

ARTFORUM

Matthew Benedict

ALEXANDER AND BONIN

The works presented in Matthew Benedict's "Dramatis Personae" are photographs made as studies for paintings—but they are striking nonetheless. Portraying archetypes from unfamiliar parables and allegories—the cabin boy, the sea god, the widow, the sideshow freak—the sepia-toned images distinctly resemble daguerreotypes: Most of the figures pose in a manner that suggests stillness (rather than frozen movement), and the prints have odd unfocused areas and various flecks and scratches. Some of these flaws are not part of a photographic plate or film but appear on the walls and floor of the studio in which the images were taken—a trompe l'oeil effect that echoes other kinds of illusions employed here, some trickier than others. Befitting the works' original status as preparatory studies, the models' costumes are obviously costumes: Neptune's beard looks like a mop held to his face by a string; the cabin boy wears sweatpants and tube socks. But despite these contemporary details, the layers of artifice dissolve, and something arresting emerges. *Baker and Chimney Sweep*, 2001/2010, for instance, is marked by gorgeous contrast, with the silhouetted chimney sweep's

Matthew Benedict,
*Baker and Chimney
Sweep*, 2001/2010,
sepia-toned black
and-white photograph,
14 x 11".



broom obscuring the face of the baker bathed in light; without revealing too much, the characters and composition suggest story, consequences, moral.

All of the images are marked by a sense of the past performed in the present or of the present garbed in the past, and the period the characters inhabit is somewhat hazy. As in the somewhat gothic world of Edward Gorey, in Benedict's work it includes the Victorian and Edwardian eras and extends up to the 1930s; the more anachronistic figures—Neptune, Abel—look like actors in period stage shows or silent films. (Nayland Blake, in an essay about Benedict, describes the historical era conjured by the artist as "a time of textile mills and spirit mediums.") But the past is employed here mostly as a source of atmospheric, a sideways slide through history that allows the widow her dramatic weeds, the Brahmin his Valentino-style pose, the cabin boy his scimitar and all its Orientalist mystery. Authenticity does not seem to be the point, and it is interesting to note that Benedict

does not always eliminate the tokens of artifice from the resultant paintings, such as *The Mariner's Baptism*, 2002–2003 (not on view here), in which Neptune appears with a mop tied to his chin in the very same way it is in the photograph. Benedict makes use of the past, this suggests, but he maintains a theatrical distance from it. In fact, the more stagy the image, the more compelling; the model in *Fortune Teller*, 2006/2010, for instance, who looks completely contemporary, is less interesting than the others.

The play of historical detail and the characters' archetypal feel suggests the moral metaphors of Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," the horror and absurdity of Poe's "Hop-Frog," and, perhaps most forcefully, given the number of marine characters represented here, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, with its heady combination of typology and mysticism. Ultimately, however, these characters evince stories at once tantalizing and open-ended, and they suggest a kind of ersatz tarot deck, their symbolism yet to be plumbed.

—Emily Hall