

## Little Displays: The Photographs of Ricardo Gil

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Millett, Ann (2009) "Little Displays: The Photography of Ricardo Gil," in *The Review of Disability Studies: An International Journal* Issue 2, v.4 (June).

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### **Abstract:**

Ricardo Gil is a little person who photographs his family and lifestyle. I compare Gil's images to images of little people drawn from fine art, the freak show, and popular culture. Gil's photographs express dwarfism as an embodied perspective and subject position.

**Key Words:** photography, dwarfs, representation

### **Article:**

"His photographs are deeply intimate, filled with the banal details of life and tempered by an engrossing self-examination as Gil, sometimes quite literally, measures himself against a larger world" (Miller, 1999).

"The photographs in the folios are part of a larger collection entitled, "A View of My Own." I am a dwarf, as is my wife, and we are raising our average-sized daughter. Since 1991, I have documented my family and my perspective of the world. Thank you for visiting" (Gil, 1999/2003).

Gil's quote is the introduction to his web-site, which features photographs of himself, his wife, and his daughter in their daily family routine and on outings. He literally documents his perspective of the world, as the images show the embodied view of an individual who does not fit the "normal" world designed for the average-sized. Gil's photographs, however, revel in the average, as they celebrate the mundane qualities of his everyday life. The actions and environments the images depict make his series resemble a typical family album of a not so typical family, of dwarf parents and an average-sized daughter, Lily.

In Johann's Kiss (1999; 2000), Gil spotlights his wife, Meg, sharing a moment of affection and praise in a kiss on the cheek with an average-sized man, who kneels down to her height. Figures in the background are, but this is not the work of an amateur, rather it presents the embodied viewpoint of the photographer. Lily and Bars (1999-2003) shows a playful moment in the life of Gil's daughter in a close-up of her hanging from a jungle gym. At this proximity to his daughter, Gil's viewpoint is "normal," or average-sized. The closeness of the image replicates the bond between father and daughter, despite or perhaps, even because of, their differences. Father and daughter see eye-to-eye.

Gil's photographs show viewers how the little person sees, which proves not so unusual. He hangs the photographs in shows at his height, not to disarm his average-sized viewers or necessarily force them to kneel, but rather because this is the height at which he prefers to view artwork (Bird, 1999). Mannequins (1999/2003), is self-conscious of this viewpoint. It depicts the legs of mannequins that likely advertise pants, for the Forms purposefully have no upper halves. While this is Gil's characteristic viewpoint of all bodies from his dwarf height, these "half" figures are indeed "normal." The mannequins fool the eye, which is Gil's point. Exemplified by this

subject matter, Gil's images make the viewer look twice. In *Dance* (1999-2000), the heads of the figures are outside the frame of the photograph, but the female dancers from this viewpoint are not lacking. Their dance is captured by the dramatic twisting of their bodies, adorned in party dresses; their identities are irrelevant and their facial expressions are predictable, based on the main subject of the image, the dance.

Gil's photographs witness the "normal" world that does not fit his own. Disability Studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (1997; 2001) has most thoroughly investigated the "stare," which she states occurs in the daily life of individuals who do not corporeally adhere to the norm of appearance and which marks them derogatorily as "other." Garland-Thompson (2001) states, "Photography mediates between the viewer and the viewed by authorizing staring." The gaze/stare that photography sanctions and depends on marks the subject/body as not just "abnormal," but sub-normal, according to Garland-Thompson, and allows for distance and difference to be constructed between non-disabled viewers and disabled subjects. She focuses on photographs of the disabled by nondisabled, or so-called "normal" photographers, but Gil's photographs instead stare back, as he stares at himself and his family with love, admiration, and self-identification.

Bird (1999) describes Gil's portraits and self-portraits as self-confident, humorous, and scientific, as they depict multiple aspects of his multidimensional subjectivity. Simultaneously, they embody the history of the representation of little people, by sharing similarities with historical images, as well as marked visual and discursive differences. Barthes (1981) writes that photography is tormented by the ghost of painting, and Gil's photographs confront histories of painted, photographed, and live displays of little people.

In addition to becoming supernatural and medical monsters, little people during the 15th and 16th centuries were uniquely kept at royal courts as prodigies, jesters, comic fools, clowns, and the caretakers and entertainers of royal children. These little people performed their amusements before the family and guests, portrait artists (most famously, Spanish painter Diego Velasquez), and before society at large in private quarters and in public fairs, festivals, celebrations, and other spectacles. Dwarfs kept at royal courts were considered wonders and part of a collection of "exotic" decorative items, which were commonly found in curiosity cabinets. Renaissance travelers to "exotic" lands, such as Africa, India, and Central America, reported seeing races of little people called pygmies and heard native myths about little people descended from monkey gods (Daston & Park, 1998).

Yet, legends surrounding little people were not all degrading. Adelson (2005) reports that in ancient Egypt dwarfs were associated with the gods of creative powers, such as childbirth, which elevated their status. Adelson states, "The Egyptian courts were unique in that they offered roles to dwarfs as priests and courtiers, as well as jewelers and keepers of linen and toiler objects." She points out that some historical court dwarfs, such as painter Richard Gibson (1650-1690), who were kept in the court of Charles I of England, offered formal training in their crafts and provided food and clothing.

These histories and myths are dense with symbolism of little people as divine and/or animalesque. In the genre of art historical portraiture, dwarfs are included iconographically as miniature offsets to reinforce the authority, austerity, and power of an often elaborately costumed king or queen, as exemplified in Coello's sixteenth century paintings *Magdalena Ruiz with Dona Isabel, Clara Eugenia and Monkey* (here also with a monkey), or often paired with other symbolic subjugates like dogs and particularly, female children. A major example of this convention is Velasquez's canonical *Las Meninas* (1656), a portrait of the Spanish royal family, which ironically foregrounds the traditionally disempowered: the princess or infanta Margarita, her attendant female servants, two court dwarfs, and the loyal pet dog, lying down to accentuate his submission. In these examples, across history and context, little people were expected to serve or amuse others. They played roles as fools, sooth-sayers, and sages, and they performed as tricksters for notoriety and sustenance.

Velasquez's painting of a dwarf kept at the Spanish court, *The Dwarf Sebastian de Morra* (c. 1645), frames and aggrandizes in an up-close perspective, the full body of its subject in historical costume, here seated with his hands curled under suggesting that he may have physical impairments. His ambivalent returned gaze seems

reluctant, almost vacant, or stereotypically idiotic. Mannix (1999) states that historically, by being or behaving idiotic, court dwarfs were able to speak freely, criticize, and mock authority, such that performative gestures, which manipulated their subordinate and comic reputations, gained little people the statuses of royal sidekicks and prodigies. Velasquez's painting suggests the privileged status of de Morra at court, for it is a conventional, individual portrait, perhaps commissioned, rather than a composition that presents a dwarf as a domesticated offset to reinforce royal power. Yet, the portrait showcases and strongly lights the body, accentuating its "abnormality." Hevey's portrait, Nabil Sharon as Richard the Third (c. 2000) of a little person dressed as a court dwarf for a contemporary drama production shows the legacy of these roles in the contemporary arts.

Bakhtin (1968) writes about the "miniature" as a metaphor for a subcultural society with its own rules, norms, values, and standards for bodies, as well as its own sanctioning of embodied pleasure. Bakhtin focuses on the folk humor, comic traditions, and parody of Middle Ages and Renaissance carnivals, in which dwarfs and giants were caricatures and exaggerations. Such "carnavalesque" societies, according to Bakhtin, are outside of traditional systems of dogma and therefore, operate by their own unique rules and structures. Bakhtin's meta- phorical carnival engaged alternative languages to conventional narrative and representation, and the miniature body, for his is microcosmic of its utopian, anticonventional setting. Bakhtin writes that in the 16th and 17th centuries, the art historical Renaissance and Baroque times, that the corporeal spectacle featuring little people was vital.

In the 18th century, this miniature figure was connected to Commedia del-arte, which featured the performances of miniature and gigantic bodies. The 19th century miniature body became burlesque, blasphemous, monstrous, or tragic, and stood in opposition to rationalism. In art, the miniature was featured in Romanticism, whereas in the increasingly scientific world, it became the subject of teratology, the science of monsters. In the 20th and 21st centuries, this miniature body is known to us from fairy tales, like "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," in which male dwarfs are asexually innocent and childlike, or in the case of "Rumpelstiltskin," childishly mischievous, and in some versions of the story, hypersexual and immature, like horny adolescents. Examples of such laughing and laughed at miniature characters also appear in literature.<sup>1</sup>

Gil's photograph, *Awaiting the Magic Kingdom* (1999; 2000), shows him and his family in this mythical entertainment setting. Here, they wait in line to experience all of the activity and adventure the "Magic Kingdom" has to offer any family. On this quite "normal" family vacation, however, Gil's family faces a twist on their own histories. One can imagine them meeting other little people performing as fictional characters at the park. In *Minnie Mouse Costume* (1999; 2000), Gil captures in a photograph, his daughter sporting a typical children's costume, yet she bears an atypical relationship to it. Minnie Mouse is a fictional parody of little people and an example of dwarfs' fictionalization in real life and in contemporary society.

In the 20th century, the American freak show employed many little people to perform. In one example, Lucia Zarate (1880), "the smallest woman," is featured center stage and centrally framed in a photograph from the Burns' (1998) archive of clinical photography. This image crosses the genres of medicine and popular entertainment, as was characteristic of the medical/fantastical presentations of the freak show. Freak show little people were often staged alongside amiable giants to exaggerate their caricatured smallness. To enhance the miniature body, little people were alternatively assigned larger than life personas and names, in what Bogdan (1998) has termed an aggrandized mode of presentation, in a pairing of opposites. This method exploited historical and iconographic connections between little people and ironic parody.

1. The most famous "freak" displays were Barnum's "General Tom Thumb,"<sup>2</sup> and his wife, Lavinia Warren, who was referred to as "the most photographed woman in the world" (Jay, 2001, p. 1002). Other little people made celebrities by the freak show include Admiral Dot, who was a midget; Leopold Kahn, who, like other midgets, was 25 inches tall, but had the proportions of an average size person; the "Russian Midgets," who were dwarfs with shortened legs and arms; Mercy Lavinia Warren Bump (1841-1919); and George Washington Morrison Nutt (Commodore Nutt), who commonly wore a naval uniform. Midgets were most often made "majors" while dwarfs were "generals" in title, reflecting their statuses. Little people were also most often staged in colonies. The most

famous was Lilliputia, modeled on the fictional land in Swift's 1796 satirical novel *Gulliver's Travels*), at the Dreamland theme park at Coney Island, and others included "dinkyville," midget farms, and midget cities (Manix, 1999). In these communities, performances consisted of impersonations, songs, dances, and skits. These little people as "freaks" embodied long traditions of mythological, literary, and historical little bodies on display for the entertainment of "normal" viewers (Bogdan, 1988; Mitchell, 2002).

In freak show venues, little people with impairments or misproportioned bodies often played the roles of clowns or non-Westerners. In one example, the "Black Dwarf," was featured outdoors as an exotic primitive (Mitchell, 2002). Exhibits such as this, influenced by anthropology and pseudosciences of the time such as phrenology and physiognomy, staged many little people as animals. Audiences viewed dwarfs as a "lost race" or an animal, mythical, and exotic. Animalistic epithets included toads, apes, baboon, dogs, pygmies, and missing links. Exhibited little people in these settings were said to be "stunted" or arrested in evolutionary development, as physiognomically indicated by their "stunting" in corporeal size. Here, the individual body was a metaphor for social body or race and as a quintessential social outcast to "normal" (i.e., Western civilization) (Donley & Buckley, 1996).

*Bathing Suit Portrait* (1999; 2000) is uncharacteristic for Gil's suite of images. This self-portrait features the photographer in a pseudo-objective, clinical format, wearing only a cloth that covers his private parts and standing stiffly. He is displayed like a freak subject or animal specimen. The expression on Gil's face is one of discomfort, as he returns the medical or scientific gaze at his body. The viewer can imagine him as the object of study or measurement by anthropologists or other scientists. This photograph reminds the viewer that the objectification of little people outlives the practices of 19th century "experts," or the freak show enterprise. The medical gaze at physical difference from the norm is operating in covert, deceptive venues.

Little people of the freak show starred in their portrait *carte de visites*, hand-sized souvenir images patented in Paris by photographer Andre Adolphe Eugene. Examples of commercial and art photography have played a major role in the exhibition of little people, a history which informs Gil's frames. German photographer, Sander, sought to catalog German people, and within a pseudo-objective suite of types he features a dwarf among circus people and a "Cretin" (Sontag, 1977). Photographed little people, as many in more contemporary times, were put on display. Venues for display have become more mainstream. According to Adelson (2005), examples of roles for little people to entertain an audience include "being tossed" in a bar, playing stereotypically negative roles in mainstream films, leaping about in bizarre costumes at half time in football games, acting as mascots, providing "atmosphere" in music videos, participating in reality TV, and appearing in pornographic films or at bachelor parties. She also cites circus clowns, midget wrestlers, strippers, and stars of reality TV, as roles which stage little people under the following appellations: hunchback, cretin, goblin, pygmy, jester, fool, clown, gnome, dwarf, midget, freak, monster, grotesque, cripple, buffoon, and idiot. Fine art photography likewise, features dwarf bodies, as in the example of Arhus' portrait of a sideshow performer "Cha Cha," (Mexican Dwarf (a.k.a Cha Cha) in His Hotel Room) (1970), on a hotel bed wearing only a towel. Adelson points out that such sexualizing of little people is common in the frames of performance venues as well as fine art. These representations, albeit absurd, nonetheless inform images of little people in everyday life, especially when viewers have never known a little person personally.

Hevey (1992) articulates that images such as these carry on traditions of the freak show. They are of the physically different from "normal" by the so-called "normal," for non-disabled or "normal" audiences. Hevey underscores photography's connections to theater and drama as a venue for performance. Barthes (1981) also calls photography theatrical and oversignified because it crosses categories and contexts. For Barthes, photography in essence is theatrical, such that all photographic subjects perform before the camera. In distinction to other forms of representation, Barthes writes that photographs can never be severed completely from their referent, such that the photographed body contains that body. Photographs provide the viewer unique

access to the body displayed by them. Like Barthes, Sontag (1977) views photography similarly, as it transforms history into spectacle. For Sontag, photography neutralizes distress, miniaturizes experience in order to control it, and conveys simultaneous absence and presence, as photographs both reveal and conceal.

Tagg (1988) also writes about the theatricality and performative nature of photographs because they are inevitably deceptive, distorted images of reality, and therefore, illusionary. Bearing historical and symbolic links to the freak show, Tagg points to all the myriad contexts of photographs, including medicine, physiognomy, surveillance, spectacle, documentary, journalism, popular culture, advertising, and evidence, as photographs maintain links to identity and identification (e.g., mug shots, IDs), and are productions of truth and reality. Furthermore, Tagg states, photographs produce and mediate reality, while they change in meaning over time. Photographs, in these ways according to many photography scholars, bear intricate associations with freak shows.

While Gil's images display the miniature body, they do the opposite of these historical venues for display. Rather than constructing the dwarf body as scientific, curious, or freakish, Gil's photographs accentuate the mundane and nonetheless, sentimental aspects of everyday life. His images lobby for civil rights by stressing the qualities and experiences that his family shares with so many others. Such displays of group identity were symbolized, according to Adelson (2005), in the 1957 formation of the group the Midgets of America, later known as the Little People of America, organized by dwarf actor and rights advocate Billy Barry and the owner of a hotel in Reno, which was billed as the "smallest little city in the world." The Short Statured People of Australia was then organized in 1962 by another actor, George Whitaker. These organizations represent the demand for equal representation and rights.

Gil's photographs of his daily life are assertions of everyday reality to offset the mythologies surrounding the dwarf body and lifestyle. Mythical dwarfs may be found in garden statuary as fairy tale gnomes and ornamental creatures, while Gil's dwarfs occupy the domestic gardens of middle class America. Mendacity, is here seen, as the ideal of comfort and the pleasant safety of routine. Gil presents the embodied perspective of a little person facing the enormity of the average. Party (1999; 2000) features Gil socializing. He looks awkward and uncomfortable with a plate of food in his hands and his hack to a mirror, which reflects the average-sized guests who surround, but seemingly ignore him. One is not sure why the subject looks so out of place. It is not obvious from his size, but rather, his social anxiety may be due to unknown strangers or an awkward get-together. This kind of feeling could happen to anybody.

In Public Restroom (1999; 2000), we see the upper portion of Gil's face reflected in a bathroom mirror, the only part of himself that is visible at his height. These kinds of encounters with an oversized world are just as much a part of Gil's daily life as the celebrations and loving embraces featured in other works. The discomfort Gil faces in a public restroom is likely irritating, but not life-altering. It is the daily inconveniences that compose, but do not overwhelm Gil's frames, as the viewer of the photograph sees Gil's world as multidimensional and multifaceted.

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### **End notes**

1 Examples include Par Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf*, Edgar Allen Poe's "Hop-Frog," and Ray Bradbury's "The Dwarf." Excerpts are included in (Donley & Buckley, 1996).

2 As he was constructed through his public performances, marketing materials, and souvenir photographic portraits, but born Charles. S. Stratton.

3 Howells & Chemers (2005) state, "Liliputia contained a circus, a firehouse with a half-sized fire engine pulled by miniature horses, a live band, a military garrison, areas for "surf bathing," and saddle pony riding and miniature automobile rides for children. But the central attractions were the residents of this performance community."

\*\*\*Editor's Note: Permission to reprint the photographs given by Ricardo Gil, 2008. Gil's photographs can also be viewed at <http://www.ricardogil.com>