

Dakota's Ladder

Falling Up

High on the wall by my front door is Dakota's ladder. It's one of the first he made, and he says it won't last, since it's made of tinted latex—it'll mold and weaken like a rubber monster mask. The newer pieces in the series are made of archival silicone and more durable. I keep it out of direct sunlight. But I'm fatalistic about art—we should enjoy it while we can!

You won't get too far on a rubber ladder. It's a drunken object—flaccid, deboned, defeated. The ladder of success is a dubious proposition but a formative one, in art school as much as in the rest of status-hungry America, veined with metaphors of depression and ascent, a rocket, a mountain, or (the worst) a meteoric rise, as if meteors don't plummet and burn.

Conceptually, though, you can climb this ladder forever. Dakota's ladders are a sculptural breakthrough, conducting ideas from heaven to earth. Not least in their self-effacing promise to check the boxes of art history: They're paintings, made of pigment in suspension with no substrate, like one of Suzanne Jackson's hanging, no-canvas paintings; they're portraits, suggesting, maybe facetiously, something about the artists who own the original models; they're readymades, you could subtitle Dakota's ladder "In Advance of the Broken Neck"; they're trompe l'oeil, in the round tradition advanced by Fischli and Weiss's project to reproduce every knick-knack and tool in their studio in painted polyurethane (no ladders, to my knowledge, but chairs and stools); they're social practice, especially in the sense that Dakota now frames the project as

a cleaning service (cover a ladder in silicone, peel it off, and the dirt comes off too); not least, they're photographic, documentary, in the sense of Fiona Connor's meticulous one-to-one sculptures of real-world objects, which serve not as copies or imitations but records.

A pliable 3D painting of a ladder, a cast of one—a structureless structuralism, a wobbly program, the Quixotic quest to name ladderness once and for all. From Dakota's ladder you can reach all these arguments. Ultimately, though, the crux of the ladder is tragicomic. It's a prop, a pun, a rubber chicken. While being technically a ladder (but is a ladder a ladder because of its helixes, its shape—or its practicality?)—while being arguably so many things—Dakota's ladder keeps slipping to the next definition, via rhyme or homonym, before you can find your footing.

The ladder on my wall is dark brown with khaki highlights. It has two steps, plus a top—the top is not a step.

Falling Down

The Old Testament story of Joseph the patriarch, whose seed begets nations, features a worldbuilding readymade. Having realized he's been sleeping on holy ground, Joseph anoints a stone with oil and makes it the pillar of a new city. He's in exile in the desert, running from his jealous, brawnier brother, and has just received an incredible vision: a ladder reaching to heaven, angels climbing up and down. This here is a portal, he realizes—the gate to heaven. He's been using the stone as a pillow, and in a grasping transference, the ladder having vanished with the night and no angels or godhead in sight, the rock that supported the seat of his fantasy receives his blessing in their stead.

We usually encounter Jacob's ladder through its profane counterparts. As a Hollywood motif, the vision is a delusion, the path not to paradise but to madness—we talk about chasing our dreams, but within a social contract that says dreams aren't reality, not to be taken literally. The dream is like a form that we use the best we can. At work, we climb the corporate ladder toward a heavenly corner office. White-collared seraphim shuttle up and down, tumble to the bottom, freeze with fear (they've never been up so high), grow grey on the rungs. Fine if you believe in that stuff. Otherwise, we speak of the corporate ladder the way we do the rat race, a fool's paradise invented to keep you pushing at a futile job. Valhalla is only for those who die at their desks.

There's a sculpture by the late artist Michael Richards called "Climbing Jacob's Ladder." It's a dense package of art history, and embodies a Black artist's path to enter it. On the wall, seven

illuminated silver boxes quoting Donald Judd's "stacks." On the floor below, a round mirror etched with a bull's eye, nodding to Jasper Johns nodding to Saint Sebastian, pierced by many arrows. Richards also cast his own body. A pair of clear resin feet sits on each box like shoes in a shoe store. Six hollow bronze-colored heads loll around the target like a guillotine's aftermath—none touch it, they've completely missed. And written on the sides of the boxes, top to bottom, one word at a time, is the phrase: "Climbing / Jacobs / ladder / he / lost / his / head".

Jacob's ladder begets many allegories. To make it as an artist, to climb that ladder, might look like a white flash of brilliance, but it's more often a sturdy assemblage of connections. Some lose their minds, some have their lights put out. Richards died on September 11 in the north tower—he'd spent the night in his studio on the 92nd floor—working late, dreaming.

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