

The Collapse of Civilisation

Fame and fortune awaited the victor.

The Zaminsky Prize was up for grabs—the premier award for Dynamic Modernism, the new frontier in contemporary art. *Diem*, as the movement is known, is defined as “the use of a fluid abstraction to mirror the entropy of existence” by renowned art critic Sir Cedric Broadwhistle, as well as “a pile of ol’ rubbish wif fings what move” by Dwane Brown, aged seven. Since Dwayne no longer qualifies as a babe or a suckling, we can dismiss him and his opinion from the rest of this tale.

The hot favourite was Darien Peters, the flamboyant cross-dresser whose every piece was snapped up by internet billionaire Art Grimaldi. Grimaldi founded the must-have app: Goss-up. He never hesitated to use the chatting platform to boost Darien’s reputation (and consequently increase his own wealth).

The judging was to take place in the Tate Modern, with each of the six shortlisted artists assigned a partitioned space. Darien’s work, *Hamlet’s Dilemma*, occupied the largest of these. To the philistine, this was nothing but a seesaw comprising a twenty-foot plank balanced on an oil barrel with a feather stuck at each end. To the true believers, the texture of the wood, the flaking faded paint on the barrel, even the damaged edges of the feather, spoke volumes about the fragility of human existence.

Next to this masterpiece was *Civilisation*, Susan Spears’ entry. Susan was a blacksmith who specialised in producing artistic but (anathema to most advocates of Diem) useful artefacts for the home. *Civilisation* consisted of a thousand human figures cast in stainless steel forming a globe and linked in such a way that the air currents generated by a passing spectator would generate a gentle tinkling sound. Critics were unimpressed. Cedric Broadwhistle stated it was “a trite metallic cliché evoking nothing.”

All competitors were given two days to tinker with their artworks. Darien announced that as he had achieved an unparalleled height of perfection; nothing would change. Ting Wi made minor adjustments to the air flow that kept a green ping-pong ball in a state of perpetual levitation. Gonzales, the Spanish self-styled genius, spent the time wondering why the British Press insisted on calling him “Speedy”, especially as his entry consisted of an endless film loop of a snail. Kate Krewel arrived every two hours to oil a spring supporting a dead mouse. Thumbsy realised the mechanism rotating his *Toilet Roll of Doom* required oiling.

Susan slumped in a nearby internet cafe gazing at her phone, pondering whether it was worthwhile turning up at the prize giving. The various gossers on Goss-up suggested she shouldn't unless she had a fetish for ritual humiliation.

She glared at the stream of comments, or “gossies” as they were known. Goss-up prided itself on its unashamed acceptance of the new reality. Historical accuracy is dead. Alternative facts were old hat. Gossies need only be interesting. If you goss it right, it becomes the truth.

Darien was a first class gossier. ‘I'm going 2 win,’ he gossed, followed by stinging criticisms of his rivals. His final repost was ‘Civilisation is assi9’.

She took a second to decode the message. Then a scream of despair echoed round the cafe.

‘What's up, love?’ asked a middle-aged man sitting at the neighbouring desk.

Susan wasn't thrilled at being called “love”, but sexism was irrelevant compared with Darien's insults.

‘This arsehole on Goss-up says my work is rubbish,’ she said.

She then had to explain the circumstances. By now, the whole cafe listened.

A youth in a New York baseball cap added some dubious support. ‘Load of crap, the lot of them.’

The man nodded his agreement. ‘Why bother?’

‘I just wanted some publicity,’ she said. ‘I’m good at what I do, and I was trying for a bigger audience.’ She looked down at her phone. ‘But this’ll ruin me. Look at all these gossies.’

As one, all who manned the screens invoked Goss-up and accessed the Zaminsky Prize thread.

‘Not a problem.’ The comment came from the far corner of the cafe. A man in his early thirties, his skin suggesting a Mediterranean origin, stepped forward. ‘I used to work for Goss-up. Grimaldi paid peanuts then shafted me, so I owe him one.’ He looked round at the others. ‘We need help. Any volunteers?’

A wave of assent swept through the cafe.

‘My name’s Mario.’ He shook Susan’s hand. ‘I’m a psychologist. Tasked with using every sneaky trick to make users addicted to the app. That includes generating false gossers to get threads going.’ Mario pointed at the nearest monitor. ‘What can you tell me about Darien Peters?’

‘Arrogant, self-centred, thinks he’s great.’

‘Okay.’ Mario nodded at the gossies appearing on the screen. ‘From what I see, he probably feeds on reassurance. We need to shake him.’ He turned to look at the rest of his audience. ‘I’ll show you how to create multiple Goss-up ids. Then we can post lots of gossies saying Mr Peters’ work is garbage.’

Susan’s mood had not improved. ‘What about me? You can stuff him, but I’ll still finish bottom.’

‘How good is your exhibit?’

‘I like it, but bloody Cedric Broadwhistle’s put the curse on it.’

‘We can post a few gossies saying yours is fantastic. But you might want to change it.’

A gasp. A horrified silence. Then: ‘I spent ages making it.’

‘Kill your darlings. Ever heard that?’

Susan put her head in her hands. Destroy *Civilisation*? How could she?

Unsurprisingly, Mario had a suggestion.

The next day saw Susan back at the Tate. She was indeed changing her creation. A minor alteration, one that to the casual observer might seem to detract from its appearance. A thick bar had appeared near the base of the structure.

Darien wandered through, wearing a turquoise dress with a red turban. He raised his immaculately trimmed eyebrows. 'My goodness, what have you done? You've taken the lipstick off your pig.'

Susan smiled. 'I was worried about stability. You might not know, but it kept collapsing. The bar should hold it. Without that, it all falls apart.'

'Darling, it has already fallen apart. Artistically, that is.'

His expression changed when he glanced down at his phone. 'Cretins... Philistines.'

The gossers had become more active. Cedric Broadwhistle and Art Grimaldi posted their continued support for Darien, but the majority of gossies praised *Civilisation*. A substantial number suggested *Hamlet's Dilemma* would be better displayed in a council tip. A disinterested observer might have pointed out the remarkable similarity between gossies posted by different users, but it was plain from Darien's demeanour that he lacked such objectivity.

At eight o'clock, even Cedric Broadwhistle seemed to change his view, followed minutes later by Art Grimaldi. Darien was not to know that his chief supporters were imbibing gin at the opening of a new gallery, unaware their Goss-up accounts had been hacked.

Soon it was Darien's turn to make changes.

The next morning, the sun dawned on judgement day.

Susan arrived to find a very perturbed security guard.

'Miss, someone's ruined your... thing.'

They ran towards the exhibit area.

Civilisation had fallen. The metal figures lay scattered over the floor. Weeks of effort were now reduced to a chaotic pile.

‘Did you see who did it?’ she asked.

‘Everybody but you was in.’ The guard trembled, waiting for the woman to explode into a maelstrom of fury at his obvious dereliction of duty.

Susan just smiled. ‘Not a problem.’ She walked to the far corner of the room and retrieved a small black object. ‘I may have to make some adjustments to the work.’

Three hours later, the judges arrived, led by Cedric Broadwhistle. The artists and representatives from the media trailed behind. The air was thick with anticipation, although it might have been the miasma from Kate Krewel’s decaying mouse.

Hamlet’s Dilemma received the most sighs of appreciation from the experts, before they moved to the final entry.

Susan had not reassembled her creation. Civilisation remained where it had collapsed, a mass of small tangled shining bodies. The only change was a projector lighting up the nearby wall with an endless loop of footage shot by a concealed camera. It showed a maniacally grinning Darien pulling at the metal bar, emitting a cackle that would not have been out-of-place if issued by the wicked baron in a pantomime.

Susan stepped forward. ‘Of course, Darien agreed to do this, didn’t you, Darien?’

The guilty artist nodded.

‘He said he realised my work was superior and that he wanted to be part of it. That’s right, isn’t it?’

Faced with the alternative of being found out, Darien gulped and nodded again. He was fortunate his thick rouge hid his blushes.

The BBC’s arts correspondent thrust a microphone into Darien’s face, while her colleague pointed a camera at the perpetrator of the carnage before them.

‘Darien, anything else to add?’

‘Ah... well... I think we know from all the posts on Goss-up that this is the best entry and I’m pleased...’ He glanced round, his gaze stopping when transfixed by Susan’s steely eyes. ‘Nay, privileged... to be asked to make such a small contribution.’

‘You seem very enthusiastic,’ said the BBC lady.

‘Well... um... to assist such a seminal work...’

The microphone was aimed at Susan. ‘Susan, what does your work signify?’

Susan smiled at the camera. ‘It represents the fragility of civilisation and is a warning about how easy it is for evil to destroy it.’

‘Profound,’ announced Cedric Broadwhistle.

The verdict was unanimous and inevitable. Susan received the Zaminsky Prize, which she combined with Art Grimaldi’s generous offer for *Civilisation* to modernise her workshop and produce even more artistic and useful artefacts. Aided by her marketing manager (and fiancée) Mario, her business has taken off.

Darien’s star has dimmed, and he now makes his living largely from appearing on TV panel shows and playing Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*. He is particularly suited for this role as he can supply his own, otherwise worthless, plank.