

**Eric Kostiuk Williams, *Babybel Wax Bodysuit*, Retrofit Comics (Philadelphia) and Big Planet Comics (Washington, DC), 2016, and *Condo Heartbreak Disco*, Koyama Press (Toronto), 2017**

On the inside back cover of Eric Kostiuk Williams' *Babybel Wax Bodysuit* (*BWB*) comic, we find a portrait of the artist. Against a background of preliminary sketches, he has drawn an iPhone mirror selfie. Kostiuk Williams' toned torso is awash in polka dots, his perfectly coiffed hair crowning a warped face: cubic protuberances emerge from his forehead, his eyes are cold, black slits and impossibly long fangs emerge from a gaping, walrus-like mouth marked by a cleft lip.

Kostiuk Williams identifies wholeheartedly with the gender-fluid monsters that populate his comics. Through his deliriously protean drawing style, his characters shape-shift, unbounded by physical laws. *BWB* depicts a buxom, glistening red blob in heels emerging from the primordial mire in a series of sick'ning glamour poses. She is the red wax container of Babybel cheese come to life: one moment embodying a perpetually transforming queer life force; the next, a protective casing in which to hide away from the horrors of the world. She is the id of drawing itself, malleable to suit the needs of queer and trans fantasy – and its motivating force, survival – in the 21st century.

Kostiuk Williams emerged in the early 2010s with his thrilling *Hungry Bottom* Comics series, collected in 2014. They chart his transformation from what he'd later call the "depths of closeted adolescent despair" (in Ottawa) into the "slinky, self-possessed fire hazard you see today." His sissy *Bildungsroman* begins with his move to Toronto, where he discovers alternative queer histories, cultural touchstones and community in a city that seems intent on bulldozing its own past. Kostiuk Williams knows the clichés of gay coming-of-age narratives well, and he self-satirizes his emerging consciousness with a disarming emotional sensitivity. He also has a fiercely catty perspective on our current political situation, with *BWB* kicking off with a ripped, nude Justin Trudeau straddling the houses of parliament as blobs of pipeline oil check their iPhones and Klansmen ride by on giant Trump-roaches.

What is so compelling about Kostiuk Williams' work is how he exposes his vulnerabilities as well as his anxieties about the artist's ambiguous position within contemporary capitalism: from the maw of social media "likes" and rapacious gentrification to the pressures on artists and other "creatives" to be productive, entrepreneurial brands ("Expedite your process and the reading experience, with this efficient 9-panel grid!"). Instead, the ethos of his drawing style takes shape as a ferocious deluge of curvaceous lines and impossible figures that break free, bursting out of geometries that are powerless to contain them. Social media manifests as alien tendrils physically connecting people as they reach between the frames, while gossip is figured as an oozy, hydra-headed amphibian baring infinite teeth. As Kostiuk Williams notes in his beautiful homage to early superhero fan message boards, "The Literal Word," it's "as if me and web 2.0 were going through puberty at the same time." In the face of Facebook self-love and confirmation bias, he laments, "I want to see outside myself again."

Kostiuk Williams' new opus, *Condo Heartbreak Disco*, leaves behind the directly autobiographical in order to dramatize the potential "end" of a near-future Toronto through the eyes of two divine femme mutants: diva totems Komio and The Willendorf Braid are BFFs who've settled down after an eternity spent strutting through time and space. Komio resembles a Pierrot-masked glamazon with a septum piercing, while The Braid is a ball of hair in stilettos modelled after the Venus of Willendorf. (They could have vogueed straight out of the notorious Hotnuts dance party that has unleashed otherworldly drag creatures onto Toronto since 2006.) The narrative loosely picks up from the epic "Britney Jean" sci-fi story that closes *BWB*, which sees Britney Spears still dazzling fans in Vegas in 2116 as an "artificial intelligence cyborg" (billed as "the comeback that keeps comin' back!"). Enslaved and exploited by her programmer-overlords, she comes in

### Review by Jon Davies

contact with an ancient order of women capable of intervening in the fate of the world.

Komio and The Braid live with a Jane Jacobs doppelgänger in a barely affordable apartment in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood, which, as Kostiuk Williams explains in a potted history of the one-time village, was once an affluent, desirable enclave until the Gardiner Expressway cut off the area from the nearby waterfront. It is now the kind of centrally located, working-class neighbourhood ripe for condofication. Our two queens brunch at queer hub The Beaver and face down a legion of yoga moms jogging strollers filled with mewling babies, who resemble saber-toothed Starbucks lattes. Shady Komio earns money in this "spensy" town by exacting revenge on aggro bros who victimize women, while The Braid offers "guidance and solace" to tortured souls. Without revealing too much of the wildly imaginative plot, the duo encounter a scheme to raze what is left of Parkdale – and beyond – for hyper-accelerated condo construction, after the developers track an Instagram feed by a "trendy stylist/photographer" (who goes by the name of aphextwink), who has taken to creeping Parkdale's dispossessed to generate glib comments and algorithmic attention. (Of course the developers brand their blight as "Readymade Art Condos.") Is Toronto doomed to become a dystopian ghost town of empty glass towers?

Kostiuk Williams' sinuous, bendy lines and libidinal energy fuse his sci-fi superdiva narrative with the textures of everyday queer life gleaned from years spent observing his adopted home. Throughout, there is a wistful sense of how great the city could be were it to value its underground, subcultural bustle rather than reaching up to the sky.

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