

Tomata du Plenty

by ADAM BLOCK



DANIEL MARLOS

The artist with one of his cutout figures, *America's Sweetheart*

His mother dubbed him Tomata (pronounced "Tomay-tah") and raised him as a Catholic in east Los Angeles. ("When I told a priest that I thought I was queer, he told me to wrap a rosary around my hand whenever I had those thoughts. So I learned how to masturbate with a rosary tied around my fist.") In 1968, at the age of 20, he hitchhiked to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district and fell in with the gender-fuck theater troupe The Cockettes. ("Hibiscus told me I was the image of the young Mary Martin—very disturbing.") He took du Plenty as a last name, and a star was born.

A year later, the young man had moved to Seattle, where he founded his

own troupe, The Whiz Kids. ("It was a time when people did their wildest fantasies. We decided one morning that the world was our breakfast nook and rode the buses in pajamas and wigs, with TV-dinner trays on our laps.") Their fame eventually earned the troupe a chance to open for Alice Cooper.

After a stint in New York, doing comedy with Gorilla Rose at CBGBs ("I'd do Pat Suzuki between sets by Blondie or The Ramones"), du Plenty moved back to Seattle and then to Los Angeles. At the age of 30, he became the lead singer with the seminal punk-rock combo The Screemers. ("Tommy Gear suggested we base a band on the ideas in *Winning Through Intimidation*. I think it's a pretty sick idea today, but it worked.") Du Plenty had sky-high hair, dressed in cleaner's bags, and sang tunes like "I Wanna Hurt." ("We had groupies. There'd be girls, and they'd introduce me to guys. Not a good idea, though—I ended up with a girl I'd slept with camped outside my door with a gun.")

Within five years, punk had paled. Du Plenty was working as an actor in Rene Dadler's film *Population Zero* when he found a kids' paint kit in an alley off Hollywood Boulevard ("I took it home and dedicated my life to art"). Within months, the punk celebrity's paintings were on display at the Zero Gallery, and his style was being celebrated by a critic in the *L.A. Weekly* as "somewhere between George Grosz and Grandma Moses." At 35, du Plenty had a new career.

He painted canvases, dresses, T-shirts, and Masonite cutouts. He got a job as art reviewer for the Los Angeles cable-TV show



She Set Her Healing Powers on the Dove of Peace

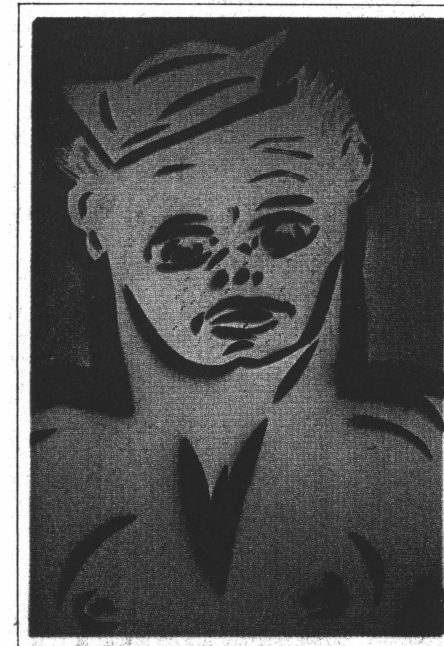


Sebastian at the Opera

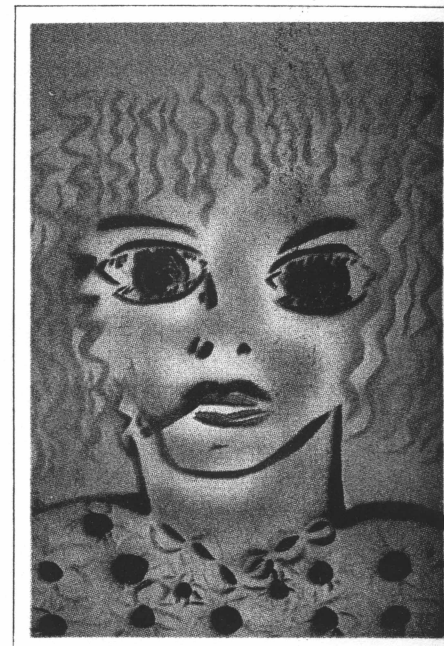
Bubbling Underground. In 1987, du Plenty won the *L.A. Weekly's* award for Best Set Design, for John Fleck's one-man show about gender confusion, *I Got the He-Be-She-Bes*. ("I had to laugh! This was not *Cats*! I [spent] \$22. I painted three sheets and hung them on a clothesline.")

This year, du Plenty turned 40 ("entering my golden age") amid a flurry of projects. He is writing and directing a musical thriller for video. ("We call it *The High-Heel Murders* for now. Styles Caldwell and Lance Loud play two private detectives who go undercover to investigate these homicides in a burlesque house—very *Some Like It Hot*.") Research for the piece helped inspire du Plenty's recent paintings of male and female strippers that are currently showing in Los Angeles. His paintings will be shown at the Art Act gallery in Miami Beach in February. ("My biggest ambition, though, is to write and illustrate a children's book.")

About his works reproduced here, du Plenty notes, "*Sebastian at the Opera* is part of a large mural of St. Sebastian. It was com-



Salty Dog



Black-eyed Susan

missioned by this fellow for a chapel he built in his home in the Hollywood hills. He converted to Catholicism after seeing *Brideshead Revisited* on TV.

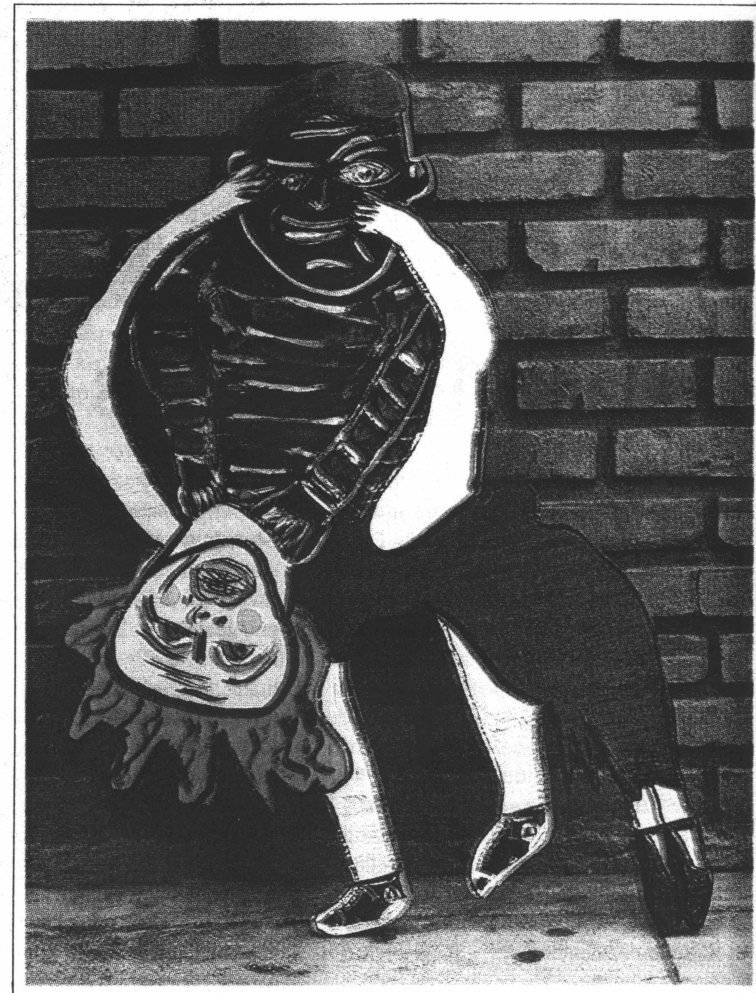
"*A Salty Dog* comes from my visits to Oceanside [Calif.] en route to Tijuana, which I visit a lot. I like to paint sailors. I think of them as so friendly. Really—who doesn't like sailors?"

"*Mom and Dad* I did last year. It is very true to my folks. It may look like he is strangling her, but it is just a tormented tango. They were very passionate about each other.

"In the photo, I'm hoisting the piece *America's Sweetheart*. The image was inspired by Mary Pickford. It's a great piece to take to lunch. I sit it in a chair, and people see I'm with a cute blond and leave me alone."

Where does du Plenty find his inspiration? "You know, I get more inspired by watching some girls on the back of the bus going to school and [by] listening to them than by those scenes I used to be immersed in. At my show in Seattle, I was talking to these housewives with strollers and found *that* infinitely more interesting and inspiring than, say, going to a concert. Does that mean I'm getting to be an old guy? I dunno."

Tomata du Plenty's stripper series, *Bump & Grind*, is on display at the West Hollywood clothing store *Ayntonio*, 7408 Melrose, through Jan. 31. The artist may be contacted at P.O. Box 875466, Los Angeles, CA 90087.



Mom and Dad