

ts the wholesome image of a venerable institution

g new meaning

THE BIG PICTURE



RM VAUGHAN

My brief tenure in Cub Scouts — long enough to buy the uniform, not long enough to actually wear it to a meeting — left me with only two lasting memories.

I remember being asked to squat down on the floor and howl at a plastic wolf's head, which I enjoyed immensely and am convinced helped make me the superstitious pagan that I am today. And I recall, vividly, a game called "jump or smack," wherein the Cub leader made us all stand in a circle while he stood in the centre and swung a nasty strap at our legs. If you jumped, you were "learning valuable wilderness survival skills." If you didn't jump fast enough, you were clearly another one of life's pain-stricken losers. You can guess which team I was on.

If the Cub Scouts pack I joined had been even half as much naughty fun as the one depicted in Toronto printmaker Daryl Vocat's new folio, *A Boy's Will*, the bruised thighs would have been worth it, and I'd be a better man today. Or at least a kinkier one.

Vocat's obsession with paramilitary boy cultures, such as the Scouts, street gangs and cadets, and the sexual and power dynamics that fuel them, has influenced his work for years, but his new folio (a loose term for a suite of prints meant to be viewed in a single folder, like an art book) brings all that latent libidinous energy and passive/dominant role-playing into sharp, provocative focus.

The boys in Vocat's imaginary Scout troop, who look like angelic young heroes lifted from a *Harold Aller* novel,

except for their tattoos, pass the time massaging each other, playing homoerotic capture games, giving each other new tattoos and, of course, tying up their willing leaders. One former Scout I consulted, a happily married father of two, told me cheerfully, "We did all that stuff, and worse." Now they tell me.

"I was involved in the Scouting movement for 12 years, way longer than most people seem to stick," Vocat admits.

"I started when I was five years old and joined the Beavers, then went on to Cubs, Scouts and Ventures. So I keep coming back to the Boy Scout illustrations and ideals because they played such a huge role in my life when I was growing up. At the time Scouts just seemed like something fun to do more than

anything. It wasn't until later, and when I had left that environment that I could look back at it critically and rethink what was going on."

Is *A Boy's Will*, then, a critique of the movement? The goings-on in the prints certainly subvert the wholesome Scout image.

"I use the Scout imagery because I'm very familiar with it, but also because there's a built-in nostalgia to it, a sort of universality that people recognize. A great deal can be projected on to the characters and scenarios that take place within the pages of Boy Scout handbooks. But overall, the basic message of Scouts is that we should be kind to each other and help each other out. In the work I kind of pervert these ideas, but I don't intend to completely discredit the philosophy. I



Vocat: bringing latent libidinous energy into sharp, provocative focus.



Bowen builds and layers the pieces of her animated dream language, seducing the viewer in slow steps.

admire the goals as much as I make fun of them."

■ Daryl Vocat, *A Boy's Will*, Limited Edition Folio, available at Art Metropole, 788 King St. W.

After watching Deanna Bowen's beautiful, hallucinatory video (*truth)seer*, I was tempted to call her up and sing REO Speedwagon's 1975 hit, *Dreamweaver*, but good taste prevailed. Not that Bowen's work needs any musical augmentation: (*truth)seer* is a floating, lyrical escapade as otherworldly, nocturnal and bedevilling as a Satie song.

The video follows a young black-clad Asian woman as she negotiates a dark, barren space filled only with symbolically loaded animated visions and manifestations. The roughly drawn visions — of everything from guns and crosses to chromosomes — appear randomly across the screen, sometimes covering the woman's mouth, her laser-bright eyes, her forehead or all of her body. Occasionally bits of text appear, such as samples from psychological tests and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, but we can never be certain if the woman is acting or being acted upon; much as we can never be sure during our own dreams if we are the protagonist or merely a spectator.

Bowen is a master of timing. I will never forget a compelling video she made of a candle flame being buffeted and almost extinguished by breath, which ended with the flame being snuffed out at just the exact

moment when the viewer was about to lose patience. In (*truth)seer*, Bowen takes her time building and layering the pieces of her animated dream language, seducing the viewer in slow steps until we are wholly immersed in the film's world and the apparitions begin to reveal an innate logic and rhythm.

Better than an afternoon nap, Bowen's video will replenish your serotonin and leave you pleasantly befuddled. Bring your own pillow.

■ Deanna Bowen, (*truth)seer*, Trinity Square Video Gallery, 401 Richmond St. W., Ste. 376, through Oct. 26.



Gysin: Dream Machine Plan.

The gaps in my education are as wide as, well, many other parts of me, but there's no excuse for the fact that until John Geiger's book *Nothing is True Everything is Permitted* landed on my lap, I knew nothing about the exploits of Canadian artist Brion Gysin — no excuse but that I am Canadian and, typically, was taught all about Gysin's American collaborators instead.

Gysin's art caused him to cross paths with just about every person you've ever read about, from William S. Burroughs, his life-long friend, to Jane Birkin, Phillippe Starcke, Alice B. Toklas, Max Ernst, Jackson Pollack, Cy Twombly and on and on. He painted, he designed book jackets, he wrote books, he served with the Canadian Intelligence Corps in the Second World War, he travelled the Middle East and his ashes were scattered by no less than Paul Bowles. And that's just a sampling (another art strategy he is credited with co-inventing) of Gysin's life.

Comprehensive and briskly written, Geiger's biography is a fascinating read, yet it mysteriously doesn't include any reproductions of Gysin's artworks. If there are any enterprising curators out there looking for a great subject for an exhibition, look no further.

■ John Geiger, *Nothing is True Everything is Permitted*, Disinformation Books, \$37.50.

National Post



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