

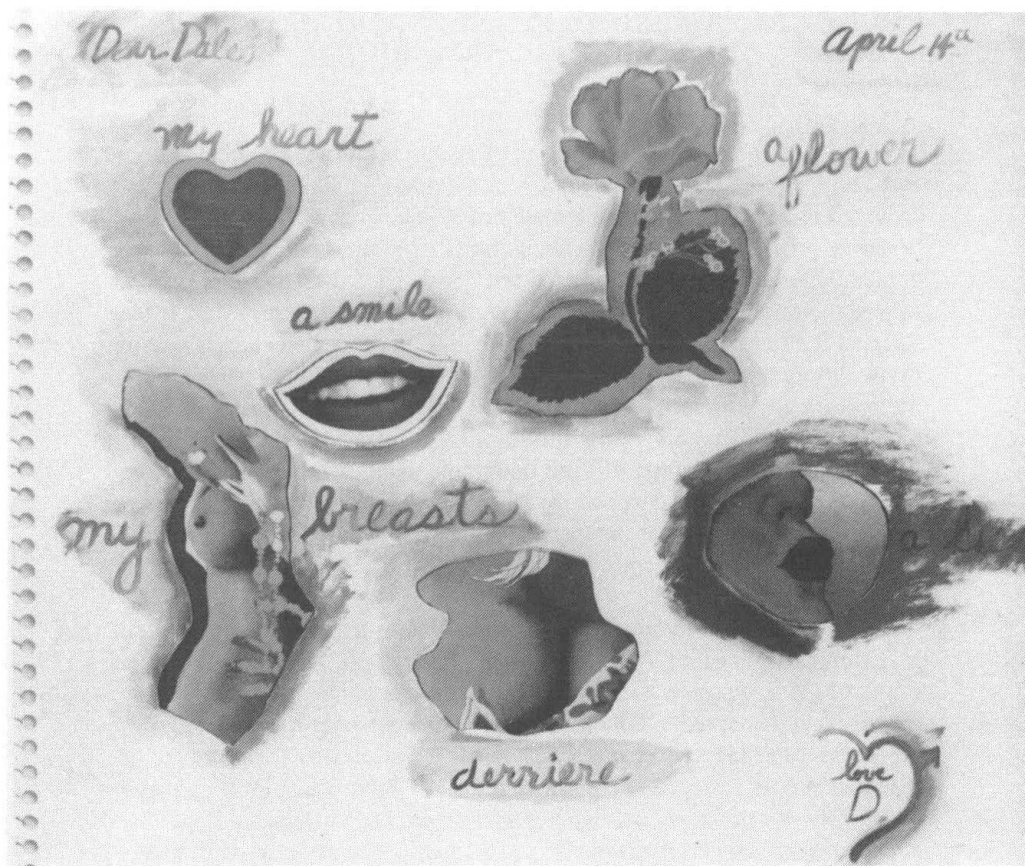
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RENEWAL OF SEXUAL SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS IN WORKS BY LARRY RIVERS

In tableaux by Giorgione, Titian, Tintoretto, Boucher, Goya and Van Gogh, to mention only a few of the many celebrated painters who indulged in sexual symbolism, female nudes in a variety of reclining poses brazenly proclaimed their voluptuous traits from their couches. Luscious cupids fluttered expectantly, silken drapes rustled and dark mysterious trees moved their branches in a manner to suggest primeval caresses. More often than not the sensual imagery and symbolism were concealed under a veil of myth, while words or objects placed in the picture plane to convey metaphorical associations were rare. The history of these important iconographical elements merits full discussion by scholars, but not in the space of an article. Rather, it is felt preferable to confine one's attention to a single artist, in this case, Larry Rivers. An inheritor of Western Art traditions, he employed at one period in his vibrant career sexual symbols and metaphors in numerous juxtapositions with measured levity and a degree of hermeticism.¹

Two contemporaries of the 1950's and 1960's provided revealing insights into Rivers' creative disposition. One was the poet Frank O'Hara, who observed: "Into the art scene of the 50's Larry came rather like a demented telephone. Nobody knew whether they wanted it in the library, the kitchen or the toilet, but it was electric."² The theme of dynamic tension recurred in the sketch drawn by John Gruen in *The Party's Over Now*. He described the painter as "... wildly restless ... compelling because he lived in utter chaos ... an intense, wiry, not particularly appetizing-looking young man, he exuded an incredible electricity and a most seductive and patent sort of sexuality. One felt one could throw oneself into the gutter with Larry Rivers and emerge purified. His rather brash and outrageous demeanour hid an enormous and continually operative sensitivity."³

One particular symbol of eroticism emerged early in a series the artist composed in the sixties. Each unit bore the title *Parts of the Body*, which was completed by an adjective of nationality indicating the language used in the asymmetrically placed superscriptions serving to identify



Larry Rivers, *Dear Dale*, 1976
Collage and pencil on paper
11 3/4 x 13 3/8 in.
Marlborough Gallery, New York

selected parts of the female nude.⁴ His attachment to these compositions was revealed in a 1977 interview with the writer Carol Brightman: "These works, when I look back now, continue to give me the most pleasure of any work I did in the sixties."⁵

The inspiration for the introduction of words into the picture plane was truly pedagogic, being linked to his attendance at the Alliance Francaise in Paris.⁶ Prescribed books displayed linguistic labels as vehicles for augmenting lexical confidence. For example, a face was given lines which ran out to numbers on the margin and these were decoded as words at the bottom of the page; line 5 was *bouche*, line 6 led to *nez*, and so on. The nudes Rivers depicted were the epitome of sensuality: ample breasts and buttocks, provocative poses. Whether the figure was reposing, standing or sitting, and whether it was en face, or depicted three quarters, its pudenda were the centre of focus. Characteristics of Goya's celebrated *Naked Maja* 1797-1798 may be detected in the portraiture entitled *Parts of the Body — Polish* 1962, where the nude is recumbent at an oblique angle. However, a more likely model could be Van Gogh's *Reclining Nude* 1887.⁷ In spite of Rivers' apparent emphasis on the erotic, the viewer's attention to the sexual symbol is deflected by visually compelling stencilled titles on labels. They add a touch of whimsy, reinforced by the light and variegated tones of the artist's palette. The intellectual exercise of remembering vocabulizing becomes a dominant force that makes light of the voluptuous forms.

The sexual metaphor of the dadaistic letter *Dear Dale* 1976 (Plate 1)⁸ is quite explicit. Parts of a woman's anatomy are represented by small images excised from host designs and placed in the picture plane. Each has a label and each may be viewed in isolation. Name and object correspond accurately in every case but one: a flower in bloom could be read as phallus and testicles presented upside down. Although the female figure is deconstructed, the message is integrated and whole by its own terms. One hesitates to speak of rebus, since there are no fragmented words or pictures in lieu of words. The absence of verbs in the text suggests that action was not expected on the part of the recipient. As for the beholder, presented with a succession of erogenous zones, he risks becoming a voyeur while he is assimilating the metaphorical sexuality of the Epistle to Dale.

The upturned rump, observed almost full on, is a classic erotic symbol and one that Rivers incorporated boldly into a self-portrait format which he entitled *Boucher's Punishment* 1981. The principal subject sits

facing his public, his right hand is raised and about to bring down a lash onto the buttocks of a young woman. The oval of her soft sepia mouth is fixed in what appears to be a squeal of delight. Her dress, underwear and high-heeled shoes resemble the fashions of the 1930's, and the eye is attracted more to her antics than to the presence of the sitter. The viewer becomes greatly disoriented when reading the title, for the pictorial symbolism is obscured by the introduction of the name of the Rococo painter. Rivers may well have had in mind the enticing *derriere* in the painting *Mademoiselle O'Murphy 1755*, but was Boucher's name merely a metaphor for social high jinks of the eighteenth century? Rephrased, the question may be expressed in other terms: did Rivers represent social *mores* of the past in modern dress, or did he depict a timeless theme under the inspiration of the earlier Master?

An assaulted posterior had featured on another occasion in Rivers' *oeuvre*, in the form of a mixed media sculpture entitled *Lampman Loves It* 1966.⁹ A black mechano-man penetrates from the rear a forward-leaning figure, seemingly mulatto,¹⁰ who is naked but for a sleeved blouse or shirt of generous cut. Employing the device of a *coupe transversale*, the artist displayed the male member as a small bulb fixed at the extremity of a thin metal conduit. Hanging from the other end of the piping is a pair of standard size globes, of conjectural voltage. The electrical metaphor is sustained by additional bulbs for hands at the end of arm-like spindly tubes, by the multi-image of the black man's head, and by a switch at the rear to 'light up' the sensitive points of the structure. *Lampman* is thought to be the nickname of an acquaintance who was an electrical fitter.¹¹ Sam Hunter, one of Rivers' more sympathetic critics, viewed the composition in uncomplicated terms: "Two fantastic male and female figures are linked in the act of copulation, although their critical anatomical parts have been masked as a gooseneck lamp and a plexi-glass-enclosed cavity."¹² However explicit the act may seem to be, the artist sought to disarm criticism that was so naive as to believe he was honoring a vogue of sexual permissiveness that was fashionable in the American society of the sixties. He is reported to have described the subject matter as "really quite serious, referring to the dehumanization of black people under slavery and the popular fear of black virility ... the encounter portrayed in *Lampman* is ... a hostile act symbolic of racial degradation."¹³ The *cognoscenti*, on the other hand, may wish to applaud the brilliant panoply of electrical impulses in mixed media that conveys an image of sexual stamina.¹⁴

In a similar vein, critics wished to invoke racial comparisons as motivation for *America's Number One Problem* 1969. Here a black phallus and a white one are depicted in the same panel of mixed media construction, each separated by the block lettering of the title. Across the lower plane of the panel lies a nine-inch ruler, with the numerical subdivisions carefully displayed.¹⁵ The reading of the metaphors is highly complex because the subjects, namely engorged penis, ruler and title, carry erotic, anthropometric and social connotations. Perhaps Rivers is employing words as 'realistic' indicators and spring-boards for broad painterly expression.¹⁶ The nine-inch rigid members represent wonders of volume and length for observers of either sex. One must nevertheless hesitate when attempting to decode *America's Number One Problem*, for the obvious may not be the key. Critics do not seem to have noticed the absence of the hermetic symbol of virility, the testicles. Emasculation of the male is more likely to be the profound problem whose metaphor is proclaimed by the incomplete genitalia.

Years later phallus and testicles rise out of the illustrator's subconscious in *On the Phone II* 1981. It is an overtly developed version of *On the Phone I* 1981, about which Helen Harrison wrote: "... doodles from the table top that serves as his telephone pad in the Southampton studio or the casual jottings in a notebook float around the artist's figure like so much mental flotsam and jetsam awaiting Rivers' salvaging interest."¹⁷ The doodles are rectangles with diagonally planed ends, no doubt modelled on erasers, and with random phone numbers scrawled on them. In the modified tableau, *On the Phone II*, the artist created a phallocratic composition, where the benign and inoffensive oblongs became robust male organs complete with scrotum, and emblazoning not only phone numbers but dates and names of acquaintances. The innocent eraser-like doodle is now a more arrogant metaphor, it has been transformed for erotic encounters.¹⁸

Yet another instance of a more pronounced erotic symbol and metaphor emerging in a second edition of a work is afforded by Rivers' *The Greatest Homosexual* 1964, in oil, collage, pencil and coloured pencil on canvas. The inspiration was the portrait *Napoleon in His Study* by Jacques-Louis David, a rhetorical work of 1820. The Emperor is represented in the American artist's composition by three juxtaposed standing figures.¹⁹ The first closely resembles the stance of the subject in David's work, but Napoleon's face has been denied character. The adjacent figurations are featureless, with uniform and anatomy in barest outlines. An unusually



Larry Rivers, *Golden Oldies 60's* (Detail), 1977-1978

Oil on canvas

106 x 144 in.

Collection of Jeffrey H. Loria

long rectangular piece of cloth dangles from the pubic region to knee level of the second image, but the beholder is unsure of its symbolism. It could represent the rudimentary projection of an elephantine phallus.

When he composed the *Golden Oldies 60's 1977-1978* (Plate 2) for the collector Jeffrey H. Loria,²⁰ Rivers incorporated the whole of the 1964 work, leaving the pendent member unchanged, but he firmed up the details of a previously amorphous, dark area, shoulder-high, between the two sketched portraits. It became, according to one's perception, an arm extending downwards from an epaulette, or a flaccid phallus hanging beneath pubic hair and flanked by two testicles. By such a firm alignment Rivers strengthened the perceived homosexuality of his principal actor. Whereas in the early version the artist had relied on androgyny and an exaggerated posture to portray an epicene person, he next openly suggested masculine sexual preference by delineating the genitals.

In a total reworking of the 1964 portraiture Rivers produced in 1965 a structure of plexiglass, electric light and wood, entitled *The Second Greatest Homosexual*. The term 'second' stands in close relationship with his first rendition of the theme.²¹ The approach to the subject matter changed: the pensile elephantine member, the third shadowy figure and the dark area between it and the second phantom were all suppressed. Their absence negated the sexual metaphor, and sexual symbolism was made redundant.

Sexual metaphors and symbols encountered in the works of Rivers had one thing in common: a high degree of functionality. The sexual codes serve not as elements for prurient delectation but as ingredients for the transference of a multi-hued vocabulary of ideas and thought passages. At times, these were polyvalent, deliberately provocative and rich in symbolism. One is made aware, from the way they are positioned in the canvas or in a *tout-ensemble*, mixed media construction, that they disseminate from Rivers' hand. He seized their intrinsic nature and recast it in his own aesthetic mold, thus ensuring a prominent rebirth based on historical antecedents.

1. Overviews of aspects of Rivers' art may be studied in the monographs by Sam Hunter, *Larry Rivers*, New York 1969; Larry Rivers with Carol Brightman, *Drawings and Digressions*, New York 1979; *Larry Rivers. Retrospektive. I Zeichnungen. II Bilder und Skulpturen*, ed. C. Haenlein, Hanover 1980; Helen A. Harrison, *Larry Rivers*, New York 1984. The great artistic currents in which Rivers was moving in the period that interests us in this paper are discussed by I. Sandler, *American Art of the 1960's*, New York 1988. In a more recent work entitled *Larry Rivers*, New York 1989, Sam Hunter included compositions created by the artist in the last twenty years.
2. See J. Gruen, "'Down Memory Lane with Larry Rivers' Golden Oldies," *Art News*, 77, Nov. 1978, p. 85.
3. J. Gruen, *The Party's Over Now*, New York 1972, p. 137.
4. The series includes *Parts of the Body — French 1962*; *Parts of the Body — French Vocabulary 1961-1962*; *Parts of the Body — Italian Vocabulary Lesson* (two versions) 1962-1963; *Parts of the Body — Polish 1962*; *Parts of the Body — English Vocabulary Lesson 1963*.
5. Rivers and Brightman, *Drawings and Digressions*, p. 139.
6. *Ibid.*, and Harrison, p. 77.
7. Inspiration from works by earlier Masters is a well known characteristic of Rivers' art. Tableaux by Boucher and Jacques-Louis David as models will be discussed below.
8. Reproduced in *Retrospektive. Zeichnungen*, p. 122.
9. A photograph of the structure may be viewed in *Retrospektive. Bilder und Skulpturen*, p. 165 and Harrison, p. 79. The *Drawing for Lampman 1966* is reproduced in *Retrospektive. Zeichnungen*, p. 101.
10. Harrison, p. 131, n. 14 comments: "Originally, the female figure was derived from a blond "Playmate of the Month," but after a suggestion that *Playboy* might sue over the appropriation of the image, Rivers substituted a black-haired, rather androgynous figure, whose ambiguity somewhat blunts the work's social critique."
11. Harrison, p. 80.

12. Hunter, 1969, p. 48.
13. Harrison, p. 80.
14. A drawing of *Lampman Loves It* was incorporated into *Homage to Picasso 1974*, reproduced by Harrison, p. 101. Nostalgia for his past artistic achievements is also a Rivers' trait.
15. Reproduced by Harrison, p. 80.
16. Cf. Russell Bowman, "Words and Images: a Persistent Paradox," *Art Journal*, Winter, 1985, p. 336.
17. Harrison, p. 103, who reproduces *On the Phone I* on p. 120. *On the Phone II* may be viewed in *Larry Rivers, the Continuing Interest in Abstract Art*, Catalogue of the Exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery, New York 1981, p. 11.
18. The association of the doodle and Eberhards in these compositions with similar provocative shapes evoked in poems by Rivers, is discussed in my paper "Larry Rivers: the Poet and the Painter," *Literature in North Queensland*, 15, no. 3, 1987, pp. 21-6 (4 figs.).
19. Reproduced in Harrison, p. 92. David's portrait of Napoleon may be conveniently studied in *Retrospektive. Bilder und Skulpturen*, p. 158.
20. Reproduced in Harrison, p. 113 and front cover. Mention is made of this composition in a discussion between the patron and the artist; see Jeffrey H. Loria, "Golden Oldies: an Interview with Larry Rivers," *Arts Magazine*, 53, Nov. 1978, pp. 104-6.
21. Reproduced in *Retrospektive, Bilder und Skulpturen*, p. 159.

Reproduction of Larry Rivers' work by courtesy of Marlborough Gallery Inc., New York.