

Watercolors

by [Robert Edwards](#) (April 2021)



Main Street Cafe Society, 1939, Ben Messick

The couple were vacationing tourists: he, white hair thinning, slow-moving; she, thick glasses, shouldering a purse, approach the woman at the entry, who is fashionably coifed, culottes and neck scarf, half-glasses, very correct.

“Watercolors,” the visiting woman inquires, “We heard there were watercolors.”

She looks around the old Carnegie and admires the glass-walled extension to the old structure.

“Yes,” the culottes responds, “there are watercolors in the installation,” then steps behind the glass-topped reception desk to return with some printed handouts.

“The requested donation is eight pounds for seniors,” she says as she hands the woman the print copy.

The gentleman hands her his credit card while the woman admires the bouquet of daffodils on the desk.

The pamphlet is a glossy trifold with a purple craft paper insert. Above the requisite paeans to inclusivity it lists the governmental, corporate, and foundational sponsors.

The culottes nods toward the entry to the installation and says, “There’s an exhibition of local ceramics in the room in the back. Enjoy your visit.”

The couple walk together slowly into the gallery while the woman, with some evident difficulty with her glasses, reads the purple handout given her with the trifold. In large bold type at the top she reads:

A SPELL TO BIND STRAIGHT WHITE CIS MALE ARTISTS FROM GETTING RICH OFF OF APPROPRIATING QUEER AESTHETICS AND FEMININE ABJECTION

She asks her companion, "Dear, what's a C-I-S male?"

He answers, "I think it's pronounced *sis* male. I think it's what I am." He regards the walls in the gallery otherwise empty of visitors, "and I think it's what they're not," he says, nodding at the art displayed.

She focuses on a watercolor of a roughly rendered female nude within a drawn pentagram, unframed and push-pinned to the wall.

She steps back a few steps to stand under the gallery's track lighting. Adjusting her glasses, she reads aloud from the purple handout:

THE SPELL IS TO STOP WHITE CIS MEN FROM APPROPRIATING AND PROFITING FROM QUEER AND TRANS AESTHETICS WHILE NEVER HAVING ANY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF QUEER PEOPLE, TRANS FOLK OR WOMEN

"I'm not sure what to make of that," she says. "Appropriating and profiting? And I don't understand this *sis, sis, sis.*"

"Well," he says, "Then we can move on, wouldn't you say? Maybe get into that pub down the street ahead of the lunch crowd."

"Now just a minute. This is my holiday as much as yours," she insists, "and I want to look at some watercolors."

She steps ahead of him and looks at another watercolor of naked women with large antlers dancing in a circle, women with crescent moons, with collaged black and white photographs of men with slash marks obliterating their genitals. She returns to the pamphlet.

"It says to do something with a black candle and a photograph of a CIS white man who is" –she giggles– "very naked."

His mind is elsewhere as he checks the time on his wristwatch as she squints to look at another watercolor drawing. After a moment she turns back to the purple handout.

“And there’s a, I think it’s a curse of some sort.” She reads again:

*INTO THE WATER I PLACE THIS BLADE
TO GUARD AGAINST THE THIEF AND SHADE.
MAY NO STRAIGHT PALE MALE FLESH NOR ASTRAL SHELL
ENTER INTO THIS PLACE WHEREIN I DWELL*

She adds, “There’s some more stuff about the candle and the photograph.” She looks to catch his response but sees that he’s left her to wander into the room with the ceramics.

When she catches up with him, he says, “I could really go for a beer.”

And that finishes their visit to the St Auburn’s Community Art Center.

In the car as they drive out of the lot she sighs audibly. “I just wish you were a little more patient, a little more open-minded.”

He does not respond but attends to the traffic on the road. When they get into the familiar pub she chooses a table near the window. Quickly he orders a beer, she orders a tea. In the sunlight coming in through the leaded glass she reads again from the purple handout:

*I BIND YOU FROM USING OUR MAGIC
OUR IMAGES OUR LANGUAGE OUR BODIES OUR BLOOD
I BIND YOU FROM PROFITING FROM OUR MAGIC
OUR IMAGES OUR LANGUAGE OUR BODIES OUR BLOOD*

“The watercolors were nice,” she says to no response from him.

She regards him critically and adds, "You wouldn't do that, would you? I mean, steal their...aesthetic?"

He softly inhales the head of the draft he'd ordered and then answers, "Some very nice ceramics back there. Might look nice with the tablecloth Stacie sent us from Jaipur."

"I didn't see any price tags in the museum." She asks, "Do you think they're for sale?"

"No, dear. Not likely."

"Why are they there, then?"

"Maybe somebody wanted a public to know they're there."

"That doesn't make any sense. Wasn't anybody there but us."

He answers, "Maybe these people who are not...not CIS ...wanted us to know that that's what they're not."

"Still, that makes no sense. They're one thing, I suppose, and we're another. I'm drinking a tea, you're not. You're drinking a beer, not a tea. It's one or the other, why is this *CIS* important enough to be in a watercolor?"

He sets the beer on the table and peruses the menu. He suggests the fish and chips and then resumes: "I suspect that there's a certain resentment about this. I mean, you don't resent that I'm drinking a beer, do you? And you don't think I resent that you're drinking a tea?"

"No, of course not. Although I wish you'd take it easy with the beer sometimes."

"Yes, well. The point is that if you throw a made-up word at somebody, something that tells them what they are, it's a kind of argument."

"Like an insult, you mean."

"Maybe, especially if the word means one thing to the one who uses it and nothing to the one it's aimed at."

"So, it's a secret language. Like pig Latin."

"Exactly."

She thinks about this for a moment and then says, "I never liked pig-Latin. I had trouble enough with French."

"Or it might be a kind of euphemism. Like calling somebody an S. O. B."

"Now, that's not nice."

"Yes, but it's nicer than calling somebody a *son of a bitch*."

"Quiet. They'll throw us out of here if you use words like that."

"What, *bitch*? That's a fine Old English term. Goes way back and nobody argues its meaning."

"What meaning? Only Dover's a bitch, and now that I'm reminded, I worry about Dover in the kennel."

"No, dear, Dover's not a bitch, he's a stud. And not even that since he's been fixed."

"Yes, of course..."

"But he might be called a son of bitch since..."

"Oh, you're just being cute."

"Okay, Dover's not anybody's *son* since he's just a dog."

"Maybe he's CIS?"

“Yeah, let’s call him that. He won’t mind.”

“Maybe it’s okay if we’re CIS and they’re not.”

“Sure, like these Brits drive on the left, we drive on the right.”

“So CIS just means driving on the other side.’”

“Okay. I’ll go with that. You don’t mind if I have another, do you,” he said, lifting his nearly empty glass.

“When we get back I’m going to have to go over this with Alicia and Joni.”

“Right, the girls will set it straight. Mahjong, sudoku, a game of hearts. It all sorts out.”

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Robert Edwards served as a Counterintelligence Agent, Vietnam, 1968 to 1970, and graduated BFA, University of Minnesota, 1974. His visual art is now included in public, corporate, and university collections. Now retired from the Saint Paul Public Library, he lives in Prescott, Arizona where he has worked with a small press, Loose Moose Publishing (closed), designing books and writing promotional blurbs. .

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