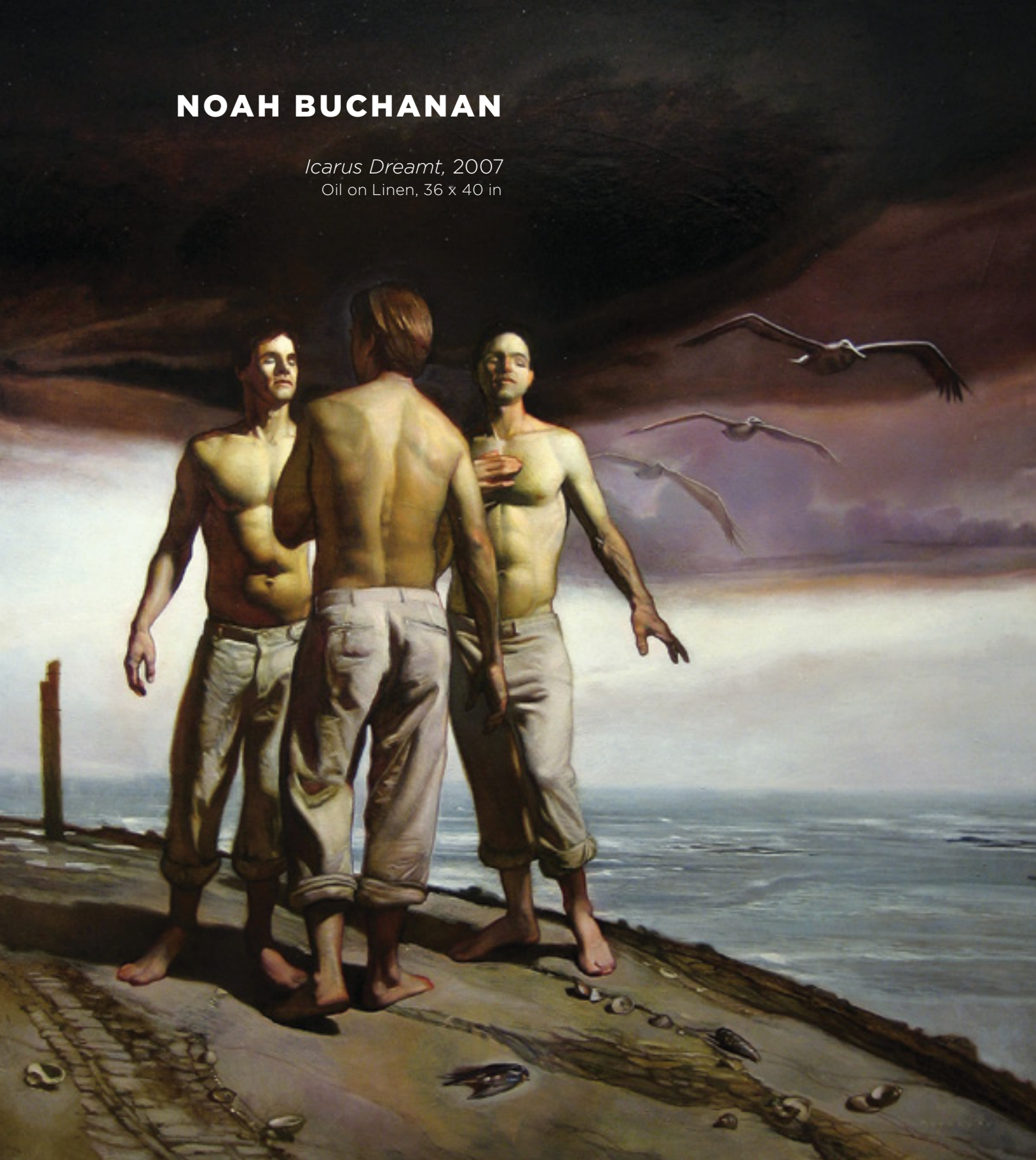


NOAH BUCHANAN

Icarus Dreamt, 2007
Oil on Linen, 36 x 40 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

ANTHONY DETRO

Badfish

Downtown Santa Cruz in the early nineties was fun: even more so in the summertime towards late August, when you still had a lot of tourists roaming around and all the out-of-town college kids were flooding back into town and getting settled in to begin the fall semester. Most of them frolicking and feigning poverty while secretly spending Mom and Dad's money on expensive weed, microbrews, and the A.M. ritual of hummus, bagels, and gourmet coffee.

On the upside?

Jerry Garcia was still alive and performing shows with the Dead.

On the downside?

Kurt Loder had reported on MTV News the previous April how Kurt Cobain had pumped himself full of heroin in up in Seattle and scribbled a note comparing himself to Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison, then commenced to blowing his brains out all over his garden: *All in all is all we are*.

It wasn't all bad, though. Pearl Jam was still at the top of its game after "Jeremy" had spoken loud and clear a couple of years prior. People were still drinking gin and juice with Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg; Chronic still stuck in most people's cassette decks. The punk rock scene was still alive and well—D.I., Agent Orange, Suicidal Tendencies, and Bad Religion were all still touring and stopping through town. And while NOFX, Pennywise, and Good Riddance were establishing themselves as the voice of the next generation, glow sticks, baby binkies, and Dr. Seuss hats and house music were all the rage among the pale, hairy-chested yuppie crowd. And the city known for its world-class surf breaks, and for having played a major role in putting professional skateboarding on the map over the past couple of decades, still only had a single sorry excuse for a skatepark. Five years after the Loma Prieta earthquake shook things up, damaging several buildings to the point that many of them had to be demolished, there were still several prime lots which had yet to be rebuilt on. Including the one at the corner of Cooper Street and Pacific Avenue where the old Cooper House once stood, in the heart of downtown. Opening in 1894, the Cooper House served as the county courthouse for several decades. And from the 1970s up until the earthquake in 1989, it had passed through several owners, transforming into a

mercantile that housed several small shops along with a restaurant and bar with outdoor seating, where a house band would play live music during lunch, and where acid guru Timothy Leary was often spotted hanging out. The building was considered so unsafe after the quake that shop owners were not allowed to go in and retrieve their merchandise. The huge hole left in the ground after the rubble was cleared away was symbolic of the huge hole left in the hearts of many locals when the five-ton wrecking ball finally took down the beloved yellow brick building.

A little farther down on Pacific Avenue was the vacant lot where Ford’s department store used to stand. Dubbed Hippie Corner because it had become a gathering area for caravans of traveling Deadheads and random drifters. VW vans and converted school buses with flowers and peace signs painted all over them—and the permanent cloud of incense and pot smoke—dominated the parking area most of the time. On any given day you could score anything from mescaline to mushrooms, to good weed and LSD. The cops knew there wasn’t anything heavy going on down there, so they usually didn’t bug out. Everyone knew if you were looking for the hard stuff you had to go to the Mexican neighborhood near the Boardwalk.

When the weather was nice, the street performers were usually out in full force. You had painters and poets and musicians and clowns—a perpetual smorgasbord of random artists—all willy-nilly along the avenue like lonely petals blown there by the wind. There was the old Mexican man who wore thick glasses and played sad tunes with his violin. The clown who rode around on his unicycle, feeding coins into parking meters that were about to expire and saving unsuspecting people from a possible parking violation. Sometimes you saw Spoonman, of Soundgarden fame. And sometimes you saw Tiny Tim walking along, singing in falsetto and strumming his ukulele. You had the young drunken hillbilly with a handlebar mustache and long, sandy-colored hair who wore a leather vest with no shirt and dirty bell-bottomed jeans, playing his out-of-tune acoustic guitar and butchering the lyrics to every Black Sabbath song ever written. Some folks might find the whole motley cast of characters to be a nuisance. But truth be told, they were all as much a part of the downtown scenery as the trees and the streetlamps that lined the avenue, all strutting and fretting their hour upon the stage.

And why not? The filth has always been the lifeblood of the character of every city.

A city without character would be a smug bubble of monotony where beauty refuses to grow.

At least that’s how it seemed when looking out onto the world through the boy’s eyes.

Through the boy’s eyes.

* * *

It was early evening on a summertime Saturday. The boy watched his two friends walk off down the other tracks towards the Boardwalk. He couldn’t go along because he had to be home by dark, or else he might have a fight on his hands, depending on how drunk his old man was when he got there. Most times it didn’t matter if he came home late or not; his old man would still want to fight him anyway. The boy had gotten bigger over the last couple of years, and it was getting harder for his old man to lick ’im, and he knew it, so it hadn’t been happening so often—but every now and then he still got brave. Been that way ever since his mother died a few years back, just after giving birth to his baby brother—whom he’d known nothing about, because he’d been taken away to go live down in Palm Springs with his mother’s mother right after he was born.

Lots of things had changed and gone away since then.

Sometimes the boy wished he could go back to those times when everybody was alive and well, and just stay there and be happy forever. Just being able to dream about it most days and every night often lightened the load of despair he carried around in his young heart. “Everyone suffers,” his mother had told him more than once. “But it’s what you do with your suffering that matters most.” For a long time, he hadn’t known what the hell she was talking about. He still didn’t understand completely. But after she died, a whole lotta things she’d said in the past had started to make sense.

He was only fifteen years old on that summer day when he’d come across that old bum, just past the desalination plant along the railroad tracks that ran behind Lighthouse Liquors. A bald-headed man and a man with a beard had just finished kicking the shit out of him before walking off with his case of beer. The boy saw the two men heading off towards the wharf and drinking the bum’s beer and laughing about it. As the boy walked by, he saw that the

man was bleeding from a gash on his forehead, the blood running down his face and into his mangy beard. The man gagged and choked and struggled to stay on his feet. He spat blood a couple of times before he fell onto his back and stopped moving altogether.

The boy kept walking, and couldn’t help but to keep looking back at where the man had fallen down. He knew he couldn’t stop or else he wouldn’t make it home on time, and he was already running late as it was.

It was almost dark by the time he rounded the curve in the tracks and turned around to go back and check on the man.

When the boy came up on him, he was still lying on his back and staring up into the twilight with unblinking and lifeless blue eyes. From a distance, the man had looked old. But looking at him up close, the boy thought he couldn’t be older than twenty-five. The blood on his face was beginning to cake up and dry out, and a group of flies was already engaged in a great battle over who would get dibs on the feast.

The boy knelt down beside the man’s body and shooed the flies away. He crossed himself, because that’s what he’d seen people on TV do while kneeling next to a dead body. The only other dead body the boy had ever seen in his life was that of his mama lying peacefully in her casket as his old man stood over it and sobbed, his tears rolling off and landing on his mother’s face.

The boy stood up and grabbed an old nasty blanket and dragged it over to the man and tossed it over his upper body, covering his face and torso.

The boy knelt back down and closed his eyes and began to whisper a prayer, because once again, that’s what people did in movies.

The man reached up and slowly pulled the blanket down from over his face. He looked at the strange boy kneeling beside him, his eyes closed and his head down and whispering to himself like an athlete about to play in a championship game.

“Say, Sonny?” the man said, more amused than anything. “What the hell you doin’?”

The boy jumped up at the sound of his voice, startled and wide-eyed. “I thought you were dead.”

“I’m not that lucky.”

“You looked like you were dead.”

The man pulled the filthy blanket off and slowly sat up, wincing in pain. “I always look like I’m dead.”

“No, you weren’t moving. And you weren’t blinking your eyes,” the boy said. “It didn’t look like you were breathing, either ... that’s why I thought you were dead.”

“Then maybe I was, Sonny. Maybe I was.” He inspected the busted cartilage in his nose with the tips of long dirty fingers that looked like spider legs. “What the hell you prayin’ for, anyway?”

“For you to not be dead.”

“What the hell would you do that for?” he grumbled.

“I’m sorry?” the boy stammered. “I ... uh—”

“Sonny?”

“Yeah?”

“Lighten up, man, I’m messin’ with you.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Do me a favor, Sonny?”

“Maybe.”

“See that old sofa over there in the bushes?”

“Yeah.”

“Be a pal and go over and lean it forward and grab that bottle behind there for me, wouldja?”

The boy went off and did what he was asked. When he came back with the bottle, the man was sitting on a milk crate and trying to roll a cigarette with shaky fingers. As soon as the bottle was in reach he snatched it from the boy’s hands, and the loose tobacco spilled onto his lap and blew off onto the ground. He opened the bottle in a hurry and drank from it thirstily and cursed when the liquor stung the cuts on his lips. He sat there for a long moment, breathing heavily and peering outward like a filthy mountaineer atop a great summit.

“You gonna be all right?” the boy said, snapping him out of his trance.

“Huh?”

“I said, are you gonna be all right?”

“I’m always all right.”

“It doesn’t look like it. I think you might need some stitches.”

“Nobody likes a smartass, Sonny.”

“I’m not being a smartass. I’m just telling you the truth.”

“Well go on and run home to Mommy and Daddy with that bullshit.” He raised the bottle to his busted lips and drank.

A small forgiving smile pinched the corner of the boy’s mouth. “You don’t like when people tell you the truth.”

“Truth or no truth, Sonny, I don’t remember askin’ you a goddamn thing.”

“I was just trying to help you.”

The man leaped from his seat with a flash. “Goddammit! I don’t need your help!” He sent the milk crate flying with a swift kick. “I don’t need anybody’s help! And I don’t remember askin’ you a goddamn thing!”

“You probably don’t remember a lot of things.”

The man rushed the boy, and the boy’s eyes grew wide in surprise and he backed up in a hurry.

The man went to leap over a pile of rubbish that stood between him and the boy, but his pant leg got hung up on an old rusty bike frame and he went down hard, but somehow managed to protect the bottle from being shattered.

“That’s what you get!” the boy scolded, though as soon as he said it he felt like shit.

The man wasn’t moving, but lay sobbing with his face buried in the crook of his arm.

The boy looked around before approaching the man very cautiously. “You okay?” he said, a slight tenderness in his voice.

The man didn’t respond.

As the boy got closer, he realized the man wasn’t sobbing; he was laughing. The boy didn’t know what else he could do for the guy. He thought about calling an ambulance. But all they would do would be to treat him, then turn him over to the Santa Cruz PD, which may or may not toss his poor ass in County.

At least he wasn’t dead.

The boy wasn’t so sure that was such a good thing anymore.

He reached down and stroked the back of the man’s head. “Silly ol’ Badfish.”

The boy took off up the tracks and towards home, which really wasn’t a home to him as much as it had been an unpredictable motel of unknowns, where the shadow of a man resembling his father had wandered drunk among the empty bottles scattered about the dark room like corpses as he quoted from Revelation and tended his broken heart.

The man could not see the boy as he went off, but he could hear the gravel crunching underfoot as he walked

away. After the footsteps faded, he lifted his head to look up the tracks and he saw a silhouette of the boy set against the light of the moon. He watched him walk and walk until he rounded the curve and was out of sight. “Come back, Sonny! Come back!” He started to cry into the sleeves of his raggedy shirt. “Don’t go! I’m sorry!”

He stretched his arms out into the dark, in the direction the boy had gone, until his arms tired and gave out on him. After that, he lay there for a while with the rubbish pile and stared at the moon. It dawned on him that the liquor stores would be closing up in the next few hours. He knew if he didn’t get his face cleaned up and get a move on and head downtown and start playing to get a few bucks together to get himself another bottle, it was gonna be a helluva rough night.

When he finally got back onto his feet, he dusted himself off with an air of dignity befitting a king and gracefully finished off what was left in the bottle, then gently set it down with the trash. He walked over to the thick ivy patches near the old sofa and retrieved his pack and slung it over his back, then reached into the bushes nearby and pulled out a tattered black guitar case. He stormed off past the liquor store and on to the outdoor showers at Cowell’s Beach. “Silly ol’ Badfish,” he muttered, and wondered where the hell he’d ever heard such a thing.

Anthony Detro is a native of Santa Cruz, California, which is the setting of some of his most treasured memories. “Badfish” is loosely based on a Buddhist parable, and was originally written to be adapted into a feature length film with original music. This is Detro’s first published work.

NOAH BUCHANAN

Resurrection, 2007

Oil on linen, 29 x 46 in



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