

**DOUGLAS MILLER**  
on  
**Larkin Ford's *Faith Healer at the Buffet***



In the second, room, there were two pieces by Georgia State University's third year Larkin Ford. Ford's oeuvre includes in paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, and graphic work that seem to work in one of my favorite genres, and one particularly fitting for the "tough times" show. Like American Realism, Larkin's work features working class characters and scenes. But gone are noble, dignified, romantic working men and women, and in their place are proletarian grotesques arranged in pulpy milieus. The effect is an unsettling, violent, and (like *Blue Velvet* or *Twin Peaks*) surreal experience, rooted (I think) in a place of anger at stupidity, corruption, and indifference. Like me, he wanted to name its source, and to strike back with art.

"Faith Healer at the Buffet" is an example of the themes and details I like best in Ford's work. The oil painting depicts an obese food-covered child with an exaggerated mouth, hands raised in a fist, blindfolded, and wailing for (or demanding, or being forced--is he protesting?) more of a mysterious soup. That concoction is offered by a shadowy-but-patient hand extending from far-left corner of the canvas. In the background, in an almost empty restaurant, a man leaves over the buffet, his palms dug into the sloppy and colorless entrees below. A twisted smile indicates that the sensation is giving him pleasure, through his eyes are blocked by a lamp hanging over the table. Another figure, in Hopper-esque seclusion, sits in the background at an unlit booth.

The allegory is fruitful for political interpretation. Is the baby a reference to contemporary false prophets who would twist scripture into a vapid theology (notice the way multiple lines draw out focus into the void of the baby's mouth) for personal enrichment or political ends? Is the shadowy hand, the secret supplier of funds, resources, or an agenda? And does the figure in the background depict the working-class rural voter we've

heard to much about, whose unacknowledged sense of isolation and anomie has had such dire consequences? Whatever the case, Ford's use of light and shadow exaggerates the muscles and shadows, creating a perverse, threatening, and masculine presence which hangs over this world.

But Faith Healer also exemplifies an ambiguity which (in this charged moment) tests me in Ford's work. Initially, Faith Healer spoke to my anger, but that pleasure was quickly replaced by confusion--does Ford's work caricature the poor, or is he lashing out at the classist gaze of the upper crust gallery crowd (I mean that gaze which "others" poor white southerners as ignorant, anonymous, disposable, and solely responsible for our present political troubles?). If the latter, is he telling bourgeoisie collectors what they want to hear, comforting with familiar tropes to convince them that the election wasn't their fault, while in reality parading the failure to be their brother's keeper in front of their eyes? Because it is the man in far background of the restaurant, overlooked by the urban liberal bon vivant, and who believes America isn't great (for all the wrong reasons), that must be reached. Is this really a time for indirectness--do they really deserve a pass?

My feeling is no, but on the other hand, I think it's immature to write off the salacious "Faith Healer" because it didn't connect with my desire for political directness, which isn't always an artistic virtue. Ford's Lynch-esque works capture a feeling of psychological horror which take us into the night side of this American life and generally are as savory as they are terrifying. And while I couldn't help leaving the gallery wishing to feel something besides cynicism and horror, one also has to admit that horror can be a transformative experience if you can pull yourself away from its stare. Whatever Ford's real views--and I don't claim to have any special knowledge of them--his works offer an encounter between an audience member and their own classism. But classism must be confronted rather than escaped, and for what it's worth, spending time in front of Ford's work allowed me to acknowledge how deeply it had settled in me. Experienced this way, Ford's Faith Healer has healing power after all.

Larkin Ford's Portfolio  
[www.larkinhford.com/](http://www.larkinhford.com/)

Thank you Douglas.

Sincerely,

SOUP experimental