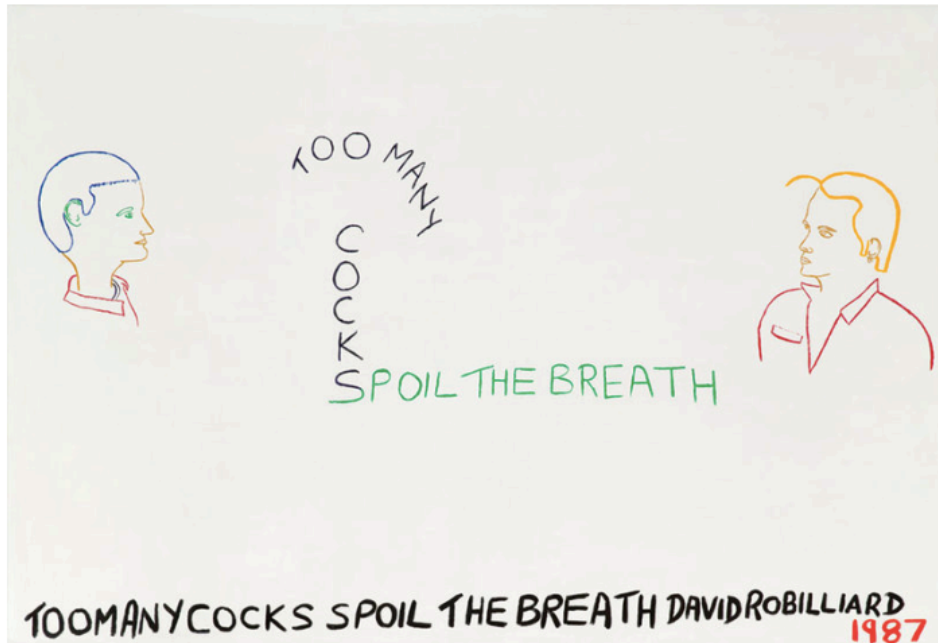


ARTFORUM

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David Robilliard, *Too Many Cocks Spoil the Breath*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 39 1/2 x 59 1/8".

David Robilliard

ORTUZAR PROJECTS

WELCOME TO MY OPENING. Outwardly polite, the announcement takes on a cheeky second meaning when rendered by the late British artist and poet David Robilliard. Daubed in childlike dirty-yellow capital letters on a small framed sheet of paper, it ushered us into his first New York solo exhibition in nearly thirty years and immersed us in the queer London milieu that he inhabited throughout most of the 1980s. Championed by Gilbert and George, who anointed him “the new master of the modern person,” Robilliard pursued a disarming combination of image and text that found its most distinctive expression in his “poem-paintings.” A selection was on view here along with works on paper and archival ephemera, all deliciously bittersweet as ever.

A quintessential Robilliard poem-painting juxtaposes the simplified outlines of faces or figures with the briefest of texts, the tone of which ranges from wistful to bawdy, from A BURST OF TEARS FROM ALL YOUR FRIENDS THE END to TOO MANY COCKS SPOIL THE BREATH. Colors are mostly primary, the ground a basic white. And, tellingly, the artist’s signature is frequently large and bold enough to qualify as a compositional element. That Robilliard’s romantic wit was edged in acid comes as no surprise; AIDS bit deep into his world, and in 1988 he succumbed to an AIDS-related illness at the age of thirty-six. Perhaps this sense of loss fed his drive to pare things down, to record only the loveliest, bitchiest, most essential moments.

The works in this exhibition were mostly concerned with relationships—specifically, the disjunctions between their idealization and reality. NOBODY FINDS A DREAM MAN TILL THEY'RE ASLEEP read one, with a blond boy (the dreamer or the dreamed?) peering over its scarlet letters. YOU KNOW HOW TO WIND ME UP YOU KNOW HOW TO CALM ME DOWN YOU KNOW read another, depicting two figures, caught in an uncertain gravity, orbiting each other. OUR MOMENT CAME AND WENT LIKE A DROP OF WATER IN A DESERT IT CAME TO NOTHING lamented *Nothing Doing*, 1987. In their melancholic turn, these canvases evince the “truthfulness, sadness, desperation, and love of people” that Gilbert the Shit and George the Cunt ascribed to the works’ beloved maker.

The drawings in this exhibition were all small and framed, featuring disjointed portraits skittering across empty space. In one, a row of faces became a kind of human caterpillar; in another, they formed a decorative border. Were these the same “disposable boyfriends” from the title of a 1987 painting by Robilliard, one wondered, or a series of sketched-out prototypes for his aforementioned “dream man”? Either way, their slender black lines, lack of background, and frequent incompleteness gave them a wiry, weightless, fragile quality, like doodles on an Etch A Sketch just before the obliterating shake.

Finally, copies of Robilliard’s poetry books, including *Inevitable* (1984), *Swallowing Helmets* (1987), *Baby Lies Truthfully* (1990), and *The Cat’s Pyjamas* (1991), shared cabinet space with a few other publications, including *A Box of Poems*, 1987—a small gray carton stuffed with inscribed cards, which one could hear the artist read aloud via some nearby headphones—and various invitations, press releases, notes, and related bits and bobs. Gathered together, they transmitted that gentle nostalgic buzz common to all such small treasures, rounding out this tender picture of an original creative light extinguished far too soon.

— Michael Wilson