



HEATHER LAYTON

HEATHER LAYTON • *Preparing To Lose* • March 6 to April 8, 2010

Heather Layton is a Senior Lecturer of Art in the Department of Art & Art History at the University of Rochester. Her drawings, paintings, and public interventions use fictional narratives to address sociopolitical tensions from an interpersonal to international scale. Layton is currently illustrating a series of imaginary parables to guide a contemporary revolution. Layton has exhibited nationally and she is the recipient of the 2008 Lillian Fairchild Award for contributions to the arts.

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PREPARING TO LOSE



In Heather Layton’s sketchbook series of drawings *Preparing To Lose: A History Book for the Antihero*, an ambiguous and unknowable narrative plays itself out in a series of vignettes that are funny, pathetic, and slightly unnerving. Layton has referred to the series as a pointed reaction to the notion of perpetual winning, unending competition, and a mentality that insists that failure is not an option. So instead, we are invited to enter a terrain where failure is always an option and its possibility is met with humility—albeit humility forced by circumstance—rather than preening and ultimately hollow self-assurance.

The work is not expressly political, but in the post-9/11 world, Layton adopts two now-familiar tropes—that of a cluster of quasi-military figures as well as the iconic image of hooded prisoners of war. Collapsing these two images together in her figures implies interesting things about whether the victimizer makes himself the victim, but this may describe more about the moral issues and quagmires the early twenty-first century has fed us than the artist’s specific intent. Layton’s treatment connects directly to a long thread in her work where figures are hooded or masked, clarifying that the current work is ultimately more metaphorical—groups of people who cannot

seem to accomplish anything because everyone has their head trapped in a personal cocoon.

In most cases, this means a desultory sack on the head. In others, a somewhat more stylish hood. The hoods are accessorized with goggles, though we see no eyes and there’s no evidence that these sight-enabling devices are any help. A group of hooded, goggled figures cluster in a football huddle with no one apparently giving instructions and everyone apparently wondering who’s on first. Then again, in a much larger grouping of figures with the hood sans goggles apparel, there’s not even a hope of getting a huddle together. The goggles may do something after all, so there is a slight hint of optimism within the pathos.

The sense of hapless action and hapless inaction are accentuated by Layton’s drawing style in rendering her vignettes. Sometimes rigorously drawn, sometimes trailing off into the white, her figures encompass a wide range of attitudes—they sag like the sacks they wear, but they also seem athletic; they often feel terribly still, but also engage in a host of frenetic actions; and they do not appear to accomplish anything, sometimes because they’re not trying and sometimes in spite of their effort. It is never clear whether we should be laughing or crying.

The hooded and goggled figures both connect to an earlier series, *Bucketheads*, in which figures whose heads (not to mention their intellects and emotions) are similarly trapped fail to relate to each other or approach any viable sense of communication or intimacy. There is ambiguity in Layton’s *Bucketheads* as well and it is never clear if the devices they wear are intended to enable or disable a connection between these figures.

Each time I look through *Preparing To Lose*, I am lulled by the faint desire to apply a narrative but, beautifully,

this impulse always collapses. Are the goggled figures trying to subjugate the hooded figures and failing? We do begin and end with a lone hooded figure. Has he withstood some onslaught? Well, maybe... But Layton’s series is more true to emotion than narrative and contains too many open spaces to pin it down like that. Whatever tableau we consider, they all occur against a blankness and it is only the figures and the smudges they create against this blankness which proffer any information.

On the surface, a phrase like “preparing to lose” suggests a defeatist sensibility and this was what first struck me about this series of work because Layton’s work has often contained within it an abiding streak of optimism. Which may explain why I recognize a perverse kind of moxie or pluck in the preposterous figures in this series. They often seem to be failing magnificently, but there is a kind of stick-to-it-ness in the air. In a few more recent drawings called *Flight School*, the “preparing to lose” ethos is manifest in hooded, goggled figures adopting a klutzy set of dance moves and yoga positions in preposterous attempts to evoke or simulate flight. These new drawings are colored and the figures are individually—often foppishly—attired, underscoring the pathos while simultaneously evoking something undeniably ebullient.

Ebullient like a talentless crew of enthusiasts rehearsing musical theater perhaps, but ebullient nonetheless. “Preparing to lose” might be deceptive language. It may be as accurate to think of accepting the possibility of failure and, if the breakout color pieces in a series that began as intensely wrought black and white are any indication, this may be the gesture that sets you free.

Time will tell if we lose the hoods.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator

