

You Owe Me A Feeling

Reviewed by Travis Diehl

Fried & Rich (DRUGGY RICH GUY'S LAMENT)

When confronted by the voice of God from a burning bush, the agnostic hunts for the speaker, while the atheist breaks out the marshmallows.

Recovery begins at birth

In the painting on page 115, a curtain has been pulled back to reveal the word NOTHING. In what is otherwise a book of photographs, this is the final image in a short descent into inky black full-bleed spreads of Friedrich Kunath's paintings. It's an opiate void, sharpened by cocaine hangover, and littered with ketamine hallucinations: psychedelic pastiche haunted by cartoons and food and spectral phenomena, scale out of whack, disassociated, fantastic, and all too real.



If you've made it this far—stuck it out to see the big reveal—you're by now familiar with the listless exploits of one despondent, leathery rich guy. He staggers around amid symbols of leisure and pleasure and class and SoCal (swimming pools, tennis courts, a wood-and-brass sailboat, telephones, oranges, palm trees). And in this he is not happy, he looks so sad, his excess is to his emptiness as Kunath's lush paintings are ultimately contextless within a dizzying overload of colors, styles, references, and STUFF.

This object sentimentality teeters on the edge of "sincerity," tethered by frayed, sheathless nerves—just as this "reality" seems both de facto and subjective (yes, the "self" as rare sailboat adrift). Kunath's is atheistic art that is nonetheless, and no matter how cynically, invested in art's effects—and there is a veritable cocktail here—a mix of antidepressants and tranquilizers and uppers—and who cares how it works, so long as it does.

But what if it stops working? Or what if you start to care?

A parking ticket on God's Winnebago

You Owe Me a Feeling was produced alongside Kunath's solo exhibition at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles: 2012's *Lacan's Haircut*. The photographs and layout are credited to Michael Schmelling, the text to David Berman. Feeling contains page after page of photographs of one "Friedrich Kunath" (played by Rudy Verwey), with screwy concrete poetry drifting all over them: a graphic designer's drug-dulled wet dream.

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The Berman, like a Brautigan, builds its soaring moments on lots of falling-flat: "Bad ideas are good again," and then: "O I have walked inside oil paintings". Phrases and fragments of phrases bend or droop into odd conclusions. The type itself keeps moving, curling, dripping, mimicking the seams on a sail or the trunks of a stand of palm trees or the lines of a tennis court ("a graph of atheism").

There may be meaning in these congruencies, there may not be; these are the iridescent slug trails left by slow hopes in hopelessness. There must be some feeling left somewhere or why else would this book exist, why go through the trouble, why take out your paintbrush and write NOTHING, and if you don't like this one, well then turn the page, these folks have made other pages.

The book is richly printed and bound; it is more than a catalog but in fact its own entity; it is itself a damaged, hi-fi creation.



Sad, the way rich people are sad

Kunath's Blum & Poe show included a video which was the basis for this book, or that shares much of the same imagery—depicting in spirit and deed the same psychic year-after.

On page 89 you see Verwey as "Kunath" in the back office of Blum & Poe; standing in front of a sculpture with a fancy woman on 94; or on 69 pulling out a painting to show a guy in a beige blazer. ("My work, it's something I call awkward divine".) They don't look like friends. Why? He doesn't seem to have any friends. (Not if you don't count his artworks.) He sails, swims, plays tennis alone. He looks through liquor bottles and pets cats with the tip of a paintbrush and hugs a giant fiberglass banana. He talks on a disconnected phone. He's an imaginary future Kunath, a projection of certain stereotypes of wealth: a joke. But not the funny kind.

At Blum & Poe, oversized sculptures of brown loafers plodded across three big carpeted galleries, loaded with smiling fruit, or ashtray sand, or mushrooms, or nothing. In "Kunath" there is ambiguity, in the sense of wandering; in Kunath there is certainty, in the sense of what remains.

Annoyed but alive

The *Feeling* text recalls David Berman's songs, performed with the Silver Jews; or resembles his poems, published in *Actual Air*. Lines from songs also reappear here verbatim: "And you've got that one idea again. / The one about

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dying." And, "There is a place past the blues I never want to see again." Severed from Berman's Marlboro-rough delivery, these turns of phrase writhe awkwardly through the book, just as Schmelling's fashiony reportage is both warmed and ironized in the service of Kunath's self fantasy.

It's different to strike a balance of earnestness and wit in a high-class catalog experiment—or in a painting or a written poem, for that matter—as opposed to in a country song. But perhaps the fact that *You Owe Me a Feeling* shares *Lacan's Haircut's* pretensions (to be both more and less than what it is, to both over- and underachieve... to be sad in the way that rich people are sad) makes it all the more true.

Against a nouveau-riche backdrop, the dark joke at the center of *Feeling* collapses into the fact of Berman's own very real suicide attempt, followed by his wholehearted embrace of Judaism.

If we could float on this hollowness

Verwey as Kunath has grimy hands, a stubbly face, and wrinkled skin. He is skeletal but handsome. He is baked in a particularly Californian way. He has some money, some cars, some place to live. Given all he has going for him, his "giving up" is a little insulting, and let's hope it's part of Kunath's ambivalent humor to champion this kind of privileged malaise.

Of course, "Kunath" doesn't really give up. He schleps through the motions. And in the last fifth of the book, on the far side of the emotionless smudge of Kunath's paintings, we see him smile.

Mingled with this chemical despondency is the sense that all Art is fake—that there's NOTHING behind the curtain—and that that is Art's trick. Kunath's work—despite its excess, its optical overload and RICHNESS of color, shape, pop culture, art history, *pastiche*—is fake too, is a well-dressed burnout in love, is high-budget bathos, and knows it.

Painting NOTHING is a problem. Who would make that painting? Who would buy it? And who would expect or even want a feeling from it?

In all this excess, or lack, or excessive *oceanic lack*—A feeling, ANY would do. The problems are fake. The feeling is real.