

SIGNIFIED AND SNIGGERS
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ON CYPRIEN GAILLARD'S
CITIES OF GOLD AND MIRRORS

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Cyprien Gaillard, *Cities of Gold and Mirrors*, 2009 (still). Video; 8:56. Copyright the artist.

Image description: A dolphin swims in the calm waters of a seemingly surreal environment where a beige, sharply-diagonal building with many patios meets the shoreline.

BIG WINDOW

In one of Cyprien Gaillard's early film works, *The Lake Arches* (2007), the camera lens is trained on young men flexing their risk-taking for the artist. The two subjects gaze out at an artificial lake, preparing themselves to jump in. Unfortunately, plans go astray, and one of the participants gravely injures himself when diving into the basin. The presence of blood and severity of the accident render "The Lake Arches" a tragic tale. However, when watching Gaillard's other filmic portrayals of men hurting themselves as a result of voluntary acts of valor, the result is frequently risible. This inclination to laugh at challenges-gone-wrong leads me to wonder: Why is it so funny when overt displays of machismo end in repeated failures?

When I was six, my older brothers—ages eight and ten—and I discovered a squirrel in our backyard, decapitated by one of our cats with surgical precision. No head was in sight, but the body lay supine in a bed of grass and twigs. "Jump on it. Just do it," my brothers goaded me, their sadistic encouragement crescendoing into full-throated dares that were more threat than play. So I did. I hopped and landed with both feet. And, in the words of Larry Miller's character from the 2000 classic *Best In Show*, "the intestines, like they're spring-loaded, pop out," splashing my shins with rodent entrails. At that exact moment, our mother rushed outside, telling me to get in the car or risk being late for my piano lesson. Overlooking—or willfully ignoring—what had just occurred in her own backyard, she whisked me off to the autocratic Ms. Balkey's house, where I pounded out arpeggios with squirrel innards still coating my legs.

To say nothing of the deranged goings-on that qualify for childhood amusement—nor the company that I keep—whenever I tell this story, it gets laughs. Not just a polite chuckle, but more often than not bellowing and continuous cackles. The story functions on multiple comedic levels: the scatological meets with blue humor played out through the perspective of a potentially traumatized toddler succumbing to the whims of his crazed brothers. What's there not to laugh at? But, to me, what stands out most about this anecdote—and consequently makes it so funny—is the image of three young boys testing out their own power and watching it go awry. By encouraging me to flatten animal remains, my siblings and I empirically investigated the point at which our budding manliness runs up against the limits of the physical world. Can you convince someone to do something masochistic just to see what happens? (Obviously, yes.) But why do we find it so funny when it turns out exactly like, or worse than we would have imagined?

These questions flood my mind as I watch Gaillard's *Cities of Gold and Mirrors* (2009) and find myself unable to suppress laughter as the punchline in each of the film's vignettes unfolds. Shot on 16mm, Gaillard's work is composed of six thematically related scenes recorded in and around Cancún, Mexico. Each of the scenarios provides a new visual testament to the pratfalls of masculinist posturing, whether through contrived competitions, zoological imprisonment, or gaudy architectural failures. More than enough ink has already

been spilled analyzing the film's sly examination of tourism's degradation and outright erasure of histories, but few and far between is the review noting just how funny it is to watch individuals and institutions try so hard to be tough, self-assured, unflappable, and controlled, even in the face of obstacles that seem self-imposed.

In the first scene of *Cities*, a coterie of college-aged spring breakers gather outside their resort, a cheap imitation of the sloping architecture of Mesoamerican pyramids. After capturing their pregame push-ups, the jerky camera quickly zeroes in on two shirtless men preening for attention and flashing unopened bottles of tequila, both adorned with Mayanesque iconography. (Somewhere Baudrillard is doing somersaults in his grave.) The erosion of signifiers doesn't stop there: for the film's soundtrack, Gaillard lifted a song from the 1980s anime, *The Mysterious Cities of Gold*, a series that charts the adventures of young Esteban as he sails to the New World searching for a lost metropolis. The irony of a French artist using music from a Japanese show about a Spanish child to score a film depicting Americans running wild in Mexico is entirely lost on the two men in Gaillard's film as they begin to chug their tequila as fast as possible. To boot, the composers of the soundtrack are both from Israel.

As our two competitors race to see who can finish an entire fifth first, the humor quickly sets in when one of the challengers is (understandably) unable to stomach a single sip, all while his buddy drinks the whole bottle in less than twenty seconds. This does not stop Contestant #1 from trying again, though. And again, and again. Even after his friends have lost interest, he attempts to accomplish a task that his body has clearly deemed impossible. The presence of a few cameras pointing in his direction appears to be enough pressure to justify further masochism. It is in this portrayal of cocksure histrionics that the farce arises. Costumed in typical spring-breaker ensemble—crew cut, hairless chest, shorts that fall below the knee—Contestant #1 refuses to forfeit an arbitrary and physically harmful competition, even after he has already lost, quickly turning irony into slapstick. The entire scene would read as play-acting at masculinity if the spit takes were not so convincing.

A similar brand of fate-tempting braggadocio takes place throughout *Cities*. From a Bloods member dancing atop the Mayan archaeological site El Rey, to the dynamite demolition of a twenty-story office building, to the use of caged live dolphins as hotel curb appeal, each of the film's scenes reads as the punchline to the joke, "What did god say after creating man?" (I can do better.)

Analyzing why we laugh at certain topics and not others is nothing new, and Gaillard's depiction of painful realities butting against comical pleasures brings a number of texts to mind. Most notable is Georges Bataille's treatises on laughter and its necessity when faced with the dual gravities of death and eroticism: "Laughter is an attitude of compromise adopted by man when some repugnant but not apparently important factor confronts him. If eroticism is

taken seriously or tragically it is overwhelming.”¹ But when discussing society’s predilection to view sex lightly, Bataille never recognizes gender, much less the humor latent in watching men don the drag of masculinity, even while their macho attempts fall short. However unwittingly, *Cities* plumbs this exact facet of comedy, and the results are hilarious.

1 Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1962) 266.