

Cicero explores existential themes, but he does so in a peculiarly lighthearted, humorous way. His wild figures are abstract cartoons: the awkwardness of their construction—a very carefully calculated awkwardness—makes them more amusing than terrifying. They are comically discombobulated forms—incoherent to the point of grotesqueness yet ironically droll—that seem more improvised than substantial. If, as Baudelaire said, the grotesque—the freakish—is the comic at its most absolute, then Cicero's figures are absolutely hilarious, for he has given the grotesque an uncanny new human form, or else brought out the inherent freakishness of human beings in a vivid new way. The cartoon hero of *Mr. Ghost Goes to Town*, 1982, makes the point clearly, all the more so because the whiteness of his face suggests both the comic mask of the clown and the tragic nakedness of the skull. Humor takes away the bitter edge of this grim figure, and makes him even more original.

Humor is a mature defense against the instincts, as Freud said, and Cicero's absurd figures are funny enough to make us laugh at the violence of their instincts, even as we are forced to take it seriously. Nowhere is the tangle of life and death instincts—sexuality and death—more fiercely displayed than in the weird *Battle of the Sexes*, 1972, and *Crime*, 1976. Each

figure in these tragicomic masterpieces is what Freud called “a cauldron full of seething excitations”—“a chaos” of instincts and primary process. At the same time, the figures, fantasies of virility—tortured virility and sexuality—are comic ghosts. The man and woman in the *Battle of the Sexes* dissolve into gestural anarchy, while the aggressive figure that personifies *Crime* seems like a mirage in the gestural whirlpool that surrounds him. These intense, vibrant, truly “sensational”—sensation-full—works convey a sense of relentless drive and conflict, inner and with the world. One can't help wondering if the blue “rope” in which the figure in *Crime* is tied up or entangled—it forms his contour—is a symbol of social restraint or self-restraint. His crime seems to be no more than his expression of his sexual and aggressive instincts. He is raw instinct in tentative human form, unable to contain the energy of the instincts he “binds.” The figures in *The Battle of the Sexes* and *Crime* make no effort to be civilized, that is, to inhibit themselves for the sake of peace and safety. There is no suppression or sublimation of instinct in Cicero's figurative paintings, only its expression in a figurative form as raw as itself.

The manic surge of instinct seems to have disappeared in *Prince Charming*, 1981—the figures are more composed, geometrically coherent (although they also have a deceptively

improvised, hastily thrown together look)—but the death instinct has not. One figure is about to stab the other figure in the back, which is why death stands between them. As in *The Battle of the Sexes* and *Crime*, no reason for the conflict is suggested, as it was in *The Exit of E-5*, where it involved the choice between art and sex. The violence is instinctive—given by nature. The same irrational point is made in *Battle of the Sexes II*, 1992. Gestural wildness has disappeared, but the war between man and woman continues unabated, and both remain split personalities. Each has a dapper, physically attractive light side and a dark, grotesque primitive side. But a split personality does not mean a divided will, for both the troglodyte and the dandy, the beauty and the shadowy beast within her, are willfully violent. Even the attractive *Provincetown Princess*, 1984, is a split personality, for the iceberg or stone mountain in the foreground represents her inner coldness or hardness of heart. And her conceited funny face belies her beauty. Neither the opposites on the inside or the outside unite in Cicero's paintings, although the painfulness of their relationship is mitigated by the humor of their representation. Cicero is an artist god laughing at the antics of his creations, however much they may be projections of the conflict within himself—the nightmare which the self is, as

*Nightmare*, 1985, suggests. This grotesque, pained, split personality is also haunted by woman, as the upside down female face attached to his left leg, like a ball and chain, suggests.

The setting of *Nightmare*, is a lonely desert, and while the desert disappears in Cicero's works of the nineties, the loneliness remains. These works are painted with a remarkably meticulous touch. Cicero has always been concerned with detail, but now he is more obsessed than ever and the detail more minute. Instead of broad strokes, wild gestures, and eccentric geometry we have carefully managed touch informing a carefully staged scene. Instead of improvisation, we have a clearly rendered, carefully crafted work, which seems to have been thought out beforehand. Instead of looseness—a sense of let the paint fall where it may—we have concentration and deliberateness. We have full consciousness, rather than unconscious accident—ego control rather than painterly parapraxis. The setting remains bizarre and fantastic, if more bright and familiar than the nightmare setting of the previous works. What seems to me crucial is that instead of two figures in conflict, or one erotically aggressive figure, Cicero presents a single figure isolated in a landscape. The violence has gone. The question is, what remains?