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Kissing Dolores

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**Abstract** – In *The Book of Dolores*, una serie di autoritratti fotografici e disegnati e accompagnati da un testo scritto, William T. Vollmann si ritrae come un travestito. Utilizza diverse tecniche che enfatizzano l'approccio pittorialista alla fotografia per creare un'icona perturbante della femminilità. Tentativi di raggiungere l'altro lato, non solo del genere, ma anche della vita, i suoi negativi, in particolare, sembrano rivelare una presenza spettrale.

**Parole chiave** – Fotografia; Disegno; Autoritratto; Travestitismo; Pittorialismo.

**Abstract** – In *The Book of Dolores*, a series of self-portraits in photography and drawings with accompanying text, William T. Vollmann pictures himself as a cross-dresser. He uses various techniques that emphasize the pictorial approach of photography, to create an uncanny icon of femininity. As an attempt to reach the other side, not just of gender, but of life, his negative prints in particular seem to reveal a ghostly presence.

**Keywords** – Photography; Drawing; Self-portraiture; Cross-dressing; Pictorialism.

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# Kissing Dolores

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## 1. Introduction

William T. Vollmann takes photographs of others. Of people maimed by war, in the last volume of *Rising Up and Rising Down*, maimed by war or poverty in *The Atlas*, or by utter destitution in *Poor People*. And, as I have argued elsewhere (“Imperial Photography”), he takes photographs of his relationship with others, as when he captures his reflection on a window displaying wedding cakes behind the sitter, in the remarkable picture of his symbolic “wedding” to a prostitute in *Imperial* (191). To put it very simply, he is interested in others, in their difficulty, their plight even, but also in their dignity, and one might add their beauty, in spite of all the suffering he makes visible, or possibly because of that suffering. It should therefore come as no surprise that in his only book of photographic self-portraits to date, *The Book of Dolores*, he pictures himself as Other. As a woman. As a picturesque, antiquated cross-dresser from another time, or from out of time. And for this volume, he works as a studio painter, working *on* photography, not only *from* photography. He uses various techniques and elaborates his prints of negatives or positives in the developing-room, emphasizing the painterly approach of picture taking, in order to create an uncanny icon of femininity. He arranges the images in a series of self-portraits, mixing photography and drawing in the same volume, to offer a narrative of his attempt to reach the other side, not just of gender, but of life, as his negative prints seem to show a ghostly presence. He manages to provide images of eternal, generic portraiture of the self as other, and of the self as encompassing all others, both the living and the dead, in a Whitmanian artistic gesture of largely inclusive narcissism. He thus kisses the self-created mask of “Dolores” with relative happiness (in the fashion of one of his book titles on Noh Theater, *Kissing the Mask*), in an attempt to sublimate any trace of ecstatic “dolor” from castration and identification with the feminine Other, even though his mask of feminine disguise is set in a decorative setting, emphasizing the image of femininity as passive and ornamental.

## 2. Composition of the volume

The book divides Vollmann’s production according to his techniques and media in the second part only, because the first part, entitled “Constructions,” deals with the making of, or the “Becoming Dolores” (30) in the various stages of applying make up, of dressing up, of associating with other “friends” (23) and of setting up a place for the shoots, mostly indoors, except for the “Birthing Cave” sequence, taken outdoors. The second part, “Portraits,” is actually organized according to medium and technique, and we find in succession: his laptop photographs, his watercolor drawings, his woodblock prints, his paper negatives, his silver gelatin positives, his color film positives, and his gum bichromate prints. The third and last part expands on the why and how Vollmann uses gum bichromate for his prints, an unusual technique that emphasizes the blur and washed-out look of his self-portraits on that medium, as if they were overexposed.

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Before we get to the contents page, we are presented with four images, as a preamble, or a port of entry into the volume: the first one on the title page, a color half-length portrait of him as a woman standing in a bedroom; on the next page, a black-and-white sketch of Dolores, a montage of two drawings of the author, one without a wig, one with a wig, and with garment accessories on hangers; then a full-page paper negative of a seated portrait next to a bunch of lilies in a vase; and finally, a close-up self-portrait of the cross-dresser as a photographer, taken in a mirror with the flash of the camera on a stand clearly visible in the mirror: a dour portrait of Our Lady of Sorrow, “that sad old lady named Dolores” (17) that the accompanying text of the volume talks about. The four successive pages thus present the gamut of his production in the volume, essentially ranging from a staged vision of womanhood presented with a smile, to the more artistic elaborations of drawing and paper-negative printing, which draw attention onto the work process rather than on the staging of the photographic take. The book is mainly a depiction of the artist at work, either on himself, or on his art to present himself as other. Tellingly, throughout the volume, the drawings or photographs are interspersed with a “how to” manual of sorts, a reportage on the work in the making, like the series of 5 snaps of the artist busy at work in his studio in smaller format (5,8 x 4,3 cm), on page 114.

I would like to propose a different categorization and assessment of the work. The images may be classified more simply under the following categories: other than the photographs of the photographer at work in his masculine garb, the images are either drawings, decorative self-portraits as a woman in positive prints (either black-and-white or color), and finally, self-portraits in negative prints, which in my view offer the most interesting photographic takes in the volume.

The latter give the impression of an X-ray vision, as if the photographic negative could provide more than surface depiction, as if it could reach beyond the skin of the sitter in the nude, into interiority. They are the least self-depicting portraits of all the self-portraits, and they manage to reach an inclusive vision of the self as another, in Ricœur’s sense of a reflexive vision inclusive of others, rather than the more exclusive, more narrowly narcissistic portraiture of some of the other shots.

By personal choice and critical decision, my study will thus mainly focus on these paper negative self-portraits, and on the gum bichromate prints, for their elaborate narrative that invites viewers into the deciphering process of the work of art in a collaborative effort.

### 3. Self-portrait as metamorphosis

There is no depth of field, no perspective in the frontal shots. The sitter occupies the bulk of the image, enthroned, or standing as on the cover photograph, with a defining object like a flower or a bouquet in a vase. This is antiquated staging, in the tradition of the ancient studio portrait of the beginnings of photography, with its long, static sitting, the black drape behind in imitation of the classical light against dark of oil-painting portraiture, the low side table with flowers in a vase, the long exposure imposed by the technical limitations of the time, requiring the dignified fixity of the sitters, with their ceremonial face worn like a mask.

Vollmann chose to morph into Dolores, with one name for all her representations and performances throughout the volume, in a similar way to Claire, the English artist Grayson Perry’s transvestite alter ego. And the performance is highly reflexive, according to Perry:

As well as with clothes, cross-dressers have a strong relationship with two other sorts of objects, the camera and the mirror. The camera is often cruel, it condenses us to a single image easily taken in at a glance, showing us how we really look to other. The mirror is kinder. In the moment, looking in the mirror, it is all too easy to see only the wig, make-up and the dress and

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not the masculine body holding it all up. There is a poignant longing in the act of cross-dressing, a seeking for some ineffable femininity and in the mirror we can convince ourselves we have found it. The dressing table is an altar and the mirror the icon lodged within. (9)

I would argue that Perry's insightful commentary is valid for *The Book of Dolores*, but in a different mode in Vollmann's case, more melancholy than parodic in the performance of femininity in a masculine body, questioning less the macho tenets of masculinity than the limits of any self in the displacement of gender, a self whose ultimate goal is to face death.

By printing the negative in many of his pictures, rather than the positive image, Vollmann gets closer to a photogram in the manner of Moholy-Nagy in his 1926 self-portrait (in Marie Cordié Levy, unnumbered page), with the uncertainty of an aura, that vague, undefined vibration of being, captured in the exposure, or to a pictorialist self-portrait by Imogen Cunningham, whose blurry image next to a vase of daffodils projects a soft image of self-conscious artistic mastery in her 1910 self-portrait (*ibid.*). The negative presents the ghostly self, the other side of the vision, which should have been transferred onto a positive print but was not, by a decision to take the viewer to the other side of life: the metamorphosis of the sitter thus includes the viewer in the wonderful change. We need to understand that white areas like pale expanses of skin are black in this mode of photographic printing, and dark areas are white, like the nipples or the creases in the flesh. The inversion of the light and dark areas thus provides the equivalent of an X-ray image, but at skin level, without getting into the inner organs or the bone structure of the body. Here, Vollmann uses the same process of inversion as in engraving, intaglio or relief etching, but applies it to photography. This grants another vision, as if from other eyes than ours, say an animal with colorless vision. The lack of color emphasizes the starkness of the image, conveying the impression of an otherworldly sight, of the sitter snapped in limbo, the reverse of the visible self thus uncannily exposed. Vollmann's protean capacity to disguise himself and morph into others reveals an uncanny desire to reach the other side, the obverse of life, or the obscene, literally what stands off-stage, on the other side of representation.

### 4. Kissing the mask

In the case of the gum bichromate prints, the images are fuzzy close-ups, somewhat in the wake of Francesca Goodman, whose blurry self-portraits using a slow shutter speed convey the image of a ghostly presence, of a sitter on the verge of absence. But Vollmann adds the blur from development techniques rather than from the photographic take of the shot as Goodman does. The blur and the close-up accentuate the undefined quality of the image, whose gender or age, but also social status, become vague under the overexposed aspect of the development. This is similar to what painter Francis Bacon does when he smears the fresh layer of color in the portraits he paints, destabilizing the depiction of the sitter. Each print thus takes on the unique quality of a monotype, in particular when Vollmann signs the print with a brushstroke over the surface of the photograph (173), or with a handwritten caption like "femme" in long-hand (159). The monotype imitation, glorifying the unique painterly gesture and printing, seems to revert to an age before what Walter Benjamin called the age of mechanical reproduction. The unicity of the artwork thus compensates the vagueness of the blurry characterizations. The iconic artistic gesture matters more than the indexical relationship to the real, here.

The choice of color also betrays a retrograde attempt to inscribe the photograph in a long tradition of painting, as the explanation for "Desert Light" shows: "This version was printed with quinacridone coral, quinacridone gold and Van Dyke brown" (165). The precise naming of the brown color alone calls forth a long tradition of Dutch oil-painting portraiture. In

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some cases, the number of printings for the same negative adds even more blur, to the point that the portrait becomes a hand-made version looking like a digital image of extremely poor resolution, as in the case of an “untitled portrait”: “contact printed three times (cadmium yellow, ivory black and cerulean blue) from 11 x 14” silver gelatin in-camera negative” (164). Vollmann explains at length in the text of the volume the difficulty of working from old techniques, because the enlarger he uses is antiquated and cannot be replaced when out of order (135). As a result of his mixing different techniques to emphasize the experimental blurring strategies, the picture is so blurry in its final inking and printing that recognition comes from its similarities with the others in the series, on other pages, rather than from the image itself. One guesses at the sitter’s identity because of the shape of the hair (or wig), of the bare arms, and from the central position of the sitter with the recognizably massive silhouette, seen recurrently in the collection, but the vague outline becomes almost generic, nondescript, like a type from a collective grouping that had lost the individuality of the living. It is an image of death, as if the sitter had long gone to the grave, and returned to haunt the living, in generic zombie form. One photograph is particularly interesting in the section of the paper negatives, reversing light and dark. The black and white paper negative represents a double image, with a full-frontal face in the foreground, and the back of the photographer holding the large camera in the background mirror image (134). Vollmann had to stand with his back to a mirror in a slight slant to take this shot of his face, capturing his back in a mirror at a slight angle. He added his monogrammed signature in a paper square that looks stapled onto the image, with his initials in a square block printed in red, like a Japanese artist’s stamp or *hanko*, as well as the handwritten word “femme” in the lower right-hand corner. Three small ornamental squiggles with flowery shapes have been added in the corners, in gold, embossed ink. The decorative quality of the signatures, as well as the blurry image lacking definition, seem like an epitaph, or a memorial image signifying an actual erasure from life.

It is no coincidence that the penultimate photograph in the volume looks like a death-bed image, with Dolores’s made-up eyelashes minimally opened (196). Barthes saw the return of the dead in photography, “perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life” (*Camera Lucida*, 92). In his self-portraits, Vollmann returns as a dead-looking woman. Not just as his dead sister, as what she might have become if she had survived drowning and grown up to womanhood, but as himself from the other side of the other side. In his prose travel stories *The Atlas*, he claims that his work as a writer stands as a form of homage to his sister. He sees his prose as a textual incarnation of her in his unearthing her from the grave, which he calls “quarrying”: “My blood-writing has quarried you, but I wish that you were still my sister, dancing above the grass” (104). One may wonder if *The Book of Dolores* stands as a photographic incarnation of that impossible “quarrying” of a sister who died in childhood, who might have become a sibling with a family likeness to her older brother. She might be reincarnated in the other self the photographer gives artistic birth to in his photographic takes of himself as a transvestite.

An indirect portraiture of his dead sister may not be the only source of nostalgia. The nostalgia for wholeness, for being both man and woman, is another possible reason for the melancholy of the artist, who also mourns forever what he never comes to terms with, possibly the tragedy of separation, of not being fully capable of being at one with himself in his art, even in self-portraiture. The Janus-like artist can only kiss the mask, not fully be the representation and the self at once. Art may yet be a way to cope with sorrow, the representation being a solace against the ugliness he so often chooses to show of himself.

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## 5. The question of distance

The feminine sitter he self-portrays looks passive, without any occupational activity or purpose other than being decorative. The images contrast with the photos of Vollmann in his masculine garb, actively engaged in producing the work later included in the book and in explaining his active, technical making of in his commentary. The question of distance is thus acute. How distanced from stereotypical images of women is that mask? Unlike Grayson Perry, who travesties himself into varied images of women according to certain types or categorizations, one does not detect the irony of Perry's comically dramatic posturing in *The Book of Dolores*. If there is any distance from stereotypes, it does not lie in irony so much as in the aesthetization of the disguise, in a melancholy approach. It is melancholy because of the photographer's refusal to mourn the loss of differentiation and accept separation. And melancholy does not provide a very distanced position of observation. The self-portraits as a woman depict the woman the sitter seems to aspire to be in art, but which he will never fully be in life. This is the unreachable ying to the yang, the yang to the ying, the fantasy of fullness, of un-adulterated wholeness in an infantile state, before sexual differentiation. Vollmann uses the representation of conventional womanhood, distanced mainly by the recurrent switches to the creator at the origin of the retrograde icons of femininity, the artist himself in his photos of him at work: at work making up, applying false eyelashes, paint, wigs, or at work in the developing room or preparing the final image to be printed in the book. Or he distances himself from the icons he sets up through the elaboration of the photographs in a pictorial approach, a product of a product, art made from photography.

The pictorial aspect of some of his photographs is enhanced by his painting over them, in a doubly decorative gesture. He tends to frame the portraits in a painted or layered frame, in particular in the section devoted to the gum bichromate prints (section 2.7, starting from page 152). The photograph reproduced on the cover of the book is an apt example of the double framing he chose to set around his conservative portrait as a woman next to a bunch of weedy flowers that look like Queen Anne Lace in a jam jar, over a black-veil background. The framing is made of rough brushstrokes of watercolor or diluted gouache on the outside, then black-ink brushstrokes on the inner frame, overpowering the pale image inside, printed "from 8 x 10" silver gelatin in-camera negative" (162-63). The jam jar, the flowers, the framing, everything is chosen to be deliberately ordinary. This might be the distance he sets from the conservative, even reactionary, woman-and-flower image of the sitter. The brutal brushstrokes and the untidy coloring of the outer frame give the lie to the photograph of a sitter in a classic black dress with a black lace "Kurdish shawl" (121) over the shoulders, displaying an amiable smile and a gently tilted head, hands politely joined in her lap. In this case, the framing contradicts the staging, or rather, it gives an ironic key to the antiquated staging, in a wink to the viewer for full complicity. Whether the viewer accepts the irony or not becomes a personal issue, regardless of the artist's intentions. The way the frame is painted does not display the drawing technique visible in the sketches and watercolor section of the book. It shows rapid strokes, decoratively coloring the field with energy rather than sketching lines carefully. Impulsively, almost childishly, it inscribes a painterly gesture onto photography, and this is a trait that one finds also in Vollmann's choice of medium with his gum bichromate process. He explains in his accompanying text that the end result of that developing technique may look like "chalk drawings" (153), using the example of Robert Demachy, a leading pictorialist photographer in France at the turn of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century:

Once again I gaze at a reproduction of his "Behind the Scenes," 1897: Two young ballerinas stand chatting, the one in the foreground with her ankles crossed and light gleaming on her heel; their tutus could be pencil-strokes or pastel-work or anything; as for this precious light in

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hair and on a face and on a door, I suppose Demachy made it with a brush, or by swirling around in sawdust-water. (160)

Vollmann here glorifies the painter in the early photographer, he imagines his gestures in mixing pigments in the developing room, and the brush-strokes he fancies Demachy made onto the coating from the final image. He sees the inscription of the hand in the image, like a unique signature, an idiosyncratic trait of genius. Likewise, and with great humor, Nobuyoshi Araki comments on his gesture painting over his photographs, adding the painter's touch to the photographer's vision, although he does not choose a pictorialist approach: "The act of painting in itself is fast, like brush strokes on canvas, because I'm a genius (laughter)" (211; my trans.).<sup>1</sup> In Araki's case, laughter provides distance, but the idea of genius is candidly expressed, as if the gesture came from the innermost nature of the artist, etymologically from his *genus*, literally the stuff he is made of, his true self, thus providing his imprint, his authentic signature.

Signed in a painterly way, even pictorially so, and often framed, Vollmann's portraits are also staged, in the tradition of Saul Leiter (*In My Room*). In the history of photographic self-portraiture, he also leans toward the photographic auto-fiction of Nobuyoshi Araki, who narrates 40 years of his life in a photographic autobiography, which he calls "integral photography" (arranging his photographs in chronological order, with an accompanying narrative, covering all aspects of his life). Combining both the staging and the auto-fiction aspects of photography, Vollmann gives a mellow soft-porn, mild peep-show serial portraiture of himself as a fantasy woman, often oversexed as is commonly the case in cross-dressing, with an occasional plunge into pornography in his performance. In "Corset Strut" (170), for example, he may be brandishing his erect penis under his black and red corset, the uncertainty of the blur making it impossible to see with certainty if his hands are joined on his penis, on a dildo (like the one he sketches recurrently, 113, 117), or on a piece of garment, thus providing a suggestion of pornography only, or a tease to viewers. In any case, the photographer invites viewers to jump over the gaps between the sitter and the viewer, to get closer to his made-up and dressed-up persona and take the provocation as a shared joke, in a mildly erotic tease appealing to those who enjoy disguises and games. The issue of phallic power and its obverse disempowerment, castration, are here playfully evoked, and surface elsewhere recurrently.

### 6. Yes, we have no bananas

A hand of baby bananas serves as a "crown" over the head of generic Dolores, in the Veracruz section of the drawings (111). In a sparsely colored watercolor sketch with ink drawing, the bananas' light green and yellow tints seem to reverberate on the forehead, nose, chin and neck of the sitter, who looks up to the banana hand standing over her literal crown, thus "crowning" her metaphorically like a queen. The queen's shift is barely delineated, using the white of the paper in a light manner, while her elaborate dress is intricately patterned and drawn, hanging on a coat hanger and suspended on the back of an armchair behind Dolores. The shift's shoulder looks Mexican, possibly like Quetzalcoat's headdress, the plumed serpent's own crown. Even though the dress hangs in the back, and is smaller-scaled in relative respect of traditional perspective, the clear delineating and partial coloring of its gathering at the bodice and sleeves makes it come forward visually, in contrast with the wide blank surfaces over Dolores's face and shoulders. Her earrings are also clearly drawn and colored in

<sup>1</sup> "L'acte de peindre en lui-même est rapide, comme le trait de pinceau sur la toile, parce que je suis un génie (rires)."

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blue, matching her eyes. The garb and accessories thus seem to define the mild character on the verge of erasure.

In the accompanying text, which comes eighteen pages earlier than the image, Vollmann makes a rare comment on the drawing: "In 'Banana Crown' I was feeling my age. One can see in Dolores's eyes that she has begun wondering when it will all come to an end" (93). Aside from the call for pity, recurrent in his work, the melancholy comment clearly states his fear of death. In this comment on "Banana Crown" Vollmann identifies himself with Dolores, who has the blues. In another sad sketch of himself, which on the contrary he distances himself from with his anonymous title "Man with serrano chili" (109), Vollmann displaces the phallic image onto a green chili, hanging at the level of his right arm against a patch of red, in defiance of verisimilitude in the staging. Again, the portrait is extremely discolored, while the accessories stand out: the green chili pepper, and a bottle in the background that looks like the mescal bottle from another sketch (entitled "Dolores Mescalita" 97). The light pink sandal in the foreground of "Man with serrano chili" is less colored than those two items, even though its lower left-hand position also draws some attention to it. The blue-green bottle and green chili, recalling some green leaves in the front and in the background, define the sitter more obviously. Food, especially if spicy, and strong alcohol, are oral pleasures that take precedence over genital eros, in a melancholy, regressive ink sketch where the expression of the sitter looks gloomy, his lip corners going markedly down. This makes for a sparse, terse, and ultimately moving self-portrait, belied by the anonymous title. The sitter's white face is barely delineated against the white background, in echo with the anonymity of the title. The serrano chili has more body, more strength, more color, as it is set against red and yellow, not against white. It might be a misplaced phallus, missing from the man who is undefined and unnamed when not performing a woman. Finally, there may be a great deal of castration anxiety in Vollmann's melancholy questioning of phallocracy, beside the pleasure of being other than a prescribed self.

Vollmann gives his persona's depression another artistic expression in the drawing entitled "Dolores as a blue devil" (109). A large blue figure with green and purple shadows over a naked torso and with dark, nappy hair looms behind the mesmerized female sitter, who wears a sedate yellow dress or top, in an environment with foliage and a saturated background suggesting a jungle. Some of the light on the blue devil is the yellow of the female sitter's dress. Both the blue devil and Dolores have minimal breasts, somewhat like a man's. Dolores's face, neck and arms use the white of the paper, making her a blank hole in the color-saturated image. She is the blank defined by the blue devil looming over her. Her wide-open eyes face the viewer full-on, as do the blue devil's over-enlarged eyes. We are gazed at in return, our viewing being sent back to us in a double mirroring exchange, helping us wonder about the possible blue devil of melancholy in us.

Altogether, these drawings offering serial self-portraiture as Other may provide a narrative against death, as they are a way of confronting depression, inviting the viewer to confront his or her own fears. Dolores knows so many various incarnations, as photograph in different printing modes, as drawing and sketches, and as commentating text, that she seems like a never-ending performance under multiple expressions. Many of the expressions encapsulate a dolorous attitude, some even with a taste for dramatic, Sado-Masochistic staging of the pain, as Stephen Heyman commented in his review of the book for *The New York Times*: "Indeed, many of the images in *The Book of Dolores* have a garish sideshow quality: Dolores with a whip and dog collar; Dolores with a noose around her neck; Dolores as a deranged clown" (E8). Beyond the conjuring aspect, or the possibly therapeutic performance of the author's self-hatred, the most pictorial images produced, along with the drawings, have a form of beauty that reaches beyond the specific quirks of the author's idiosyncrasies, a beauty one might categorize as awful, of a comical kind in the smiling representations, or of a

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romantic kind in the case of the blurry, half-erased photographic developments. The gum bichromate and the negative prints reach an angel-like quality, in the wake of Francesca Woodman's photography in *On Being an Angel*, but in their own way, more obviously centered on the sitter.

In *Kissing the Mask*, Vollmann comments on traditional female masks in Noh theater:

Hisao Kanze once wrote that Noh woman-masks pass “beyond all specific human expression.” What then is grace, if it leaves the human behind? Perhaps it is simply that it, like great poetry, brings us as close as possible to, and then points toward, what ultimately cannot be expressed. (161)

In her many Protean guises (and Vollmann uses the word Protean himself; 91), one might find in Dolores and her representations a form of grace which surpasses the occasionally chatty commentary the author makes of her, or any critical discourse like mine, for that matter. When Dolores is shown, through visual art, Vollmann the commentator of his own practice and prolific author is unusually silent. In the relative muteness of the fine arts, he calls other painters forth in an artistic dialogue with Paul Gauguin (105 in particular), or with Francis Bacon and his smeared portraits (164, 168). Leaving one art for another, if only temporarily, may have been a form of constraint that he needed to reach such grace, which in my view is equaled by his earlier fiction, as in *The Atlas* and *The Ice-Shirt* in particular—but that is a matter of personal opinion.

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