

Care and Maintenance of the Intermediate Block

Gregory Klassen

eyes never sleep



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Gregory Klassen, *Lenin Room*, 2020. Courtesy the artist. Image: Patrick Grandaw.

Care and Maintenance of the Intermediate Block: Gregory Klassen

Presented with Max Lawton at eyes never sleep

October 1 - November 13, 2022

Opening reception 5-8 PM Saturday, October 1

Care and Maintenance of the Intermediate Block presents a suite of drawings in charcoal and pastel by artist Gregory Klassen. Created in response to and as illustrations for writer Vladimir Sorokin's book *Their Four Hearts* (translated by Max Lawton), the body of work envisions a world in parallel to Sorokin's words, which tell of four characters' lives unfolding violently as the fallacies of the Soviet Union unravel around them.

Presenting dozens of drawings by Klassen—from single page portraits torn from a spiral sketchbook to large-scale scenes on multiple sheets of paper, and including both drawings from the three dozen published in the book alongside more from the nearly 200 in the series—the exhibition pans across a literary and historical timeline of civil and ethical decay. "His illustrations," Lawton writes, "allow the reader to pretend they are entering into a storybook-world instead of the aberrant flesh-libido of the Soviet system."

Radiating the dark angst and violent whims at the crumbling of the Soviet Union, Klassen's mark-making builds up the frenetic ethos of Sorokin's story of structural decomposition without autocratic artifice. Conceptually, historically, and visually, Klassen's drawings exist in orbit with the works of artists who served as soldier-witness to and searing critic of collapsing empires, including Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Max Beckmann from Weimar Germany, but also Alfred Kubin and his nightmarish scenes of state authority and human depravity in Austria-Hungary at the turn of the twentieth century. Klassen, reckoning with the heaviest socio-political implosion at the turn of the twenty-first, similarly focuses his eye on the degeneracy of anti-humanist society in which any person's fate is a roll of the dice.

Lawton deciphers the drawings with a fitting alchemy of sacerdotal terms and sacrilege: "Greg's drawings are the rosary beads of Sorokin's world, as they represent the power and beauty of art in even the most wretched corners of human history (and are any of its corners not wretched?!). In that sense, as an artist, Greg is the only one of the novel's hearts to remain as such—to not have become a die as the other four do at novel's end."

Visualizing all of the objects, all the places, all the people, Klassen's drawings for *Their Four Hearts* renders a kaleidoscopic encyclopedia of images that make the story visible without abridgment, facing every page and the painful, ecstatic nihilism exposed therein.



Gregory Klassen



Gregory Klassen (b. 1965) received his BFA at The University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh before advanced study at the Kunst Akademie Dusseldorf, where he was one of the last artists to study under Gerhard Richter. His work has been exhibited across the US and internationally, including at Rosenberg Gallery, Zurich, Jurgen Kalthoff Gallery, Essen, Kunsthaus Tacheles, Berlin, Espejo Gallery, Madrid, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, INOVA, Watrous Gallery, Madison, Walker's Point Center for the Arts, Milwaukee, and Zieher-Smith, Nashville. Klassen lives and works in Milwaukee.



Vladimir Sorokin (b. 1955) is the author of many novels, plays, short stories and screenplays, and of a libretto. Sorokin has won the Andrei Bely Prize and the Maxim Gorky Prize, and was nominated for the Booker-Open Russia Literary Prize. He was recently profiled in *The New York Times* and featured in *The New Yorker*. Sorokin lives in Moscow.



Max Lawton (b. 1993) is a translator, novelist, and musician. He received his BA in Russian Literature and Culture from Columbia University and his MPhil from Queen's College, Oxford. He has translated many books by Vladimir Sorokin and is currently translating works by Jonathan Littell and Christian Kracht. Lawton is also the author of a novel and a collection of stories currently awaiting publication. He is writing his doctoral dissertation on phenomenology and the twentieth-century novel at Columbia University. Lawton is a member of four heavy-music groups and lives in Los Angeles.

eyes never sleep (est. 2020) is a research-based exhibition space centered around curatorial collaboration and editorial initiatives. Recent exhibitions include: *Hell March* (2022), featuring the works of Chris Dorland, Essa Grayeb, Exene Karros, Jean-Marie Simon, Viktor Timofeev, Matt Town; *Instruments: Cooper Campbell* (2021), a solo exhibition of Campbell's works presented by Octagon / Moira Sims; and *In Medias Res* (2021), with works by Bradley Biancardi, Noel de Lesseps, Alissa McKendrick, Margaux Valengin, and Bradley Ward.



Max Lawton on Gregory Klassen

It was the summer of 2019 when I called Greg from Moscow and told him about the book that I'd just translated and was shopping around to publishers.

The book was aberrant; the Marquis de Sade coming to terms with the end of a fake-communist empire.

I knew that Greg had been a consummate practitioner of charcoal sketches back when he was Richter's student in Dusseldorf and I had a vision of *Their Four Hearts* as an art-object, a terrible Gesamtkunstwerk, that would convey the power of Vladimir's vision. Greg saw it too. For me, the book is one of Vladimir's strongest: perfectly choreographed and hilarious. Of course, this description might surprise those of you who've read the thing. The appalling nature of its content means both of my parents still refuse to read it on principle.

But, as Sorokin always says, is it any more problematic than the real world? Certainly not.

In his enormous Milwaukee studio, drafty and concrete like a dream of Berlin in the 1980s, Greg became another character in *Their Four Hearts*. I do not know what terrible things he did at night to become so thoroughly ensconced in the book—what shit he had to eat in weird, sodium-lit corners of the Milwaukee suburbs—but I do know that, once the project was done, once we were editing final photographs and sending them off to Dalkey and I was doing a final polish of the text, Greg had become the novel's fifth heart. Had begun to live in the book, drawing out of it literally hundreds of illustrations.

Greg had seen every one of its nooks and crannies—licked them, palpated them, pissed on them, shat on them, masturbated onto them... They belonged to him now too.

However, let me be fair to Greg: he is the sweetest heart of the novel's five. Kind and gentle in their way, his illustrations allow the reader to pretend they are entering into a storybook-world instead of the aberrant flesh-libido of the Soviet system.

It is my theory that, in *Their Four Hearts*, Sorokin depicts the libidinal infrastructure, not just of Soviet communism, but of any totalitarian system. He shows that ordinary people like doing awful things—incomprehensibly awful things—and that, as in *The Norm*, the shit they eat eventually becomes a dish as delicious as any plate of steak-frites. *Their Four Hearts*, then, lies somewhere between Anti-Oedipus and Male Fantasies. It is a map of desire-lines and explosive orgasms that, like Jonathan Littel's *The Kindly Ones*, represent a powerful affront to a potential reader's bourgeois subjectivity, which, ironically, is always the quickest to put on what Theweleit might describe as the executioner's hysterical grin. The bourgeois subjectivity would rather pretend this violence does not exist within them. But it does.

But there is also Vladimir's faith to contend with, in which sense I think the book presents a form of Christian Nietzscheanism; the reader must attempt to laugh at the horror of the world as any god must, but still fingering their rosary beads all the while.

Greg's drawings are the rosary beads of Sorokin's world, as they represent the power and beauty of art in even the most wretched corners of human history (and are any of its corners not wretched?!). In that sense, as an artist, Greg is the only one of the novel's hearts to remain as such—to not have become a die as the other four do at novel's end. Greg's art allowed him to survive his profound, years-long submersion in shit.

This might be Sorokin's final message: only the artists and the believers make it through the seething cauldron of shit that is our world with humanity intact.

Therefore, look, oh ye mortals, upon the hell that is Planet Earth. But do not despair, for all of it is a church. Rejoice at the rosary beads that have come forth from sewer, let them pass between your fingers, but do not plug your nose. This too is God's work. Rejoice.

Max Lawton, September 15, 2022, Los Angeles



