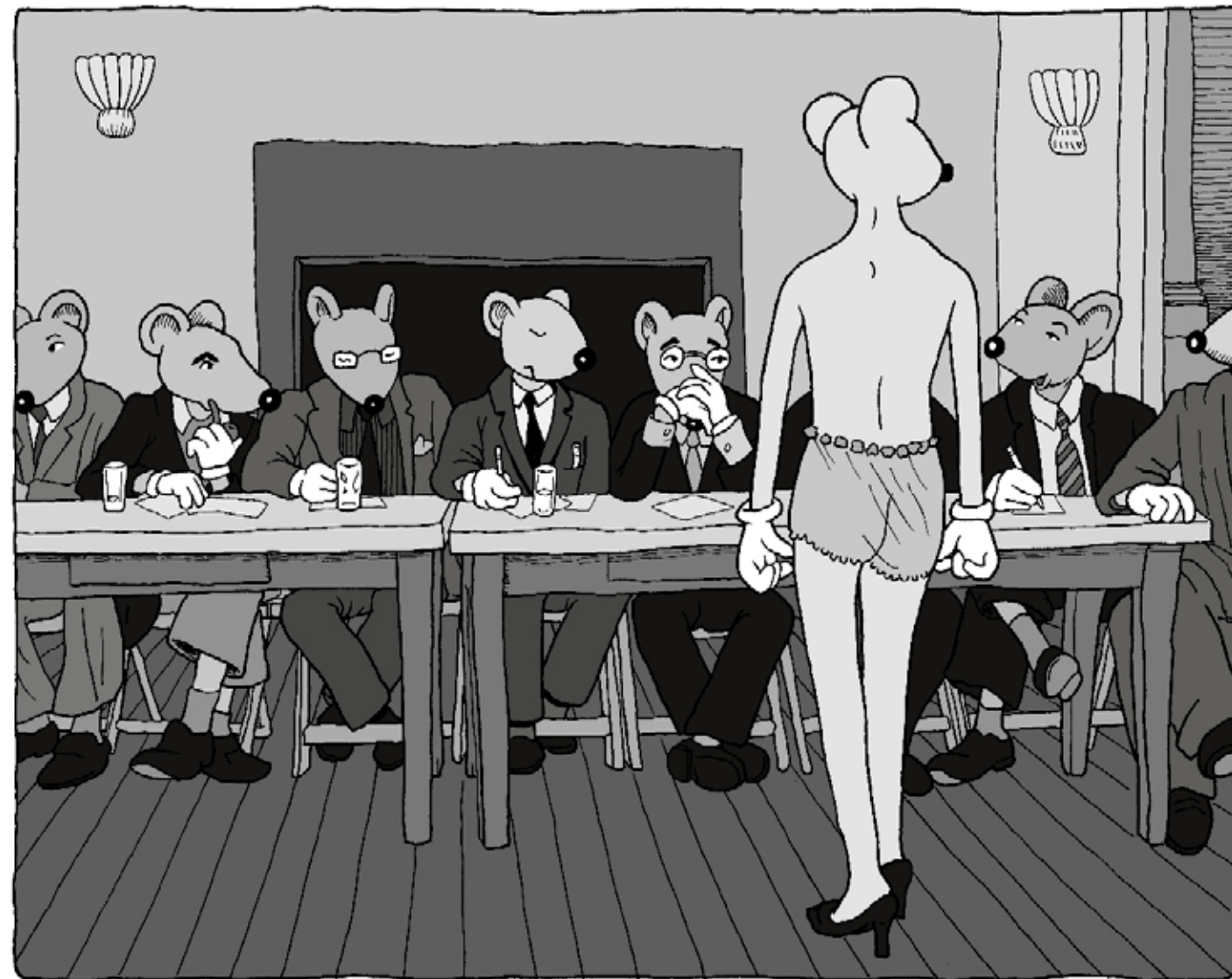
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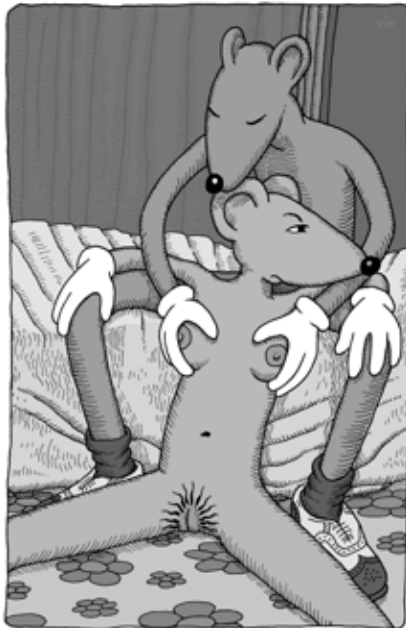
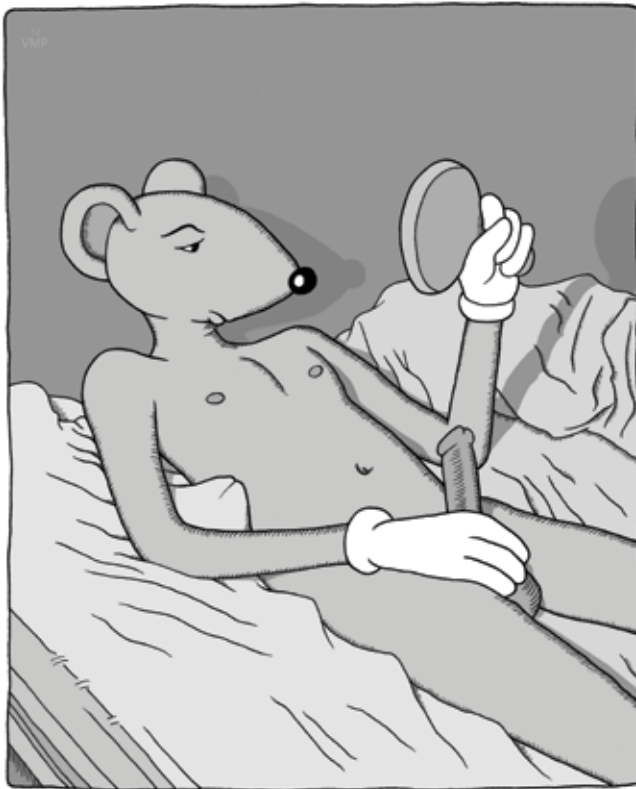
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JON HADDOCK • VINTAGE MOUSE PORN



You might anticipate that a blowjob, some threesomes, corsets, stockings, whips, cross-dressing, heavy petting, anal sex, femdom, masturbation, and gloves for everyone would involve at least a little bit of pleasure somewhere along the way. And yet the startling thing about Jon Haddock's Vintage Mouse Porn drawings is that pleasure seems to be the last thing they evoke. Perhaps anxiety, trepidation, resignation, even apathy—these all seem exist in far greater proportion in the works than the few accidental hiccups of pleasure that might be there. They are less sultry than desultory.

In the past, Haddock has often employed simple-seeming devices as conduits through which more complex notions can be considered, as when he has explored the extremities of violence through both cartoon characters (drawn and sculpted) and through hand-made wooden folk art (in a brilliant mechanical sculpture depicting the infamous “Don’t tase me, bro!” incident). He has also explored the iconography of cinema and history through the reductive representations of seminal moments in mocked-up “screenshots.”

Pornography is hardly a new visual trope in art, but Haddock’s series interestingly evades even the cheap, easy ploy of salacious visual pleasure that most artworks using pornographic images willingly utilize: flash some bare flesh and lure the viewer into the work, then deliver the “critical” message/punchline on the subject. By drawing mice in the style of early 20th century animation, Haddock ensures a degree of distance and objectivity from the subject, borrowing from the long history of animals as human stand-ins. Absent direct identification with the characters, there’s no room to occupy a position of morality or taste and we are directed elsewhere in our attentions. Likewise, there’s no room for eroticism. There might be, but Haddock does not depict these scenarios as seductive or alluring. And while they are cartoons, they are also not remotely funny (humor being another possible gimmick of using pornographic imagery). So we are left in an awkward space—a voyeur before scenes that neither we, nor the participants, take much pleasure or comfort in.

To say that, given their subject matter, Haddock’s drawings emit no sense of pleasure is not to suggest they aren’t gorgeous. With an economy of line and composition appropriate to the style Haddock is referencing, they are lushly rendered in a wide palette of greys that evokes the language of noir cinema (and its darker thematic underbelly), a documentary period piece, or the sense of a bygone time that we often frame as more simplistic but was as psychologically and emotionally complex as our own.

Haddock works this innocuous rendering with great subtlety—and not just the gentle shading of limbs, ears, or pubic hairs, but specifically in the treatment of light. Almost all of the scenes depicted have the quality of being front-lit, as though the subjects were being photographed—two of the drawings even show us photographers plying their perfunctory trade. There is often a discernible back shadow

behind the participants that describes the harsh glow of a camera flash. Within this, it is immediately apparent how mannered and posed many of the images appear. These intimate acts read as remote and cold. Stage-directed. Going through the motions. But it’s not as easy as saying that the works are taking a position on the issue of sexual exploitation. We really don’t know and Haddock’s characters do not illuminate the question. If anything, they appear placid, resolved, even bored sometimes (which may suggest a more troubling layer to exploitation, that of conscious acquiescence).

It’s unclear if there is specific narrative, although taken in one particular sequence you might end up with a Girl Mouse Meets Boy Mouse / Is Dissatisfied With Boy Mouse / Seeks More Attention and Adventure / Gets In Over Her Head. Haddock’s earlier “realistic” iterations of cartoon violence underscored both the harsh actuality of such moments, as well as the quixotic and seductive charm we project upon them. His Vintage Mouse Porn functions in similar fashion and the narrative just imagined is a projection that collapses the collected imagery—which can read as film stills—into the story arc of a Depression-era screwball comedy. But, as indicated earlier, there’s nothing funny here.

The tone of the work, visually and conceptually, is its own pall of grey. It is another paradoxical truth that drawings that seem so diluted of overt emotion nonetheless feel intensely dramatic. Even in their aspect of passionless aplomb, there is an undercurrent of anxiety pervading the works. And it’s not merely suggested through the dry postures of performed sex acts. Equally jarring are those drawings devoid of any sex. Haddock’s drawings of a table of mice men inspecting a mouse model and three mouse photographers seen from the model’s perspective—one photographing, one reading, and one looking up from his newspaper in a bored sidelong glance—are as unsettling as any of the images. His photographers, though neatly-dressed and framed by a picturesque landscape painting behind them, exude a quiet, confident menace.

The innocuous-sounding device of cartoon mice having sex—even when realized in a style true to the friendly visual appeal of animated animals—reveals itself as more tawdry and bereft of erotic appeal than we might expect. But it is a direct means to open up an ambiguous space around the subject, a space wherein we are invited to confront not only attitudes toward sex, but toward power, toward empathy (or its absence), toward the shifting layers of persona and identity, and even, in one drawing, to the utter self-absorption of it all.

In that drawing, a hardon-wielding mouse disinterestedly stares at himself in a hand-held mirror. We might cynically view this as a self-portrait of the artist. Or we might recognize the Everymouse trying to figure it all out.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator

