



Nick Herro, *Gallo Gravitron*, oil on canvas, 2004

MATTHEW PACE

PUSH BUTTON, GO ROUND

Push the button and watch the Octopus go 'round. Wait. Push the button again and make everything stop. Then comes a shuffling of heads; hands pushing and pulling in all directions get nowhere. Little hands and short heads, big hands and bald heads, all anxiously waiting to take a ride, wanting to see the trees turn into green and brown blurs. They pile in, one after the other, little kids gripping tightly to the collar of daddy's shirt, while daddy tells himself he's not as old as his age suggests. Always round and round, always ending where it began. Then it's their turn to wait, nervously clenching their fists and crossing their legs, trying to look calm. They are waiting for me, some even look at me, studying my actions, hoping to anticipate my next move. This is nothing new, same old story of start and finish, beginning and end, interrupted only by screams of terror and joy. Right now, I am in control. I push the button and watch the Octopus go 'round.

It's hot today, real hot, the kind of hot that makes

everything slow down. Even the wind seems to be dragging, mustering up enough strength only to create slow, fleeting dust storms. Today's crowd is the smallest it's been all summer, leaving a surplus of cotton candy and snow cones that melt underneath the sun. I operate one of the oldest rides belonging to the Jacobson Brothers' Traveling Carnival: the Octopus. The goal of this ride is for people to wait in line, and as they're waiting they see and hear all the people who got on the ride before them scream and laugh. By the time they finally reach the front of the line, they're so overcome with anticipation that they shove for access to the best seats. Once all are seated, I start the ride; the eight legs of the Octopus, each with a chair at the end, slowly start to revolve around the black and purple body. After ten seconds, the more adventurous riders thrust their hands in their air, shrieking and whooping as their legs tighten their grip on the sides of their chair. After thirty seconds, when the Octopus has reached full speed, the entire ride transforms into a uniformed rotating mess of blurred machinery and limbs. The Jacobson Brothers, who are actually two old ladies from Connecti-

cut, have granted me sole control over this thrill machine, which means this: I get to push the button.

Today's sweltering heat has left my Octopus sad and lonely, though I offer her little compassion. Watching a squirrel try to sneak a piece of a young girl's cotton candy, I see Ms. McKay, one of the Jacobson Brothers, out of the corner of my eye, appearing to be heading in my direction. I figure I have a bit longer to investigate the interactions between the squirrel and the girl, for Ms. McKay moves only as fast as her walker allows. By the time she arrives, the little girl has spotted the squirrel, yelled for her daddy, and dropped her cotton candy in the daring escape from the cunning rodent.

"Go home, Carl," Ms. McKay mumbles, followed by a fit of coughing loud enough to have come from some truck driver named Gus. "We're gonna close early today - too hot. I've already lost a days worth of snow cones to the heat, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna throw away any more money. Stick around for another hour and then you may leave. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Seven o'clock," I respond, "like always." At that Ms. McKay begins her jittery hike back to her trailer. "Ms. McKay," I murmur, as the old lady painfully turns around to face me, "well, uh, I was just wondering if, um, you think we might be heading off to another city or something?"

"Every day with your questions, like business here is no good. I've told you before, when the time to pack up comes, we'll let you know. In the mean time, keep up the hard work. Do you think I would leave town without the only person who knows how to operate the Octopus?" Ms. McKay once again sets off on her arduous trek back to her trailer. I have pushed her button before too, and, like the Octopus, she is very reliable. Though she frequently complements me on my hard work, Ms. McKay always answers my question about leaving by taking me around in a circle. Business is good, I work hard, and therefore both the carnival and I are to remain stationary until something comes along to upset this circular balance.

The thing is, the Jacobson Brothers' Traveling Carnival has stopped traveling. Arriving in Manchester three years ago, Nancy's older sister, whom no one has ever seen or heard, fell ill with a severe case of the gout. Rendering her a cripple, the Jacobson Brothers' Traveling Carnival was forced to make an unexpected stop of indeterminate length.

This was all fine and dandy for the old sisters, the warm climate and overall friendly atmosphere of the south greatly appealed to the McKays, yet I was as anxious as ever to be away from Manchester. The McKays say they still plan on reaching New Orleans, some day, when the

time is right. In the mean time, I've been sitting around, watching squirrels and my Octopus go around in circles and waiting for that day to come.

I've worked for her and her sister for five years, basically since I graduated from high school. One day after graduation I noticed an advertisement for a traveling carnival that was scheduled to stop in my little town of Manchester, Tennessee. The ad said that the Jacobson Brothers' Traveling Carnival would be here in a week, stay for a week, and then continue its national tour, heading south along the Mississippi until it could go no further. Beginning somewhere up near Chicago, the Jacobson Brothers' Traveling Carnival was headed to New Orleans and had decided to add Manchester to the prestigious list of stops along the way. Having graduated high school, the desire to leave home was stronger than ever, and at that time the carnival seemed to be my best outlet away from the stagnant retention pond that was Manchester, Tennessee. My dad, believing that a young man needed direction and responsibility, offered me a job with him, working in a soap factory just outside of town. They made fancy soap: aloe and sandalwood and other plants that grew far away from Manchester. My dad came home every night tired and smelling of cooked lard and chemicals, he was usually so dirty that no one ever believed he worked in the soap factory. For Christmas I would always get soap; every year, without fail, I woke up to find three bars of soap peaking out of my stocking.

"Aloe Vera, triple milled soap. Uh, thanks pop, I guess."

"Give it a smell. Pretty nice, huh? Don't even get me started on how it softens your skin." Though the soap changes, we have this conversation every Christmas morning. "You know, your old man plays some important strings down at the factory, and, well, I know you need a job and all."

"I got a job. I work hard. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Yeah, that Octopus thingy at the fair, I know all about it. But I mean a job that's going somewhere, a job that's got prospects." Around this point in the production I usually walk away, which generally leaves my parents to continue on without me, both my mother and father playing my part when they see fit. This is also nothing new-Pop pushes my buttons and I go walk around.

Maybe Pop was trying to slowly integrate soap into my life, with the hopes that I would one day come join him at the factory. Maybe he thought I was dirty. Later that day Pop would usually walk into my room, moving

real slow and watching his feet touch the ground. I pretended there were poisonous snakes on my floor and he had to step lively to avoid being bitten.

"I didn't mean to insult you or your job, you know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know Pop, it's just that, well, how many times do we have to go through all this?"

"Well," he stammers, "I guess until you get over this crazy idea of moving to Louisiana. What the hell they got in Louisiana that you can't find here?"

"Crocodiles, to start, and..." I quickly lose any interest in trying to explain why I want to get out of Manchester to my father, "...and, nothing, I guess."

"That's what I been tryin' to say. Anyways, Ma' wanted me to get you for supper. Be down in ten minutes." He stands up, quickly glancing around my room and shuts the door behind him, leaving only his smell in my presence. The thing was, ever since I was a child and saw the crocodiles on a field trip to the zoo, I knew I wanted to work with dangerous animals. Not wrestle them, or any other type of sideshow parlor trick, I wanted to study them. You know, research and stuff. Anyways, after that field trip in the third grade we never went back to the zoo, and the only book our library had with pictures of crocodiles was some pamphlet a travel agency made about vacationing in Louisiana. Since then, I knew where I had to go.

That was five years ago. I live alone now, in a small and hot room I sublet on the lower floor of a house just two miles down the road from the carnival grounds, where I am quickly running out of room for all the soap. On the plus note, I am the best smelling carnie this side of the Mississippi.

Push button, go 'round. All day, every day, for as long as people want to ride, they need me to push the button and make the Octopus go 'round. I pay attention while their world spins. I see their eyes, electrified and lit up and struggling to focus on a reference point to connect them with their previous, more linear existence. I see arms and legs. I see hair twisted out of ponytails and hats blown from the tops of heads. I see people flying through the air screaming and laughing, too thrilled and caught up in the



David Parisi, *Heavy Chopper*, drawing, comics page, 2005

ride to pay attention to the fact that after it's over, when all the ponytails have been put back together, they have nothing to show for their journey save a mild sensation of dizziness. In the end, it's just the same old story of start and finish, beginning and end, interrupted only by screams of terror and joy. I see all these things, every day, as they circle before my eyes just like they have for five years, and it all starts when I push the button to watch the Octopus go 'round. This is nothing new. Always 'round and 'round, always ending where it began.

With the exception of going home early, today was not like any other. I had another hour to kill before I would be allowed to return home to a nice hot can of baked beans and of my television set. I was in no hurry, as going home only brought me closer to returning to work the following morning. For this reason, and out of sheer boredom, I remember being unsurprisingly excited when a group from the Manchester Home for Senior Citizens edged their way towards my Octopus. Normally I would have questioned some of the more unstable senior citizens, asking about heart and back problems and the like, but the day's lack of activity left me lenient in my occupation. Collecting their tickets, I mumbled through the safety guidelines, reciting them like lines out of a play that no one really finds interesting.

"Make sure your harness fits snugly over your waist. Keep your arms and legs inside the ride at all times. Never, and I mean never, leave your seat while the ride is in progress. Any questions? If not, hold on and enjoy the ride." Given to me on my first day of working the Octopus, these have been my lines ever since. I never change them; I always end by telling them to stay in their seats and enjoy the ride. Some of the elders seem apprehensive, and they approach my ride with a sense of bewilderment in their gate.

"This fangled contraption will hold now, right sonny?" Some old man with suspenders and spots on his skin asks in my general direction.

"She's been running for as long as I've known her, five years, without a single glitch."

"Good old American Engineering, that's what that is." The spotted man replies as he walks away, picking at some lump on his neck and securing his suspenders. I ponder pointing to the large type ingrained on the side of the beast: Made in Madagascar.

Like always, my warnings fell on deaf ears—either from not listening or not being able to hear. It didn't matter; this was nothing new. They just had to sit and enjoy the ride. Soon came the shuffling of hands (though

much slower than normal) followed by mostly baldheads, as the group of elders took their seats. They are old, I thought.

I pushed the button and watched the Octopus go mad.

I never made it home early from work that day. I try to understand it sometimes, I mean, what went wrong. Surely it was not my fault; it was nothing new, same old story of start and finish. I tell myself that I was just doing my job, doing what I have always done, and what I would have been doing for many years had my Octopus not decided to break apart in mid ride. The Manchester Home for Senior Citizens says they plan on making a case out of this accident. I offered to help, but the officers told me I was only allowed to touch the Octopus' pieces. The senior citizens had to be handled by professionals. I was an Octopus Professional. I guess I should be thankful and all, seeing as how I was spared when the oversized mechanical limbs of my Octopus decided to split away from the rest of the monster.

I tried to push the button and make everything stop. It had worked so many times before, whenever there was a screaming child or someone about to be sick, all I had to do was push the button, the same button that turned on the whole damned ride, and it would stop just as fast as it began. As I jammed my hand against that button again and again, it dawned on me that this ride was not going to end with smiles and sighs of relief; *this ride was going somewhere*. It didn't work though; nothing I knew or could have done would have stopped that Octopus from hurling half of the senior citizens in Manchester through the hot and heavy air.

The sun had set long before I finally decided to leave the fair grounds. I am pretty sure the Jacobson Brothers would be forced to disjoin, meaning that the two elderly McKay sisters must return to Connecticut with their heads held low. They never made it to New Orleans, which also meant I needed to find a new vehicle to aid in my escape from this old town. For five years I had traveled with a rag tag festival destined for the Big Easy and had nothing to show for my journey, except maybe a sun tan and one hell of a story. Five years of pushing that stubborn button and expecting my Octopus to behave and go 'round, and now, just like that, it all blows up in my face. I can't go home – not my room or my parent's house. Both those places offer nothing new; a job making fancy soap or baked beans and television?

I think about all the old people. I saw some of their faces as the Octopus spit their chairs over my head,

and surprisingly enough they were relatively calm, nothing to coincide with the inevitable demise that loomed in the very close future. I guess it was nothing new for them—life that is. Always round and round, and always ending where it originally began. Now that it's all over, the accident, the carnival, everything, I guess maybe the Octopus was

destined to fall apart some day—I mean it couldn't have gone around in circles forever. It only takes one push of the button, the same button that you've been pushing everyday hoping for a different outcome; just one push and it might tear everything to pieces. ❖



Alice Laskey-Castle, *Mise en Garde: The Watchers*, steel, fabric, cast plastic, 2004