

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Elizabeth Peyton

DAVID RIMANELLI

Unhappy Kings

I wanted to start to think about the nature of fantasy in Elizabeth Peyton's work: her fantasies as I imagined them, but especially my own. It seems as though some of our fantasies even intersect, on the level of simple subject matter if not that of pure feeling. We both are drawn to the phantasmagoria of royalty. I remember the surprised pleasure that came over me when quite by chance, in another artist's studio, I saw her portrait of Ludwig II of Bavaria. As in so many of Peyton's pictures, this portrait had the intimate quality of a miniature, although it measured seventeen by thirteen inches. I can only guess at what this kind of imagery means to Peyton (in her art, maybe I can; in her life, not at all). So I had to look inside, backward, to my own childhood, to those exaltations and perversions of a febrile child's brain just as he was breaking upon the first sieges of adolescence.

Elizabeth—I feel like calling her by her Christian name, and why not? I am acquainted with her personally—Elizabeth has painted or drawn several images depicting the last Bavarian king, Mad King Ludwig, at various stages in his brilliant and tragic history. My god, I thought, I only hear the music of Oasis when I'm absentmindedly tuning in to MTV; I own a Pulp CD but I almost never listen to it. But I felt, too, that Ludwig II was my personal imaginary property. I had to think back: Where did this dream begin? I prevailed upon my mother or my grandmother to purchase for me an elaborate coffee-table book dedicated to lavish photography of empty pal-

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Ludwig II at the age of 19 / im Alter von 19 Jahren, 1864. (FROM/ AUS: WILFRED BLUNT, *THE DREAM KING*)

aces and those historical anecdotes which more or less fit them. There was one palace in here, Herrenchiemsee, which particularly exercised me. This was Ludwig's attempt to recreate, on a somewhat more modest scale but with no expenses spared for the luxury of the retro-baroque appointments, the château of Versailles. Not only the magnificent looniness of trying to remake one's own mini-Versailles, but also other aspects of the careless and spendthrift and embarrassing and poetic monarch appealed to me: references in the ancillary notes to the obscure and suspect circumstances of his death, and certain other proclivities, tendencies. This book was modest so I will be too, but you know precisely what I mean.

Fast-forward two years: I went on an extravagant trip to Europe with my mother and my grandmother—my grandmother paid for everything—my first European sojourn. We stopped in Paris, and made day trips to Fontainebleau and Versailles. For many years, I attributed—not entirely facetiously—my inevitable conversion to homosexuality to these ostensibly educational tours. Of course, soon after the book containing pictures of Herrenchiemsee entered my library, so did a deluxe volume on Versailles itself: My actual promenade had been prepared hundreds of times in my daydreams. I walked down the length of the Galerie des Glaces, from the

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ELIZABETH PEYTON, *QUEEN ELIZABETH AT "KING AND QUEENS,"* 1994, ink on paper /
KÖNIGIN ELISABETH VOR «KÖNIG UND KÖNIGINNEN», Tusche auf Papier.

Salon de la Guerre to the Salon de la Paix and back again, dreaming myself as Saint-Simon, Colbert, Mme de Lafayette, Mme de Montespan, or even Marie Antoinette's supposed lover, Count Fersen. I was already on a rollercoaster ride of delusion from which I've never escaped.

Right now I am thirty-five years old. I live in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, an enclave much favored by homosexual men, and especially favored by those splendidly, or weirdly, muscled stud-moppet queens my friends and I refer to as "thumpers." The sexuality insistently radiating from these creatures, whether authentic and delicious or contrived and repulsive, renders the air of my neighborhood oftentimes unbreathable for me. So I march down Eighth Avenue, this Champs Elysées of gay maleness in the northeast, and I try to block the exhausting, and sometimes not altogether convincing, siren calls of the thumpers by imagining that once again I am parading the length of the mirror hall.

I looked through my library trying to find references to Ludwig, but was disappointed by the parsimony of mentions. Gordon Craig alludes to him in passing; Hajo Holburn in his comprehensive three volumes of modern German history refers to him a few times, but only in connection with the most dryly factual, historical data. But I know anyway: That Ludwig was dedicated to art and music; that these unwise passions led him to build several crazy castles and palaces (Herrenchiemsee, Neuschwanstein, Linderhof) and also to build Wagner's theater in Bayreuth. Ludwig was Wagner's greatest patron, of course, and the composer bilked the Bavarian king and his treasury of everything he possibly could. (He also composed *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*, so maybe we should let him off the hook.) We also know that Ludwig was devoted to his cousin, Elisabeth, the future wife of Franz Josef II, and Empress of Austria-Hungary. She herself met a tragic end, assassinated



ELIZABETH PEYTON, *PRINCE HARRY,* 1997,
watercolor on paper, 11 x 8½" / PRINZ HARRY,
Aquarell auf Papier,
27,9 x 21,6 cm.



by an anarchist at Lake Geneva. Ludwig became increasingly erratic in his behavior as his reign wore on; cooler heads worried. When those

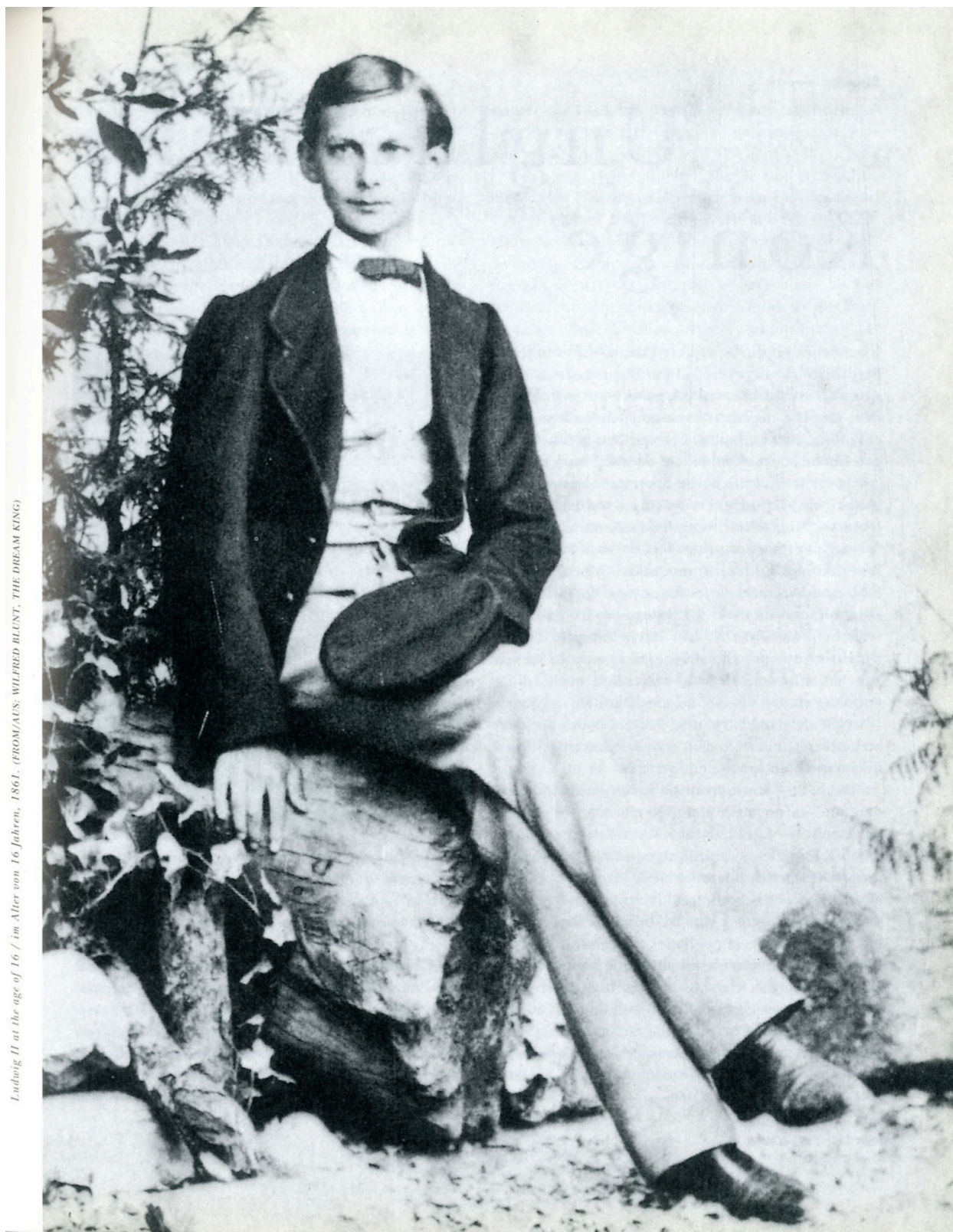
heads prevailed, they quietly put the king away. Some claim he was murdered by the orders of his own conspiring ministers.

There is a beautiful charcoal-on-paper drawing by Elizabeth depicting Ludwig standing in his box at the Residenz Theater. His arms are crossed over his chest, and a faint, ambiguous, rather fey smile plays across his lips. Looking at Elizabeth's picture, I will myself into it: I am Ludwig surveying my works, listening to opening bars of... what was it?—*Tristan, Parsifal, Rheingold*, one of those, yes? I have the temerity of imagining that Elizabeth has painted not Ludwig's portrait alone but also my own.

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Ludwig II at the age of 16 / im Alter von 16 Jahren, 1861. (FROM/AUS: WILFRED BLUNT, THE DREAM KING)