



ALEX CHAVES

The Amerikan Green Cross

September 12–October 10, 2015

Dear Alex,

I don't want to give away too much, since this private letter might be a public announcement, but do you remember what you said on the beach in Coney Island, eating hot dogs with those brats? It was something like, "But I have to prove to *myself* that I'm an artist."

Some people wear their hearts on their sleeves; others paint their hearts on their canvases. You put paint on the canvas with rigor, affection, and confidence. I also see generosity, and a touch of anger. But your heart? I wonder if it's in New Jersey, or inside your tummy, or scattered around in sacred, banal places, buried like treasure.

I'm not exactly sure who makes your paintings, when the door to your hovel closes. It would be easy to say that it's the girl inside you, but you paint those beautiful, splayed men like only a lonely boy could. All those colors—they're so delightful. Sometimes I feel like you're pretending to be normal. Like you're setting the table for a dinner party you're not sure you want to host, but feel obligated to. Maybe you really are a woman (divorced, with kids) who only feels like herself when she paints flowers under the sun.

Having an identity can start to feel like a litany—this, that, and the other thing. Not to mention, other people decide who we are for us. Power traces our bodies' contours with its all-seeing eyes. Even rebelling is claustrophobic. So I get why you paint: it's an altogether different language, with its own signifiers (color, mark, stroke, wash). It's another dimension. It's expansive and safe.

But some of the people you're painting: am I supposed to believe that they are young, white, gay, and whole? And the men—have you ever met one who is "virtuous, simple, clean, light, and kind," as you say in *Abigail Adams*? You're either dreaming of that virtuosity, or that dream has disappointed you.

So what the hell are you dreaming about? The cure for AIDS? A merger between the Green Party and the Red Cross? A time *before* AIDS? Before the bees overdosed on maraschino run-off and died? Before marriage and your cousin's expectation that you would find love? It seems like you want to let your audience be happy. But even in 1969 we would have been unhappy. It still would not have been our fault.

I mean, come on, Alex. Look at the world. It's so twisted. Last night on the subway I saw a person with no hair whatsoever riding back and forth on a pink tricycle, wearing a tutu that looked like it was made out of your leftover canvases. Like, it literally looked as if they'd ripped up *Mon Cheri* and made it into a leotard with pleats. The person was holding a sign that said, "I'm deaf: please donate," and howling at a pink teddy bear they were cradling like a dead baby.

I wish that when your audience saw purple they had to think about that unbelievably anorexic old woman walking down sunset boulevard (wearing a purple sequin gown and pushing a shopping cart), or that vain trans icon in West Hollywood who won't take visitors but accepts purple gifts left on her doorstep. I wish your audience knew that all the flowers in your house growing up were plastic. I wish all this not because I want them to be sad, but because I want them to know that joy is not separate from the weight of this world. You know that.

I love your paintings, but I don't always believe you. Alex, I like your paintings *because* I don't always believe you.

Love,
Grace