

MODERN PAINTERS

Tough Questions for Dad: In Praise of Karl Haendel's Quietly Poignant New Video

By Ben Davis

October 31, 2011



Criticism, as they say, is autobiography, and I can freely admit that I may Karl Haendel's soon-to-close show at Harris Lieberman moving because I'm close to the demographic it addresses. The video installation is about men in their 30s; I'm 32. Haendel, for his part, was born in 1976, and "Questions for My Father," as the work is called, feels personal, a kind of oblique interrogation of what that particular moment in one's life means and feels like.

The Los Angeles-based Haendel is known for ravishing, super-detailed graphite drawings, often hung together salon-style or in installation-like thickets. These drawings have a kind of frozen cerebral quality to them, at once lush and somehow emotionally removed. Though based on a series of text-based drawings of the same title and on the same theme, Haendel's "Questions for My Father" show is nevertheless notable in that, on almost every register, it departs from the formula that has heretofore proven successful for the artist.

Most obviously, it's a video (a collaboration with New York filmmaker Petter Ringbom), eschewing the usual graphite wizardry. Where Haendel has been known for a coolly removed tone, this work is fixated on expression, or even confession. And where the drawings have the immediately salable hook of being

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

evident feats of intense artistic skill, the video is almost willfully artless — so straightforward and direct that it would be easy to miss its subtle complexity.

Basically, the work consists of a 12-minute loop, featuring a series of talking heads — a diverse bunch of 30-something men — framed against a black background, asking questions into the camera. After a few moments it becomes clear that (as the title of the work indicates) these questions are all addressed to the men's dads. To make the film, Haendel asked a group of associates to write down questions that they might want to ask their fathers but never would, and then coached them as they asked these to the camera. The results feel even-keeled and honest, self-conscious but not particularly theatrical.

The questions are edited together so that they cycle loosely through common themes. "Do you have any regrets?" and "How many women have you slept with?" are the ones that seem to have been most common. But the viewer also gradually gets hints of the men as individuals with particular histories and paternal relationships. "When did you know I was gay?" one asks. "Did you always know you were gay?" asks the next. One, a white guy, wants to know, "Did you support Martin Luther King?" Another, evidently Iranian American, "Did you ever protest the Shah?"

Among the cast is Haendel himself, whom you can pick out because he is always the one asking the most uncomfortable questions — "Did you ever have anal sex with mom?" being the most obvious. You can tell that he wants the work's effect to be almost embarrassing, and it is, at moments. The themes that spill forth are not terribly unexpected — sex, money, politics, sex again, and of course all kinds of Oedipal baggage. But it's actually at its most ordinary moments that it hits the hardest. As the film goes on, it makes you dwell less on life's more explosive and melodramatic turns, and more on how questions that are so basic and obvious can go unasked anyway.

The film's pace is not frantic, but becomes relentless, a steady ictus of muted longings, doubts, curiosities, and regrets. There are wry moments. "Do you ever get... metaphysical?" one man asks, eyes twinkling. "Why did you wear a tuxedo to my playoff game?" another demands. But some of the questions are quietly shattering. The words "Are you still alive?" hang in the air, suddenly making the theme of the absent father very, very present. The most powerful interrogation may also be one of the simplest, with the man uttering it tripping a little on the words as they come out of his mouth. "Are you happy?"

As this moment suggests, in addressing their absent dads, the men are of course really asking questions about themselves, trying to understand who they are, where they have ended up. Again it is Haendel who asks the question in the film that is the key: "When did you stop feeling like a boy?" What the film captures, in its elemental way, is the sense of that moment when life stops being scary because it's full of dangerous possibilities and starts instead to be scary because it seems to have a definite and inevitable shape. How did it end up this way? you ask yourself. Is this the way it is supposed to be? Is this it? Can you tell me?