

# POST NEGATIVE EUGENICS - WHAT'S THAT?

Erik Parker knows, and his paintings explore the implications

THE FINAL SECTION of Michel Houellebecq's *Les Particules Élémentaires* (1998) offers a retrospective account of human development after a 'paradigm shift' in the course of our genetic evolution. That shift occurred, we learn, when one of the book's protagonists, the tragically solitary Michel, a molecular biologist, does evolution one better by perfecting the means (via cloning) to make the process of sexual reproduction obsolete. For humans, so freed from their baser instincts, those drives to which our 'selfish genes' always seem to

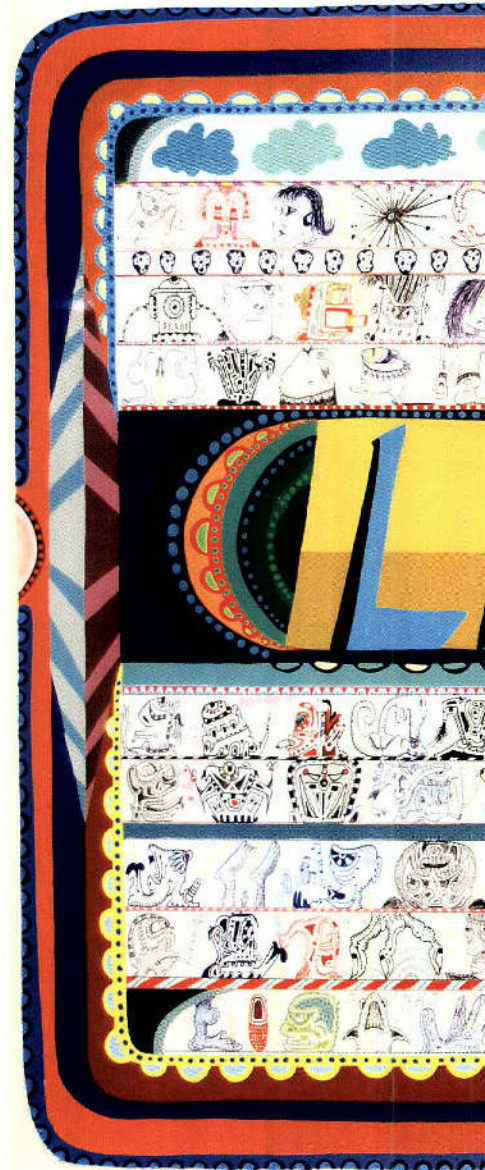
in the 1930s, the term became taboo in science and philosophy. But with the rise of genomic science and the recognition that 'race' is nothing more than the historically determined cultural construct it always was, eugenics has returned as a legitimate site of controversial philosophical and scientific questioning. So not exactly a post-eugenic worldview, but rather a post-'negative-eugenics' one, which we could call neo-eugenics.

Why this brief detour through the science and fiction of human engineering? Because Erik Parker's

hold the reigns, this means a new race of gods, not just genetically purified of disease and disability, but in possession of a superior consciousness, for which the struggles, achievements and disappointments of competition – bred, in Houellebecq's world, from the desire for sexual and emotional love – no longer exist.

The worldview proposed, if ever so briefly, in Houellebecq's book (just one among a number published at the end of the 1990s that took a sanguine view of the burgeoning genetic revolution), is one we might call post-eugenic, even though that would be a misleading way to phrase things. Eugenics, which denotes human agency in the process of biological evolution, attracted a number of rather sinister connotations throughout the first decades of the twentieth century due to its association with race-based policies and prejudices. When eugenics underwrote the more grotesque of the Nazi pogroms

newest body of paintings, portraits of dissembling and disintegrating – or are they aggregating? – figures are very much a part of this neo-eugenic landscape. Parker first gained attention in 2000 with his inclusion in P.S.1's inaugural *Greater New York* show, and for a time his paintings featured a text-heavy biographical and artworld-anthropological bent. Then, over the course of a number of international museum and gallery exhibitions, the text gave way to the figures, the most recent of which, labelled *Personae* in a 2008 catalogue from Honor Fraser and Paul Kasmin Gallery, Parker imagines as subjects of some new genetic order. Whether these characters suggest the promise of liberation, as might *New Freedom* (2008), or a more equivocal acceptance of our new genomic inheritance – how else should one read *Sink or Swim* (2008)? – what is certain is that, as portraits, Parker's newest paintings reengage that genre at a moment when the idea of one's



*Life Line*, 2006, acrylic and ink on paper, 56 x 76 cm



*Though I may  
enjoy Scotch, like  
to read or have a  
prickly demeanour,  
what I am is  
nothing but my  
genetic code.  
Change the code;  
change me.*

'self' is increasingly understood as nothing but the inheritance and expression of one's genes. And the promise of eugenics in the present, insofar as those genes can be measured, and so managed, is that the 'self' will be infinitely malleable, or rather, engineered to specifications.

It's a reductionist view of selfhood, to be sure, just as it is a reductionist approach to the science of biology, but such reductionism is central to the resurgent interest in eugenics, equally on the side of its advocates (Ray Kurzweil, for example) and its detractors (pretty much anyone opposed to stem cell research). Two things are necessary for such reductionist thinking: firstly, something must be seen to be made out of, or constituted by, something else of a smaller size; and secondly, the behaviour of those smaller things alone must be seen to dictate the behaviour of the larger entity they constitute. So, for example, though water may be described as wet,

necessary for human survival or good for washing clothes, it really is nothing but molecules of H<sub>2</sub>O. Equally, though I may enjoy Scotch, like to read or have a prickly demeanour, what I am is nothing but my genetic code. Change the code; change me.

Now, if there is one way of describing Parker's paintings, it would be to say that they are 'graphic'; not in the sense of their content, but their form. The paintings are composed of discrete colour and contour alone, and what is shed is all modelling or shadow, those conventions by which volumes may be registered as such. What kind of thing is modelling or shadow? A gradient. It's a scalar or intensive difference that lies on a continuum; for example, the articulation of a volume through its exposure to more or less 'light'. What we need to understand is that intensive differences do not lend themselves well to reductionism; well-defined boundaries, such as those that separate one atom from another, or one gene from another, do. Reductionism does not deal in continua; it's better with particles. And Parker's paintings are, at bottom, particulate.

Take *New Freedom*: all colour is singular, and each shape is discrete, from the curves of alternating chevrons that surround the figure to the tiny dots that describe the lines of its fringe connective tissue. And the composition itself operates according to a logic of magnification. The more fluid and languid forms, such as those in the area where a mouth or chin would normally be, appear as such only because they have not been subjected to the necessary enlargement. We can see all of the components of the figure's 'eyes', but with a few more turns of the microscope, those components would threaten to decohere as the figure's 'cheeks' have done. That such 'magnification' is of interest to Parker is also demonstrated by his cropping and calling out sections of larger paintings

words *Jonathan T.D. Neil*

to generate smaller works of increased 'resolution', like tissue samples that demand further study.

None of this is meant to suggest that Parker's portraits can be described as reductionist themselves. Rather reductionism, as the correlate of neo-eugenics, does not appear to work. Parker's figures do not 'cohere', they do not appear to benefit from the ease or explanatory power of reductionism's 'nothing but'; if anything, they seem subjected to it, to the point of absurdity or funhouse grotesquerie. Parker offers us portraits of what happens when our code, that fundamental language of our 'selves', fails to fully or properly 'express' itself.

*An exhibition of Erik Parker's work is on view at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, from 26 February to 28 March*



## COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Post Negative Eugenics—What's That?  
SOURCE: Art Rev no29 Ja/F 2009

Copyright Art Review, Ltd. USA and Canadian subscription to Art Review are handled by agents: International Media Service, 3330 Pacific Ave., Ste. 404, Virginia Beach, VA 23451, 800-428-3003. Annual subscription price \$79, Canada \$85. Our Internet address is <http://www.art-review.co.uk>