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DAILY COMMENT | NEWS DESK | CULTURE DESK | BOOK BENCH | SPORTING SCENE | PHOTO BOOTH | BACK ISSUES | JOHN CASSIDY | THE POLITICAL SCENE

CULTURE DESK

Notes on arts and entertainment from the staff of The New Yorker.

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OUTFIT ORACLES

Posted by Amanda Fortini



On a recent evening at the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Las Vegas, “the Bumbys,” an anonymous performance-art duo that compose what they call a “Fair and Honest Appraisal of Your Appearance” while you wait, were delivering pithy assessments, like hipster pageant judges, at a cocktail party held in their honor. The occasion was a celebration of the Bumbys’ residency/installation at the Cosmopolitan—through its innovative artist-in-residence program, the hotel has also hosted the likes of Fab 5 Freddy, Curtis Kulig, and MK Guth—which runs through April 1st. (Performances are Thursday through Sunday nights.) Guests had a chance to get “Bumby’ed” while simultaneously getting drunk.

As the partygoers milled around, waiting with apprehension to be critiqued—*Does my hair look ok? Is my shirt tucked in? Do I have lipstick on my teeth?*—Gill and Jill Bumby (not their real names) sat silently click-click-clicking on their typewriters from behind a table that functioned as a dais, their identities obscured by a red ski cap (Gill) a red wig (Jill), white sunglasses, and bandannas of the same colors, their hearing muffled by glossy white Skullcandy headphones. If Raggedy Ann and Andy had turned to a life of crime, they might have dressed like this. The Bumbys’ aggressive insistence on anonymity can seem at first like a typical art-world affectation, but watching them work, it begins to make sense: if we knew who they were, we’d question their motivations, prejudices, tastes. An oracle must transcend individuality.

The Bumbys, who were born in 2006, when Gill started telling aesthetic fortunes for two dollars a pop at the Bedford Avenue subway station, don’t interact with their subjects. People stood before them, one by one, in all their anxious, fidgeting human glory, like supplicants waiting for absolution. (“Yeah, well, I’m always worried about being assessed or judged,” one guy told me, with an implicit *duh*, when I asked whether he was nervous.) Jill and Gill studied each person intently, then, in mere minutes, produced a poetic, humorous paragraph that reminded me how fresh and inspired writing can be when it’s not too worked-over. Each Kerouacian prose poem was accompanied by a numerical ranking, from one to ten.

To a woman in minimalist black clothes and a flash of silver jewelry, the Bumbys wrote (all quotes are excerpts):

I would like to buy a significant piece of art from you anytime, power girl.

To “Pony,” the blond half of Pony vs. Tiger—a pair of female d.j.s working the event—who was outfitted in a wearable version of an American flag:

Does Ms. America ride a hog? Why not? You are the fashion equivalent of Texas.

To the manager of a local-news station, a self-contained man neatly attired in a crisp green-checked shirt and military-short red hair:

One look at the back of your head and I can tell that you’re a person who likes a clean apartment, a Frette sheet, a haircut from a man who feels the same way. I bet you cook and have the sharpest Japanese knives in all of Vegas.

To a vacationer from Brazil, a young woman with sun-streaked brown locks, perfect white teeth, and tan legs sprouting from denim short-shorts:

You understand how to make the light flicker off your lashes, you know how to tilt your head just so. What you haven't figured out yet, is how to stop scaring and intimidating boys with your look. Fuck 'em. Beauty is forever.

Observing all this, one couldn't help but think that Las Vegas is a fitting city for an act that comments on people's looks. Because as much as Las Vegas is about sin and smut and keeping what happens there secret, it is also about glitter and glamour and outward appearances. For the women prowling the casinos in napkin-sized dresses and the high-rolling men in expensive cuff-linked shirts, the exterior clearly matters.

So it is, to some degree, for most people—and not just in Las Vegas, of course. The Bumbys' shtick points out that all of us are making snap judgments, all the time, based on little more than a glance. Most of us, to put it rather bluntly, are also self-conscious, approval-seeking narcissists fascinated by what other people think and say about us, especially when it's positive. (The Facebook "like" has surely proven that.) What's more, our culture has become obsessed with pseudo-scientific statistics that purport to be "objective" about a quality as inherently subjective as appearance: from Ok Cupid's algorithmic ranking of users according to their attractiveness, to the "Who Wore it Best" percentages published in *Us Weekly*. The sly genius of the Bumbys is that they gently prod and poke and send up human nature while somehow keeping the game lighthearted, the atmosphere fizzy and fun.

The feel-good vibe stems mostly from the fact that the Bumbys don't render negative assessments. "Honestly, our mantra is just sort of positive energy, we feel there's enough negativity in the world," the Bumbys producer and wrangler, a dapper man named Viranda Tantula, told me. "When people hear 'Fair and Honest Appraisal' they assume it's going to be a judgment, and it's not." The lowest number I saw was an 8.7, awarded to a woman wearing an unfortunate tent-style blouse, but there was no mention of the blouse or anything else unfavorable in her glowing, you-have-a-great-personality précis.

The appeal of a Bumby evaluation is the solipsistic appeal of a palm reading: it's all about you, you, you. "I loooov it," the young Brazilian woman cooed when I asked what she thought of Jill's take on her. Indeed, the guests were delighted by their appraisals—the Bumbys had caught each person's essence, not just assayed his or her appearance—and eager to share them with each other. Even those who might have been unenthused about listening to what is tantamount to someone else's horoscope could take heart. They, too, had a Bumby report to foist on someone.

And now, I'll foist mine on you. Since I'm an equal-opportunity reporter, I paid a visit to both Gill and Jill. Waiting in line, I felt unsure how to stand, uncertain where to look. Would movement distract them? Should I stare at my feet, my hands, the floor? Was it too brazen to look them directly in the eye? When one of the hotel's publicists began to talk to me, I wanted to yell, "Stop! You're ruining my tableau!" Jill, who snuck a straw under her bandana and sipped champagne while she wrote, remarked mainly on my outfit, a tiny gray dress with matching gray lace tights that she called "delicious." Gill's comments, however, were bizarrely intuitive: "You look like Maggie Gyllenhaal if she had her own class on modern theoretical fiction at Columbia on Mondays, Wednesday, and Fridays, but then has other commitments to your own book that you're currently in the process of writing while living in upstate New York because you need the peace and solitude to really work." I don't teach fiction, but I am one of those overly serious, academic types (apparently, even in cocktail attire I convey this). I write journalism while also holing up in Montana, my version of upstate New York, to work on my book.

As I exited the gallery space to head to a club called "Surrender," where I would soon witness plenty of Bumbying in the wild, I heard someone yell, "Dude, the baby got Bumby'ed!" The Bumbys themselves had vaporized at some point, but there, in the middle of the room, was a baby named Sagan, gumming his typewritten note card. I asked his mother's permission to remove the paper from his mouth. It was wet with slobber. "First of all, your ears are yummy looking..." it began, and ended with: "I predict you'll be a great drummer someday." A prophesy? It read like one.

Photograph by Donna Ward/Getty Images/MAC.