



ELEPHANT

THE ART CULTURE MAGAZINE ISSUE 31 SUMMER 2017

REN HANG:
A LEGACY OF FREEDOM

KAHLIL JOSEPH:
BEYONCÉ AND BEYOND

DARA BIRNBAUM TAKES
ON WONDER WOMAN

BEYOND GENDER

REDEFINING
IDENTITY
AND SEXUALITY
FOR THE
21ST
CENTURY



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Solo for Ayumi
ARI BENJAMIN MEYERS
July 2–August 5, 2017

Art Basel
June 15–18, 2017

Were People This Dumb Before TV?
Grafische Arbeit 1990–2016
LIAM GILLICK
July 2–August 5, 2017

Art Basel
June 15–18, 2017

**The question will remain, what
kind of space are we in?**

There will be large 3D printers.

**Some people will dream of the
creation of an honest nostalgia.**

**There will be places to jump
around and wrestle.**

**Fed Ex boxes will arrive every
day full of unexpected things.**

Ether Schipper

Ether Schipper

4 MAY - 10 JUNE 2017

DARA BIRNBAUM

PSALM 29 (30)



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Francis Upritchard in
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May 13 – November 26, 2017



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Juliana Huxtable
Karen Kilimnik
Becky Kolsrud
David Korty
Paul Lee
Li Ming
Kelly Nipper
Catherine Opie
Silke Otto-Knapp
Puppies Puppies
Yinka Shonibare
Malick Sidibe
Wolfgang Tillmans
Francis Upritchard
Grace Weaver
Carrie Mae Weems



Francis Upritchard, *Second Sun*, 2013, modeling material, foil, wire and paint, 167 x 54 x 59 cm. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

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PV: 6 May, 3-7pm

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VANESSA PRAGER

Ultraviolet

MAY 13 - JUNE 17, 2017



Vanessa Prager *Blue Velvet*, detail, 2017 oil on panel 48 x 72 inches

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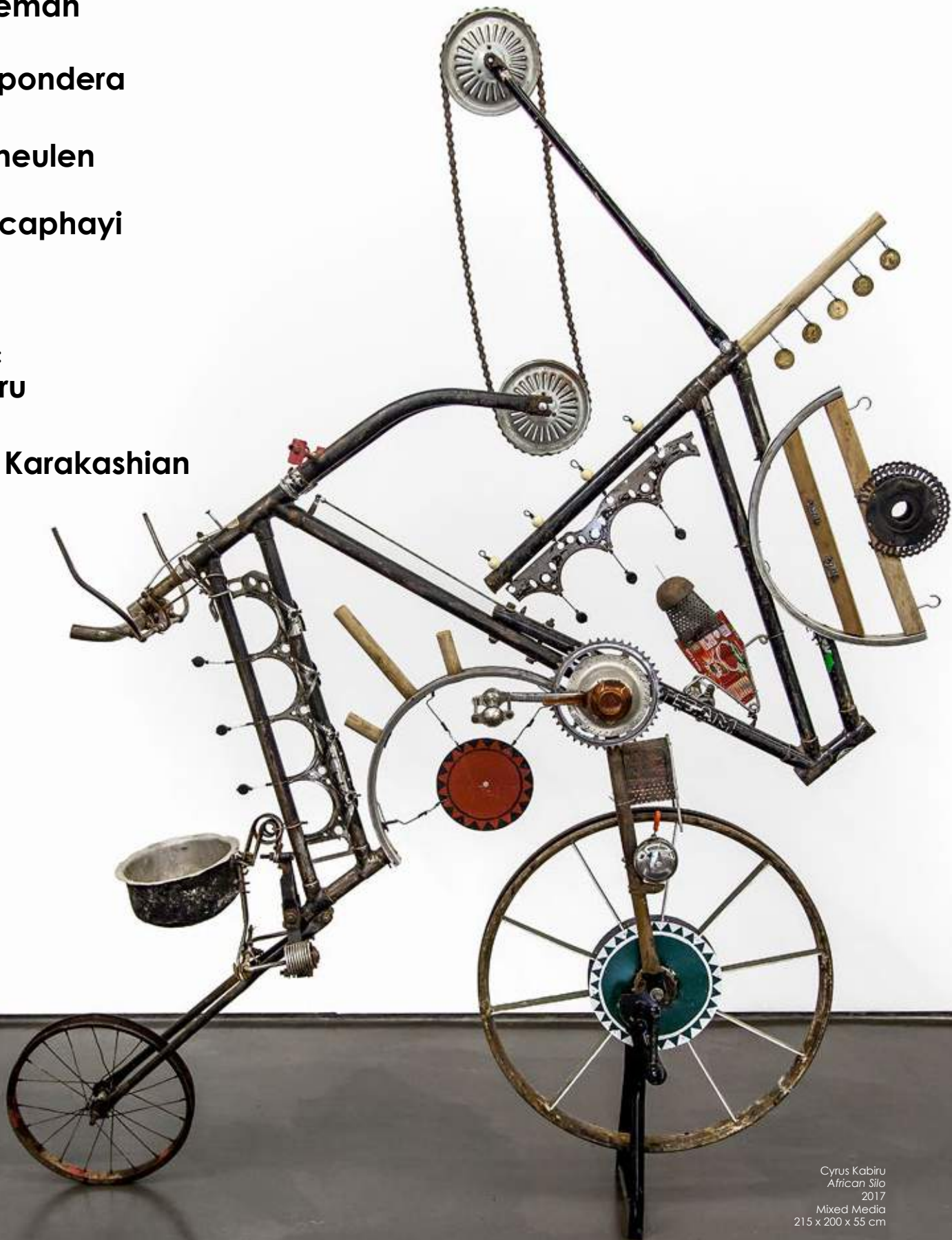
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01.07 - 12.08

Mongezi Ncaphayi
26.08 - 14.10

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Cyrus Kabiru
01.06 - 29.06

Alexandra Karakashian
06.07 - 27.07

Ed Young
03.08 - 31.08

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07.06 - 05.08

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12.08 - 07.10

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www.smacgallery.com
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ELEPHANT

Editor
Robert Shore
roberts@elephantmag.com

Web Editor
Emily Steer
emily@elephantmag.com

Editors at Large
Charlotte Jansen
Astrid Stavro
Katya Tylevich
Robert Urquhart

Art Direction
Astrid Stavro

Design
Atlas

Communications Manager
Molly Taylor
molly@elephantmag.com

Proofing
Sarah Batten

Interns
Kate Harvey
Lorna King
Harriet Lloyd-Smith

Publisher
Marc Valli
marc@elephantmag.com

Sales, Marketing
and Distribution Manager
Benjamin Verheijden
benjamin@elephantmag.com

For all editorial enquiries
Elephant magazine
Unit 315, Bon Marché Centre
241-251 Ferndale Road
London SW9 8BJ

For ad sales enquiries
Molly Taylor
molly@elephantmag.com

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Ren Hang, *Untitled*
Image © Ren Hang

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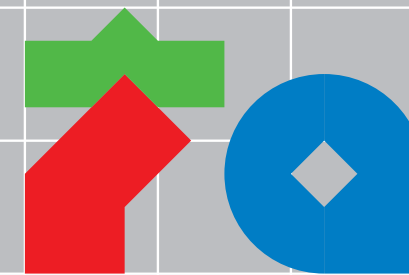
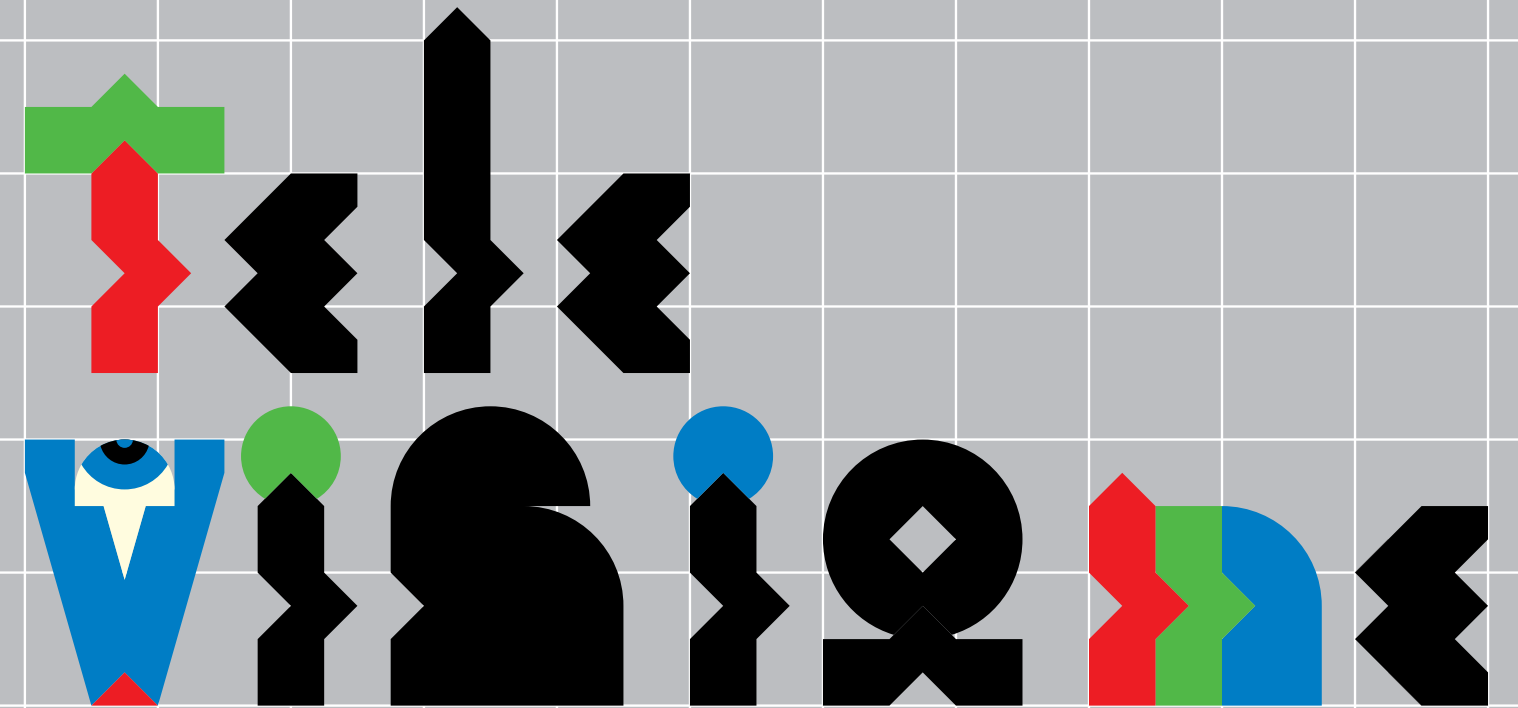
Queries
Elephant Publishing Ltd
Unit 315, Bon Marché Centre
241-251 Ferndale Road
London SW9 8BJ
Tel. +44 20 7095 9217
editorial@elephantmag.com
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Fondazione Prada



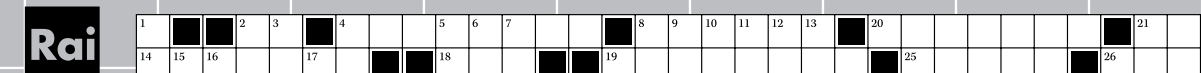
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Milano

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ART

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VOLTA13

BASEL'S ART FAIR FOR
NEW INTERNATIONAL POSITIONS

MON – SAT
JUNE 12 – 17
2017

PREVIEW:
MON, JUNE 12
GUEST OF HONOR:
10 AM – 12 PM
VIP / PRESS:
12 – 2 PM
PUBLIC VERNISSAGE:
2 – 7 PM

PUBLIC HOURS:
TUE – SAT, JUNE 13 – 17
10 AM – 7 PM
CLOSED ON SUNDAY

TUESDAY
TO
SATURDAY
1–9 P.M.
SUNDAY
1–6 P.M.

79 exhibitors
from 34 countries
* new at LISTE
Status Quo April 2017

VI, VII, Oslo
80M2 Livia Benavides, Lima
Altman Siegel,
San Francisco
Christian Andersen,
Copenhagen
Aoyama/Meguro, Tokyo
Arcadia Missa, London
Bernhard, Zurich
Blank, Cape Town
Carlos/Ishikawa, London
Clearing,
New York/Brussels
Crèvecoeur, Paris
Croy Nielsen, Vienna
* Bianca D'Alessandro,
Copenhagen
Ellen de Bruijne,
Amsterdam
Document-Art,
Buenos Aires
Bridget Donahue,
New York
Ellis King, Dublin
* Emalin, London
Essex Street, New York
Agustina Ferreyra, San Juan
Fonti, Naples
Freedman Fitzpatrick,
Los Angeles
Lars Friedrich, Berlin
Frutta, Rome

Gaudel de Stampa,
Paris
Grey Noise, Dubai
Dan Gunn, Berlin
High Art, Paris
House of Gaga,
Mexico City/Los Angeles
Hunt Kastner, Prague
Instituto de Visión, Bogotá
* Jenny's, Los Angeles
Jan Kaps, Cologne
Kisterem, Budapest
Koppe Astner, Glasgow
KOW, Berlin
LambdaLambda,
Pristina

VERNISSAGE
MONDAY
JUNE 12
5–9 P.M.

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JUNE
13 – 18
2017



Laveronica, Modica
* Antoine Levi, Paris
David Lewis, New York
* Lomex, New York
* Madeln, Shanghai
* Madragoa, Lisbon
Maistreravalbuena,
Madrid/Lisbon
* Marfa, Beirut
Jaqueline Martins,
São Paulo
MaryMary, Glasgow
Mathew,
Berlin/New York
Francesca Minini, Milano
* Monitor, Rome
* Edouard Montassut,
Paris
Mor Charpentier, Paris
Mother's Tankstation,
Dublin
Múrias Centeno,
Lisbon/Porto
Neue Alte Brücke,
Frankfurt o.T.M.
NoguerasBlanchard,
Madrid/Barcelona
* Öktem & Aykut, Istanbul
Project Native Informant,
London
Proyectos Ultravioleta,
Guatemala City
Raster, Warsaw
Sabot, Cluj-Napoca
Sandy Brown, Berlin
Silberkuppe, Berlin
* Société, Berlin
* Southard Reid, London
Gregor Staiger, Zurich
Stereos, Warsaw
Simone Subal,
New York
Stigter van Doesburg,
Amsterdam
Supportico Lopez, Berlin
* Joseph Tang, Paris
Temnikova & Kasela,
Tallinn
The Breeder, Athens
The Sunday Painter,
London
Truth and Consequences,
Geneva
Union Pacific, London
Federico Vavassori,
Milano
* Weiss Falk, Basel
* Leo Xu, Shanghai

LISTE

BEYOND GENDER

Infographics by Alvaro Valiño

THE KINSEY SCALE

“Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories... The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects.”

Developed by Drs Alfred Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy and Clyde Martin and published in 1948 in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, the Kinsey Scale was revolutionary in mapping human sexuality as a graduated scale rather than in terms of simple binaries.

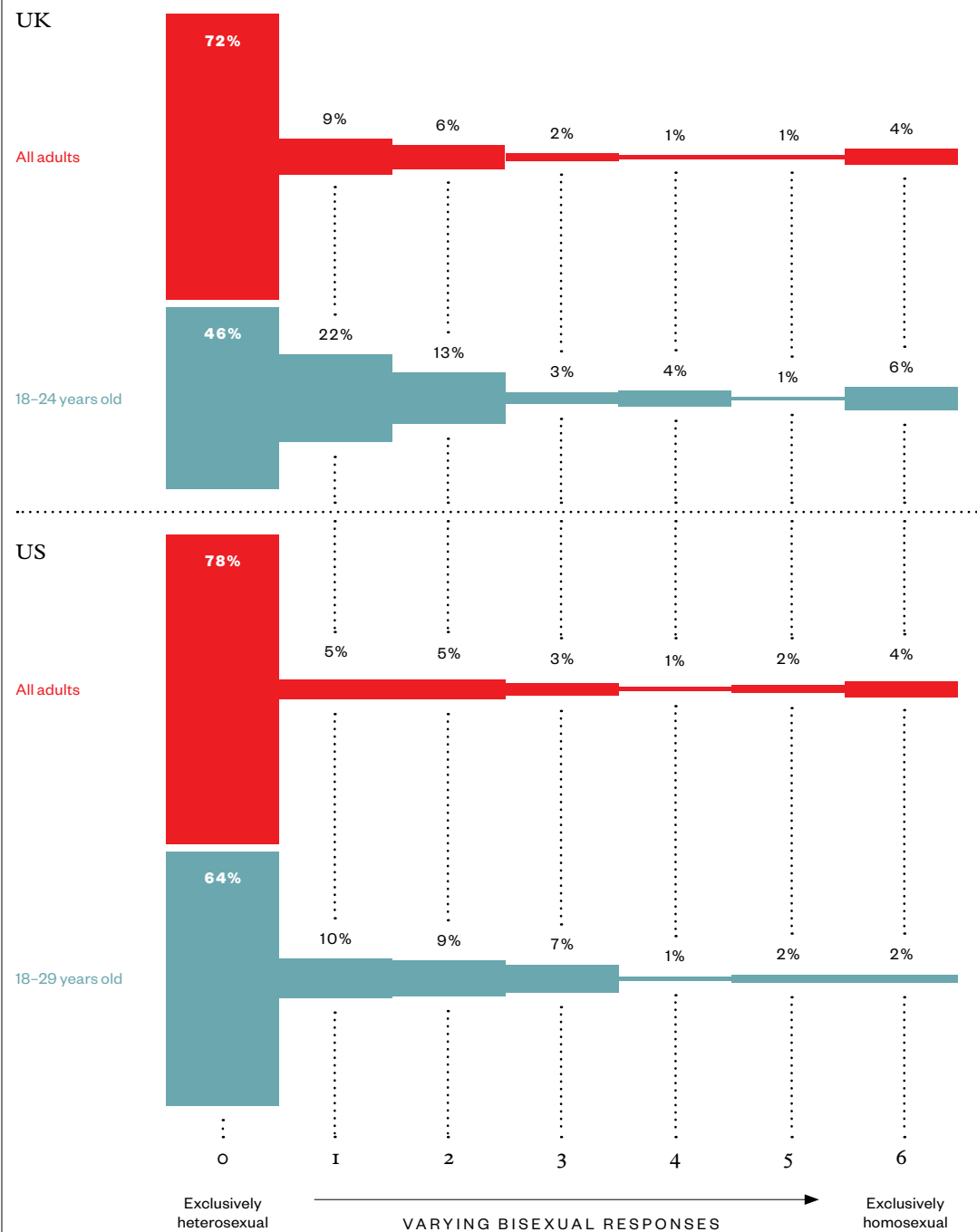
RATINGS

- 0 Exclusively heterosexual
- 1 Predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual
- 2 Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual
- 3 Equally heterosexual and homosexual
- 4 Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual
- 5 Predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual
- 6 Exclusively homosexual
- x No socio-sexual contacts or reactions. This includes the remaining values up to 100%

MIND THE GENERATION GAP

In 2015 British and US adults were asked to place themselves on the Kinsey Scale. Responses varied significantly according to age, suggesting a major generational shift in the way people think about and define their sexuality and gender.

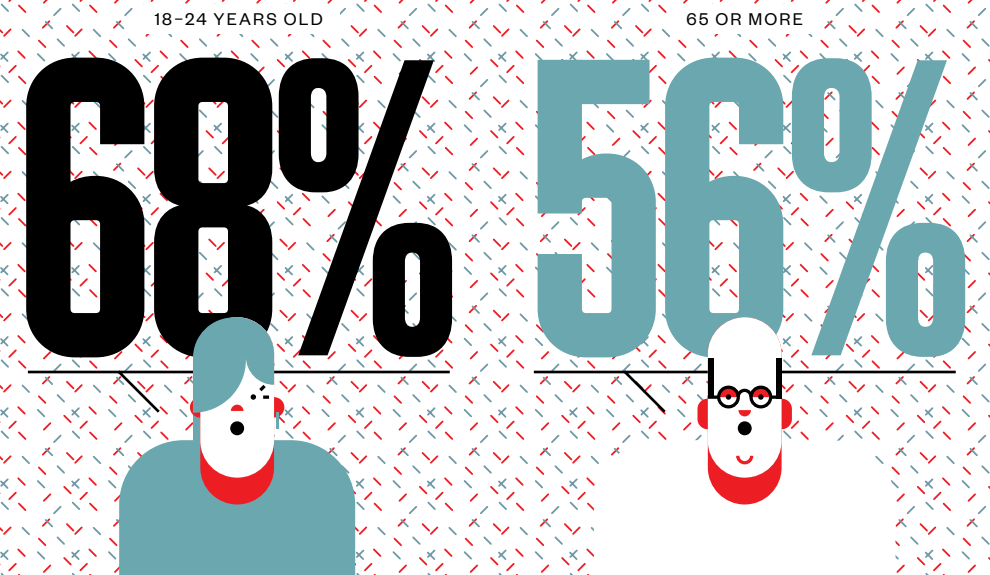
Source: YouGov, August 2015



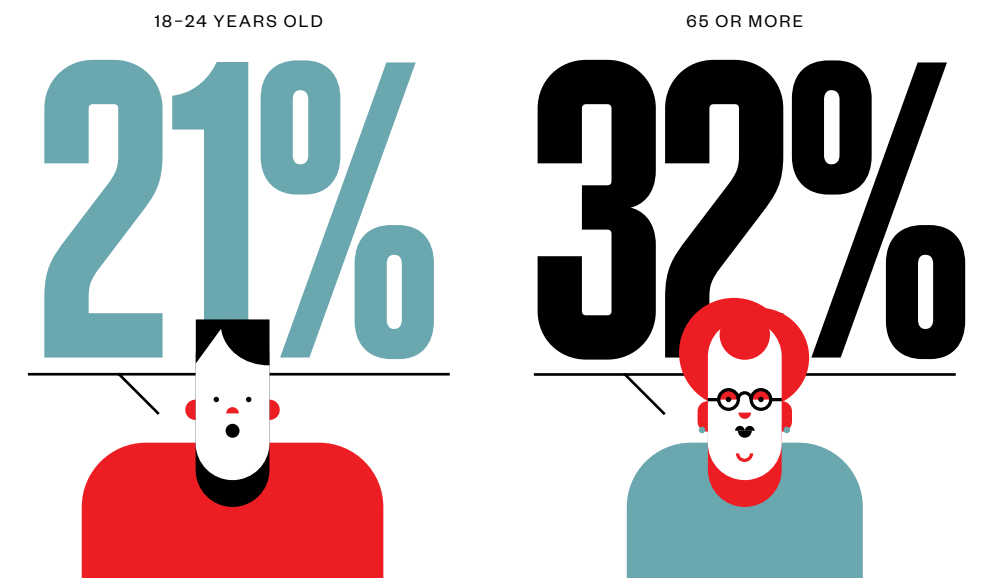
GENDER IS BECOMING MORE FLUID



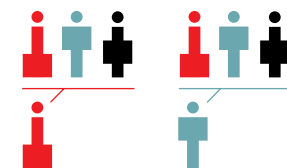
Percentage of people by age who think gender can be a range of identities



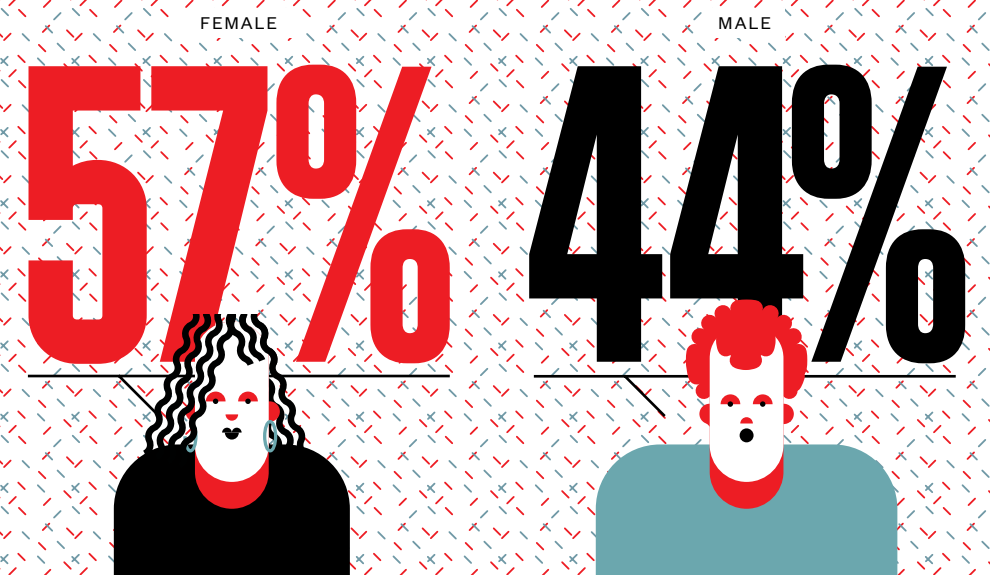
Percentage of people by age who think there are only male and female identities



Source: Survation on behalf of the Fawcett Society, UK, 2016



Male- and female-identifying millennials who believe gender falls on a spectrum



Source: Fusion.net

Cis/cisgender
a person whose identity and sense of gender corresponds with their given sex at birth

Gender fluid
a person who does not consider themselves to have a fixed gender

Gender neutral
a word, expression or item which does not refer to a specific gender

Genderqueer
a person who does not identify with a single gender

Mx
the gender-neutral honorific used by people of non-binary gender

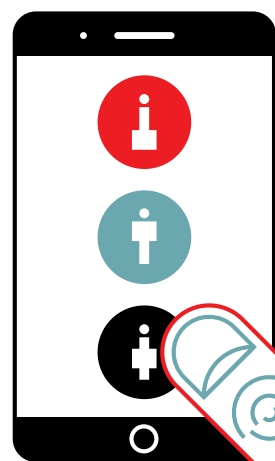
Transgender
a person whose identity and sense of gender does not correspond wholly with their sex at birth

Transsexual
a person who transitions from one sex to another



Facebook offers 70+ gender options

- Agender • Androgyne • Androgynous • Asexual • Bigender
- Cis • Cisgender • Cis Female • Cis Male • Cis Man • Cis Woman
- Cisgender Female • Cisgender Male • Cisgender Man
- Cisgender Woman • Female to Male • Female to Male Trans Man
- F2M • FTM • Gender Fluid • Gender Neutral
- Gender Nonconforming • Gender Questioning • Gender Variant
- Genderqueer • Hermaphrodite • Intersex • Intersex Man
- Intersex Person • Intersex Woman • Male to Female
- Male to Female Trans Woman • Male to Female Transgender Woman
- Male to Female Transsexual Woman • Man • MTF • M2F
- Neither • Neutrois • Non-binary • Other • Pangender • Polygender
- T* Man • T* Woman • Trans • Trans* • Trans Female
- Trans* Female • Trans Male • Trans* Male • Trans Man • Trans* Man
- Trans Person • Trans* Person • Trans Woman • Trans* Woman
- Transfeminine • Transgender • Transgender Female
- Transgender Male • Transgender Man • Transgender Person
- Transgender Woman • Transmasculine • Transsexual
- Transsexual Female • Transsexual Male • Transsexual Man
- Transsexual Person • Transsexual Woman • Two* Person
- Two-Spirit • Two-Spirit Person • Woman



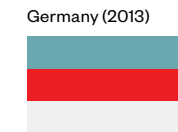
Dating apps now offer a third-gender option: Tinder has a "More" button allowing free input of terms

While only ten countries legally recognize a third gender, these represent more than a quarter of the world's population (year of first ruling in brackets)

AMERICA



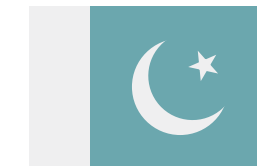
EUROPE



Malta (2015)

ASIA

Pakistan (2009)



Nepal (2007)

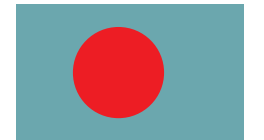


(Nepal is the only country in the world with a non-quadrilateral flag)

India (2005)



Bangladesh (2014)



Thailand (2015)



OCEANIA

Australia (2003)



New Zealand (2012)



The external red square represents the world population

The flags are scaled according to the size of countries' populations

5-6 MILLION
0.4%

Hijras identify as neither men nor women and are the most populous third-sex type in the world: 5-6 million in India out of a population of 1.252 billion

100,000
0.2%

There are an estimated 100,000 transsexuals in Thailand out of a population of 56 million

90%

Thailand has the largest number of gender reassignment surgeries in the world, with 90% of surgery clients coming from outside Thailand

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PLEASE REFRAIN FROM...

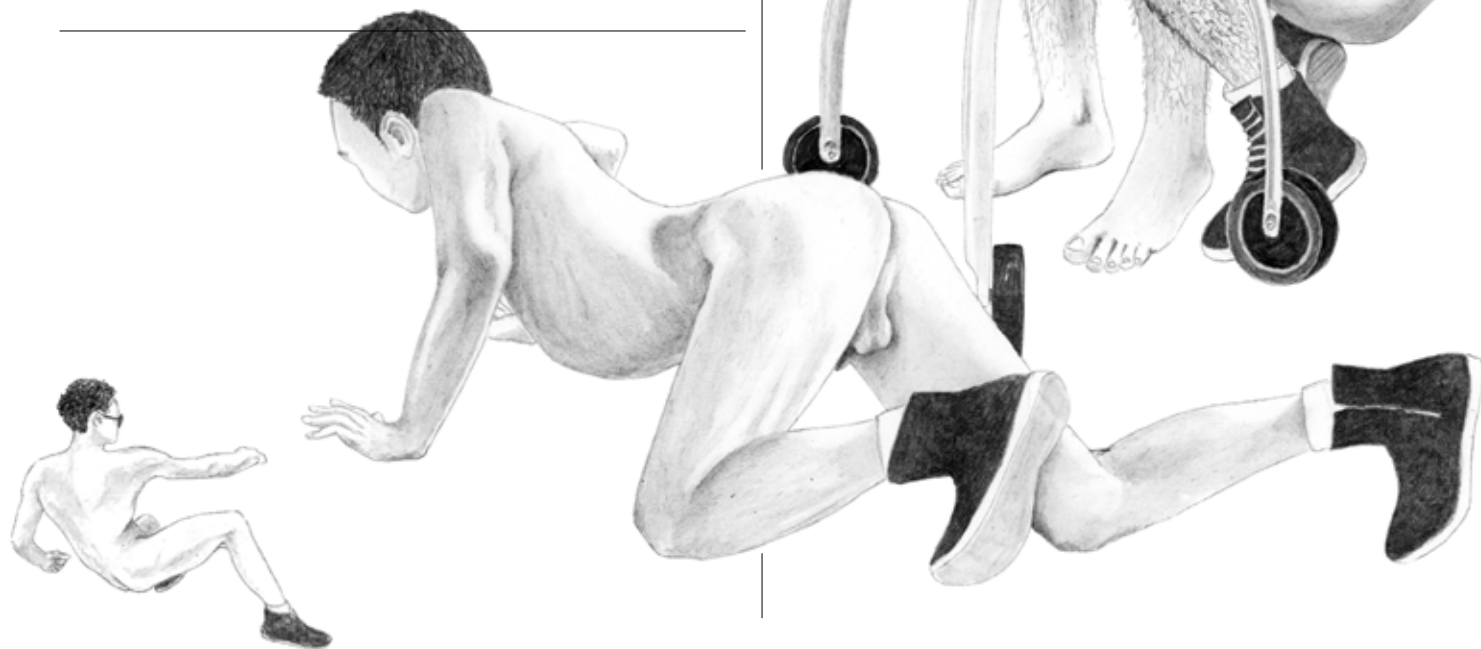
The art gallery is a sacred space, intended for deep intellectual thought, hushed conversations and, if you really must, the odd “Wow!” as you pass a particularly spectacular piece. Patrons engaging in any of the following activities will be asked to vacate the premises forthwith. Unless you’re the artist, of course. *Illustration by Clara Lacy.*

HUMPING

No longer is the back row of the cinema the prime spot for a cultural hump. The Humping Pact (“a simulated stimulation of irregularities in architecture and space”, don’t you know) are an artistic duo who, dressed in nothing but shoes and socks, engage in the humping of walls, floors, rooftops—you name it—of cultural institutions. This is often filmed and the pair are multiplied, *Matrix*-style, across the space. They first brought their curious brand of creativity to the art world in 2011 and have since humped their way around Europe, at Wiels in Brussels, Charlottenburg in Copenhagen and many more.

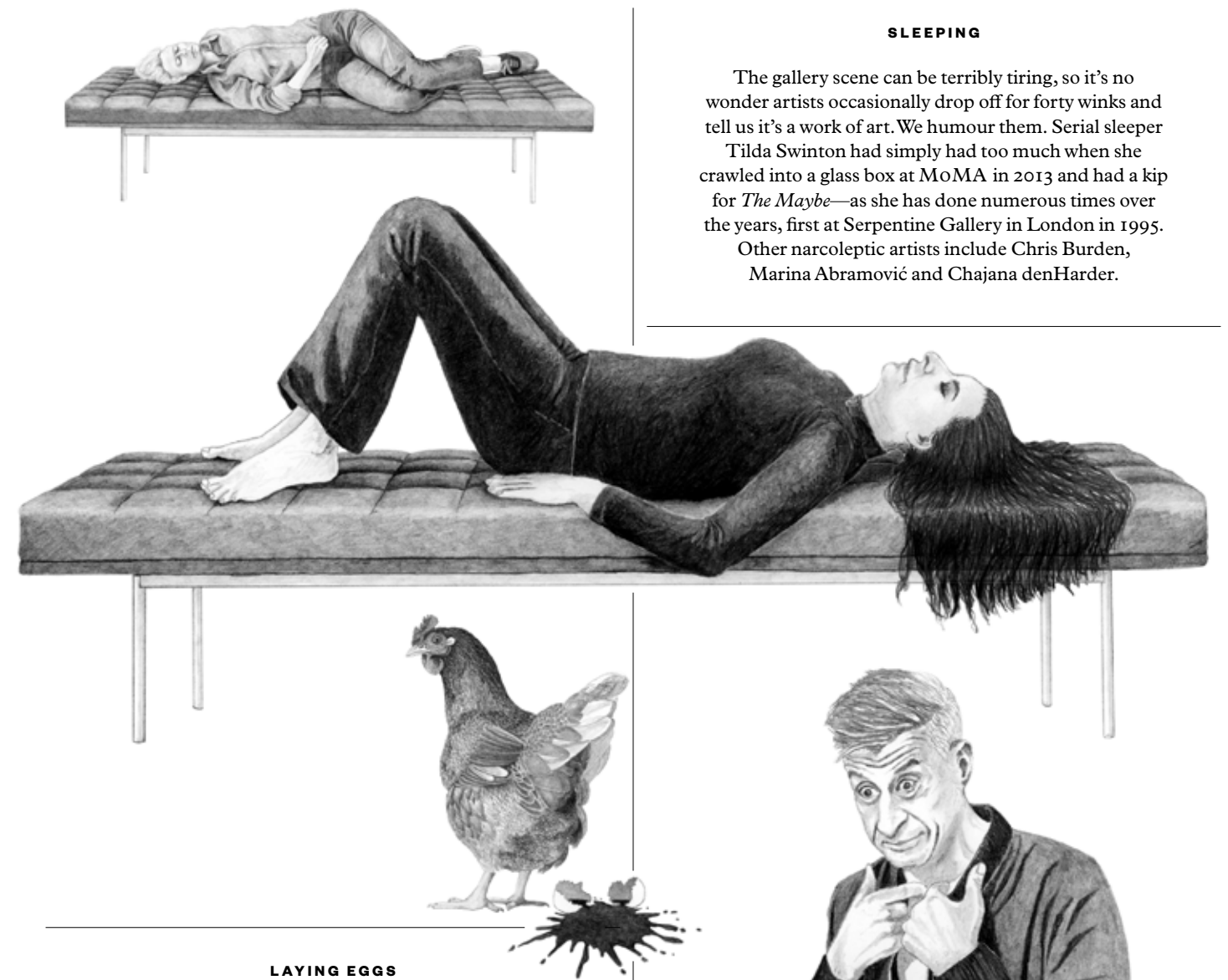
COOKING

Mark Ruffalo whipped out his wieners to get cooking with Gavin Brown at Frieze New York in 2012 (let’s hope those humpers weren’t *anywhere* near the hob). The sausage party was intended as an anti-hydraulic fracturing protest to highlight the potential damage of fracking to our food supply. The critics loved it. But, then, who’d say no to a banger from Ruffalo?



SLEEPING

The gallery scene can be terribly tiring, so it’s no wonder artists occasionally drop off for forty winks and tell us it’s a work of art. We humour them. Serial sleeper Tilda Swinton had simply had too much when she crawled into a glass box at MoMA in 2013 and had a kip for *The Maybe*—as she has done numerous times over the years, first at Serpentine Gallery in London in 1995. Other narcoleptic artists include Chris Burden, Marina Abramović and Chajana denHarder.



LAYING EGGS

If you’re thinking of laying eggs at an art fair, please consider your fellow guests and do so outside. In 2014, Milo Moiré stood naked at the front of Art Cologne and “laid” ink- and paint-filled eggs onto a canvas waiting below. *PlopEgg* was the resulting work, a splashy red and yellow piece that aimed to comment on fertility, womanhood and creativity. Some said it was gratuitous. We’ll let you make up your own mind.

POOING

We shy away from poop art as much as the next person, but no one can deny the eye-catching role toilets have played in the art world of late. In 2016, Lisa Levy sat on the loo in the nude for two days in a Brooklyn performance of *The Artist Is Humbly Present* and Julie Verhoeven took over the lavs at Frieze London. Maurizio Cattelan was next, installing *America*, a solid gold, functioning toilet, at the Guggenheim in New York.



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10 QUESTIONS WITH

PEARL LAM

Hong Kong-born gallerist, art dealer and irrepressible collector *Pearl Lam* tells us about her interest in Confucianism, staying true to one's own artistic vision and the real value of art. *Illustration by Rebecca Clarke.*

How would you describe the art world to a newcomer?
It's vibrant, alive and engaging. You'll meet some of the most interesting people from all over, working in different disciplines, and experience the world in a new way.

You've always been interested in promoting dialogue between Western and Chinese art. How has cross-cultural discourse changed since you launched your first gallery in Shanghai in 1993?
Artists and collectors have been exposed to more art from

different parts of the world over the last two decades, so the quality and depth of discourse have improved.

What prompted you to eventually open a gallery in Hong Kong in 2012?

Hong Kong is my home town. I wanted to have a space to stimulate international dialogue on art, where I can exhibit artists from around the world and also highlight Chinese and Asian art, in Hong Kong and for Hong Kong people.

What are you most inspired by in China's cultural history?
Confucianism. I studied and was brought up abroad, so I didn't come across Confucius until I grew up. I'm fascinated by the depth and complexity of his teachings.

How would you describe your ideal domestic environment?
People do not usually associate "domestic" with me since I'm usually flying between homes or other cities. However, for me, the ideal environment is about aesthetics and reflects my personality.

Which work of art do you keep coming back to?
I'll always love Zhu Jinshi's heavy impasto oil paintings, where the colours seem to drip off the canvas.

What's the most memorable book you've ever read?
Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, because I can relate to the desire to stay true to one's artistic vision and oneself in a world that often pushes people to conform to established standards of style and living.

What are you most afraid of?
I try not to let fear get to me, but like everybody else there's always the fear of running out of time when there is so much to be done.

Where do you go to relax?
Thailand. When I can't get there, I try to relax on the plane in between various commitments since it is one of the few places where I'm not running around.

If you could change one thing about the art world, what would it be?
There is too much of a reliance on auction results in establishing the value of an artist's works. All artists who are creating work from the heart are making valuable contributions to the art world.

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PRECIOUS LIKE A PIÑATA

Michael Rakowitz's papier-mâché creations pay vivid, playful homage to the artistic and archaeological treasures that were looted and destroyed in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Words: Louisa Elderton.

Imagine that you are a child. You are blindfolded, though bright light peeps in above and below the black-panorama band. A stick is in your hands and someone is spinning you, not too quickly but fast enough so that you become discombobulated. Suddenly the hands withdraw. A raucous din erupts, friends screaming with frenzied anticipation. You are dizzily thrashing at the air, aiming for that bright yellow, papier-mâché lion hanging from the tree. The piñata. Then suddenly: *Bam!* Shrieks of delight erupt and as you pull off the blindfold you see the lion decapitated, lying eviscerated in a pool of sweets, its sugary blood spilled everywhere.

Now imagine that the lion is actually made of terracotta and lies surrounded by its own powdery dust, clay pulverized, as it did in Baghdad's National Museum of Iraq. It dates from 18,000 BCE, one of two Babylonian lions found at the gate of the Dagan temple in Tell Harmal (ancient Shaduppum). That make-believe mane of rolled-up newspaper emblazoned with Arabic scripture is actually a mass of terracotta volutes; its body of acid yellow and aqua blue packaging is a smooth earthen surface; claws of silver foil are finely sculpted clay, as are the teeth projecting from the lion's dismembered roar.

American artist Michael Rakowitz's 2016 Berlin-based exhibition at Barbara Wien Galerie, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, paid homage to this lion. His papier-mâché manifestation sat majestically amid thirty-seven other artefacts made from cardboard, Middle Eastern packaging and newspaper. The eponymous body of work (2007–ongoing) responds to the sociocultural history that followed the 2003 invasion of Iraq when over 15,000 objects were decimated, displaced or disappeared from the Baghdad museum. Rakowitz has described how he “looked back at actual objects, marked the things lost”, in an attempt to bring new life to archaeological pieces that we may never see again.

Displayed upon two utilitarian wooden trestle tables, Rakowitz recreated objects down to their

minutiae: tiny jars that were originally inlaid with mosaics; a relief of a reclining woman; Poseidon standing tall, armless but proud; the seated consort of Hercules; a male figure, eyes initially set with pearl, pupils of lapis lazuli; griffins; stags; falcon-headed sphinxes; winged deities. The list goes on.

Next to each, a taxonomic label delineated the object's basic information (original material, date) and its current status—in the case of the lion: “In museum, head destroyed during museum looting”, while others read “stolen” or “unknown”. Where you might usually expect to see an interpretive text describing the object, Rakowitz had instead quoted professionals ranging from politicians to archaeologists, museologists, journalists and academics, all of whom have expressed their views on iconoclasm with varying degrees of seriousness—some pithy, some passionate, some flippant:

“Let me say one other thing. The images you are seeing on television you are seeing over, and over, and over, and it's the same picture of some person walking out of some building with a vase, and you see it twenty times, and you think, ‘My goodness, were there that many vases?’ (*Laughter.*) Is it possible that there were that many vases in the whole country?”
—Donald Rumsfeld.

“Our archaeological heritage is a non-renewable resource. When a part is destroyed that part is lost forever”
—Usam Ghaidan and Anna Paolini.

“Some appear to have been professional, acting in concert with international dealers and even with resident diplomats”
—William R. Polk.

As a viewer, one pieced together these fragments. Their clear didacticism opened a portal into the complex narrative of iconoclasm, which also led me to question how we value material culture (our own and that of others) in a digital age where matter is increasingly dematerialized.

Alongside destroying cultural heritage, ISIS has scaled up and professionalized the trade of



The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist, 2007–ongoing, including (opposite) *Seated Female Statue from Hatra*, 2014, Middle Eastern food packaging, newspapers and glue, 39 x 70cm



antiques within Iraq and Syria, creating a food chain of supply and demand and profiting through transactions drive this business, and it has been reported that \$300 million worth of antiquities have flooded the market as a result of ISIS's dealings.

Rakowitz's objects are very clearly not attempting to be the originals or, indeed, to usurp them. These are not simulacra—certainly not in the sense that Baudrillard explored in his *Simulacra and Simulations*, wherein the simulacrum claims its own independent truth, surpassing the original's signification: “It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.” Rakowitz's forms honour the memory of what once was. With their bright colours, they are reminiscent of children's figurines, lively objects designed for bashing—the piñatas that they recall are even *intended* for annihilation, and their existence depends on their destruction. Therefore, these forms inflect the destiny of the original ill-fated objects. By imbuing his recreations with a sense of craft, playfulness and joy, he allows us to acknowledge the difficult stories attached to the original objects and celebrate them, rather than relegating them to the status of ghosts of the dead.

As the grandchild of a Jewish-Iraqi family who fled to the United States in 1946, Rakowitz's practice

often explores his ancestral country, from *Enemy Kitchen* (2006–ongoing), where Iraq War veterans dished up Baghdadi recipes from a food truck, to *Spoils* (2011), where he served dinner on Saddam Hussein's actual dinner plates, which he sourced on eBay from an American soldier in Iraq. *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* tapped into an expanded field of current affairs, where iconoclasm stands as an urgent issue.

It is precisely the Western interest in culture and antiquities that gives the agenda of PR-savvy ISIS its political agency; its iconoclasm is a complicated phenomenon, with religious, political and economic motives. It would be a gross simplification to see these as senseless expressions of violence and abuse carried out by brainwashed militants; these are calculated acts that are broadcast to the world to spread a message of extremism and invoke fear.

Of course, Rakowitz's project does not solely implicate ISIS; it also acknowledges the colonial backstory of iconoclasm. His comic-strip-like pencil drawing *Excavation Extraction (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series)* (2007)—part of a wider series—depicts the Ishtar Gate of 575 BCE. The drawing describes the magnificent blue-tiled arch's history, excavated between 1902 and 1914 by German archaeologist Robert Koldewey and transported to

Berlin, where it still stands today in the Pergamon—just over three kilometres from the site of Rakowitz's own exhibition. Another illustration from the same series, *New Babylon* (2007), describes a US helipad built in Iraq by the site of the Ishtar Gate ruins; the landing spot remains there today despite archaeologists' complaints of damage. Even the exhibition's title, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, translates directly from the phrase *Aj-iburshapu*, which was the name of the ancient Babylonian street passing through the Ishtar Gate. It reminds us that Imperialist agendas continue today, with the return of this ancient monument to its homeland being disputed by the German government, overriding Iraq's right to its cultural heritage.

Rakowitz's objects have an ontology that exists somewhere between art object and reconstructed artefact. Being sold through the commercial gallery system, they do enter into the marketplace, with the artist hoping that they carry the essence of the original and have “maybe created an uncomfortable ghost in an art collector's collection”. With the West's demand for antiquities fuelling the black-market trade, Rakowitz satirically acknowledges the market's role in enabling the pillage of cultural history—his kitsch replicas never intend to provide a viable

alternative to the value and status of real antiquities, though with today's contemporary art market being a billion-dollar industry, stranger things have happened.

So, to what degree can art ever *really* offer solutions to sociopolitical problems beyond critical inquiry? In the run-up to Documenta 14, curator Adam Szymczyk stated that amid “the continuing military and political involvement of the Western powers and Russia in Syria... it is not clear what contemporary art can do in order to change the increasingly indefensible and clearly unsustainable state of things”. For Rakowitz, it is about trying “to make an unlikely thing happen, and the impossible becomes possible. It's art because it's impossible for this to exist in the world.” By reincarnating these artefacts as contemporary art objects, they have a revised ontology that can sustain their existence and draw attention to the unsustainable state of things. In a world increasingly obsessed with dematerialization and digital avatar existence, our existential need for the physical evidence of who we are and who we once were continues to fuel our insatiable relationship to objects—and our fear of their disappearance and death.

“The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist” will be featured on the Fourth Plinth, Trafalgar Square, London, next year.

“EXHAUSTED”

We asked our new columnist *Mel Byars*, author of *The Design Encyclopedia*, to begin by telling us something about himself, a chore he claims was excruciating.

However he may feel about the process, the results are interesting.

Illustration by Joan Chito.

When I hear somebody say “Life is hard”, I am always tempted to ask “Compared to what?”

—Sydney J. Harris,
American journalist.

I retired a few years ago. Actually, I didn't exactly retire. One day in 2015, at four in the afternoon, I abruptly stood up from my office desk, placed a few possessions in a carton, and took it to be mailroom to be shipped to my apartment in New York City. I then went upstairs and told the CEO: “Kiss my ass. Goodbye.” I was fed up with the corporate world.

While working as the manager of that company's communications department, I interviewed graphics people, web designers, writers and others. I was forced to be “politically correct”, which meant that I couldn't ask an applicant's age, marriage status, address or interests. One woman complained about me to her employment agency because I asked if she had children, another for my asking where he lived. For God's sake, if I hired them, we would be working elbow-to-elbow. In the interviews, I would sometimes cheat by saying, for example, “Unfortunately, I cannot ask if you're married.” Inevitably, the person I was interviewing would then just tell me if they were married.

I have known people who have so many secrets that I'm sure they cannot remember them

all. Why would anyone have many secrets? I have few. There are eight billion humans on the planet; what possible secret could you have that at least millions of others don't share with you? Exceptions include murdering your mother—best to keep that one a secret.

Of course, publishing your secrets is a different matter entirely because that's permanent. No erasures possible. So think twice. Philip Roth must be incredibly courageous.

Nevertheless, based on a request from the editor of *Elephant*, I will begin this column by revealing that I grew up in South Carolina, where I have now returned. I was a neurotic child. My mother's friends told her that I was crazy and that I should see a psychotherapist or psychiatrist. I'm not sure that there were any in town then; there are now more than fifty. What goes around comes around.

I lived in a house with my mother and aunt, who were both single at the time. By the time I was ten, my mother had remarried, and I grew up in a trailer (or caravan). I never invited a friend to visit due to my social embarrassment. My mother, stepfather, two brothers and I moved every year from the time I was about fourteen to seventeen. The name for us was “trailer trash”.

I had one friend at a time, who was a loser like me. I subscribed

to a number of magazines, read many books and consumed every page, more than once, of the fifteen volumes of *Compton's Encyclopedia*. I was a real boy, even though no one else thought so. I collected insects, had an aquarium, saw a movie every week, lived the movie in my mind during the following week, was pointed out by teachers as being perfect which caused bullies to physically attack me, was determined to have revenge on them when I became an adult, hid a lot, was skinny and non-athletic, wore upscale clothes given to me by my Aunt Dollie, despised attending church on Sundays, had migraine headaches, incessantly listened to crime fiction on the radio and classical music on a 45rpm Bakelite record player, and rose early in the morning to avoid associating with anyone, even though I hated waking up early.

I left the mobile home at seventeen to live at a big university, where life was blissful. I discovered that I could be whoever I wanted to be; I didn't lie, just didn't volunteer the whole truth. All of my college friends were rich. During holidays, I would go to their homes, not mine. I loved the university, the professors, the library, the beautiful campus with red-brick walls covered with ivy. I acted in the theatre. When I visit the campus now, my eyes tear up.

Immediately after receiving a diploma in journalism on a very hot Friday in June, I left for New York City the next day on a train with about \$700 in my pocket. Finding a job was difficult because my thick Southern accent was interpreted by snotty New Yorkers as meaning that I was stupid. I first lived in a home for old men and then the YMCA for \$25 a day. No phone. Few clothes.

Manhattan was laid-back when I arrived. Compared to now, it was a small city, even cosy. There were no \$30-million apartments for sale then. My two-bedroom flat, with a 450-square-foot living room in one of the best neighbourhoods, was about \$1,500 in the late Sixties.

My first job was with a college-book publisher. I wrote and designed brochures that were supposed to encourage

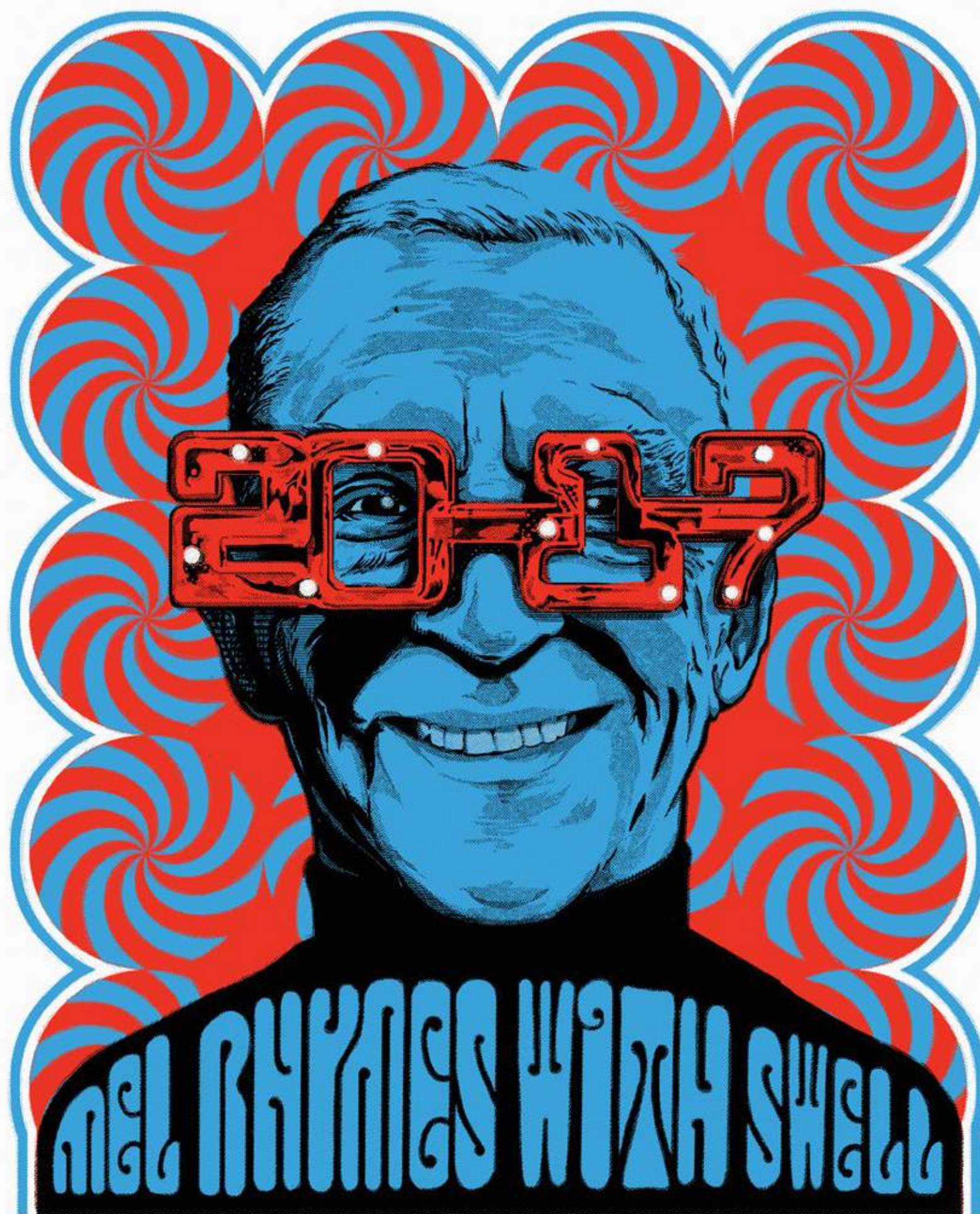
professors to adopt textbooks. I never studied design, but I did make posters with Speedball pens as a child. The members of the family-held company were indifferent to the quality of the graphic design, but not to that of the writing. My boss indulged me. I was often late, and the time-clock calculator that stamped my card would not let me cheat.

I was so stupid that, for one of the brochures, I wrote “astrology” instead of “astronomy”.

Life moved fast in New York City. In 1962 I moved to another publisher, where I designed books by well-known people like General Douglas MacArthur and the Dalai Lama, who gave me a Tibetan flag. It is one of the very few of the zillions of objects I have been given or collected that I have retained.

Becoming bored frequently, I would rent an apartment on a two-year lease, fully decorate it, and then, at the end of the lease, move on to another one. In the space of fifty-five years, I lived in possibly thirty different apartments, one with black walls, another with a kitchen floor in black, highly polished linoleum like in a Busby Berkeley musical. After moving and selling everything, I would buy more for the next one. I have been a collector forever: African art, period Louis furniture, lighting, Pop art when it was cheap, Chinese and Afghan war rugs, vintage photographs, a jukebox, vintage Herman Miller and Knoll furniture, endless possessions. As my salary increased, the pedigree of my belongings increased. I finally stopped selling and began gifting to museums in New York, Paris, Prague and even, recently, a collection of more than a hundred Sixties psychedelic, textually indecipherable rock-era posters to a museum in my home town.

Actually, I didn't and still don't like rock music. I only listened to Thirties and Forties music and didn't know about the posters at the time. It was a West Coast, particularly San Francisco, phenomenon. Living in New York City and working for book publishers and advertising agencies, I was only interested in Swiss design. The idea of words in advertising or posters



that people cannot read would have been absurd to me—just as today. The rock-music artists were drugged hippies. They were not consciously selling anything. They were not propagandists. The images included are dotted, having no relationship whatsoever to the musicians—Edgar Allan Poe, Gloria Swanson, Santa Claus with horns, the Taj Mahal and Jesus.

One of the two most prominent designers, Victor Moscoso, who studied with Josef Albers at Yale University, said he didn't care if his posters were readable. (The other most prominent designer was Wes Wilson.) If you think that the phenomenon of the unreadable died after the Sixties and early Seventies, you are forgetting April Greiman's messy scrapbook aesthetic and David Carson's intentionally unreadable work, such as his so-called deconstructivist pages for *Ray Gun*.

(As an aside about psychedelic posters, I had a dream a few days ago that made me aware that they are all positive—no matter how silly. Nothing dark. Yet they were being created at the same time—late Sixties—as the youth protests in the US and Europe.)

Serial collectors are strange people. I don't think that I and other obsessive collectors can explain ourselves. I don't have

much left except a hundred-plus examples of Navajo blankets that I am wishing to grant to an as-yet-undetermined institution. (If there is a curator out there interested, speak up.) The rarest, most interesting gift I have made—at least in my opinion—is probably a *quipu* to the Israel Museum.

Back to my career. One art-director position followed another. One award followed another. I was not only an art director at publishers but also at magazines, small studios and large advertising agencies. For four years in the early Seventies I was the principal of a small agency/graphics studio with Hollywood movie-studio accounts. It closed due to my financial mismanagement. Lesson learned: I never again managed a company's funds. And more generally: I never again took on tasks that I don't do well, which includes my abstaining from financial matters.

Everything changed for me in 1988, when I broke my personal first commandment: "I will never live anywhere other than Manhattan." By this time, about fifty of my friends had died of AIDS. I stopped excessive drink and recreational-drug consumption and moved up the Hudson River (about 50 miles) from Manhattan, made an initial

visit to the furniture fair in Milan, spent some time in Paris, began teaching the history of graphic and industrial design, and started writing the first edition of *The Design Encyclopedia*. *The Design Encyclopedia* is my best accomplishment and was made possible by the publisher himself, Laurence King—twice. For the first edition, there was no significant internet available to help me appreciably with the research; therefore, much of it was garnered from books in a range of languages. Only an insane person like me with no advanced degree in the subject and no prior books published would attempt to write an encyclopedia. Laurence has claimed that he recognized that I was nevertheless capable. It is possible that he used a divining stick or witching rod. I was about fifty years old at the time.

I learned that writing non-fiction books will not make me rich; in fact, it will make me poor. I learned that serendipity plays a big role in everyone's significant accomplishments: I was relatively free at the time of the second edition, lived in Paris with a garden (the garden helped), and was meagrely supported by a small sum bequeathed to me by my stepfather. Possibly the biggest lesson I learned is that, because I become bored easily, I have quit a number of projects

in midstream in my past—the cause of great but secretive shame, if one can be secretly shamed. The fact that I persisted with the first and second editions of the encyclopedia to their very end—and I emphasize "very end"—somewhat absolved me in my mind. And when, in the introduction to the second edition, Terence Riley, the head of MoMA's design and architecture department at the time, called me the Diderot of design, he closed the door on my quest.

Being awarded the Besterman/McColvin Gold Medal for best reference book was momentarily thrilling, but the excitement soon faded. And, by the way, I have lost the medal—cannot find it anywhere. Besides, what would I do with it? Certainly not wear it or place it on display.

Some people at a prominent enterprise recently hired me for a project because they had been told that I am the ultimate authority on design. Can this be true? Of course not.

Remember my mentioning that the world's population is about eight billion? If there are those out there who believe that they are the ultimate or the best at anything—or better than anyone else—please contact me directly, and I will refer you to a psychiatrist like the one to whom my mother never took me.

"I WAS SO STUPID THAT, FOR ONE OF THE BROCHURES, I WROTE 'ASTROLOGY' INSTEAD OF 'ASTRONOMY'"

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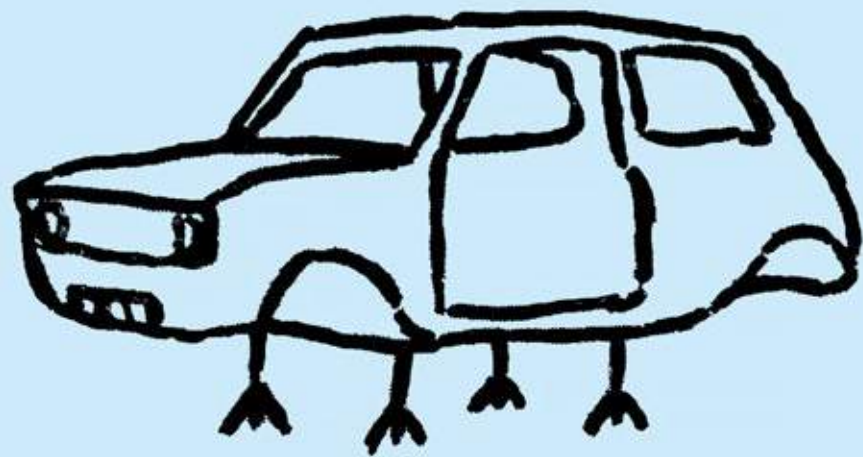
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OOO! THE RETURN TO OBJECTS

Has art exhausted the radical, disruptive potential of immateriality? *Ben Eastham* looks at contemporary phenomena ranging from Object-Oriented Ontology (ooo) to the increasingly blurred line between URL and IRL to discover why “things” are back in vogue in the art world. *Illustrations by Kind Studio.*



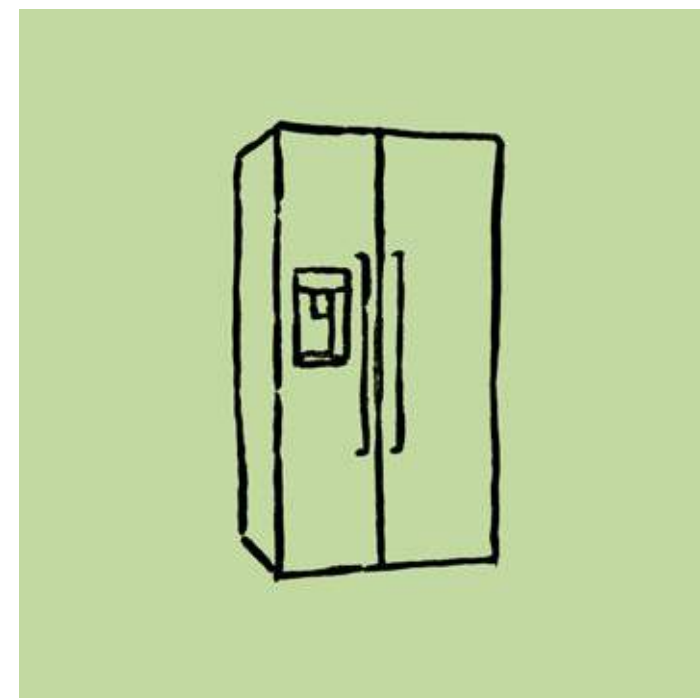
The last British Art Show, the quinquennial touring exhibition designed to showcase new themes in contemporary art, explored “new thinking around materiality”. The “renewed emphasis on objects,” its curatorial statement proposed, “correlates with a turn towards physicality taken by a significant number of artists,

whether they work with their hands, archives, people or the Internet.” At the same time that Edinburgh hosted the British Art Show, the director’s programme for Glasgow International—a contemporary art biennial with a reputation for launching new talent—heralded a renewed focus on “ideas of production,

manufacture, material culture, design, history and labour”. Things, it seems, are back in vogue. Just when the wider public is becoming accustomed to the notion that contemporary art (and its institutions) should encompass ephemeral disciplines—performance, dance, theatre, music—and immaterial

or endlessly reproducible media—videos, writing, internet art—the pendulum swings back towards the physical object. These two survey exhibitions provide just the latest examples of a new focus on craft-based techniques, industrial production and physical presence which also seems to contradict recent interest in the possibilities of the internet as a discrete space for the creation, exhibition and distribution of immaterial artworks (as opposed to simply an Amazon-style marketplace for the sale of material artworks). As Tate Modern debuts its new wing devoted largely to photography, film, video, performance, learning and “social spaces”, so younger artists and curators seem increasingly concerned with the manufacture of tangible *stuff*.

Whence does this new focus on objects spring? The first point to make is that this is not a new idea—Hal Foster was making a case for the “return of the real” as long ago as 1996, and the cyclical, or spiralling, progress of art history means that materiality and place come intermittently back into fashion—but the circumstances in which we live are substantially changed, as are artists’ responses to them. The second issue to address, as so often when considering broader trends in the practice of contemporary art (and if only to refute it), is the commercial imperative. It has long been the case that the wider shift away from the unique physical objects (paintings, sculptures, etc.) that once constituted the art market’s trading goods towards more varied and less easily commoditized forms (performance, video, etc.) has been counterweighted by the ability of dealers to find new and more inventive ways of selling them. As the charred remains of the Fender Stratocaster that Jimi Hendrix set alight at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967 was purchased in 2012 for £237,000, so the *Four Blackboards* (1972) on which Joseph Beuys outlined his utopian propositions for art during a celebrated lecture are now in the holdings of the Tate (and would cost a fortune if they ever came to market). These are not the works in themselves



but enduring material instruments and witnesses of them. In recent years, such innovations as the now-ubiquitous flat-screen monitor and the digital print have transformed new-media works into editioned, saleable objects, and their practitioners (such as Cory Arcangel) into conventionally successful artists in the marketplace. These changes have extended, as galleries look to capitalize any artistic medium that has thus far escaped the marketplace, to more established media such as experimental film-making. Highly respected, radical film-makers such as George Barber have spent the vast majority of their careers exhibiting at festivals and as part of screening programmes; now, they are being welcomed into the gallery, where their work is shown as part of a physical installation and sold in editions.

The point is that the object has remained an integral part of the art market, if not its practice, over several decades in which the avant-garde has, in large part, disdained the production of physical things. This isn’t to say that artists don’t require collectors—as Jake Chapman memorably conceded about his relationship with Charles Saatchi in a *Time Out* interview from 2003: “I’m happy to acknowledge the prostitutional relationship between his money and our

objects. Aesthetics can’t exist outside commerce”—but while dealers might welcome a return to the production of objects that are obviously identifiable as art and which might fit into a rich person’s living room, they don’t require it. The shift towards materiality is not driven by market economics, because galleries have other ways of commercializing art.

The artist no longer needs to produce objects to make money, only to authorize them. For all the tortuous attempts to challenge the relationship of culture to capital, it remains true that works of art always inhere in a thing that can be possessed, sold, exchanged. While artists such as Sol LeWitt and Martin Creed have sought to create works of art that have no physical basis in the material world, there is always something to which they are tied. LeWitt’s wall drawings are painted directly onto the wall and, when exhibited in a gallery, whitewashed over when the exhibition ends. Yet several of them exist in private collections, their uniqueness (and, by extension, value) propped up by a paper contract. Creed’s *Work No. 227: The Lights Going On and Off* consists of nothing more than two alternating intervals of light and dark. Yet deep in the Tate’s collection exists a piece of paper on which these instructions are written, for which the museum

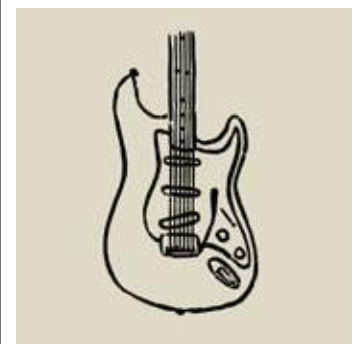
paid an undisclosed amount in 2013 (the work was valued at around £110,000). The most extreme example of this tendency is choreographer Tino Sehgal’s reluctance even to sign a contract to confirm the purchase of a work, or to commit its details to paper. Instead, he himself relates the key principles of his performances to his collectors, in person (they are not allowed to record the conversation). One catalyst for the new focus on objects might be the acknowledgement that art has, for the moment, exhausted the radical, disruptive potential of immateriality.

Indeed, even a verbal exchange is still a *thing* that carries meaning (irrespective of whether it is committed to paper) and thus constitutes an object, according to Graham Harman, one of the leading proponents of the art world’s latest half-understood philosophical infatuation. This is Object-Oriented Ontology (ooo), a branch of Speculative Realism, which is either a catalyst for the return of the art object or its post facto justification by curators keen to sound engaged (or, more fairly, a bit of both). Without wishing to dwell on the technical details of this new movement in contemporary thought (not least for fear of betraying my own fingernail grasp on such things as Deleuzo-Schellingian vitalism), we might sum up its key conviction as being that there is an object world that exists beyond human thought and outside our limited perspective that deserves consideration. We as a species have been guilty, its varied practitioners insist, of reducing everything (including artistic representation) to our own perspective on it. This new reaction against anthropocentrism might explain recent attempts to foreground animals and objects in art, to acknowledge and represent subjectivities that are not human. It’s about time, perhaps, that we acknowledged that we are not the only inhabitants of a world we have taken such strides to destroy.

Among the first notable artistic expressions of this radical new trend in continental philosophy was a singing fridge with a Scouse accent. This 2010

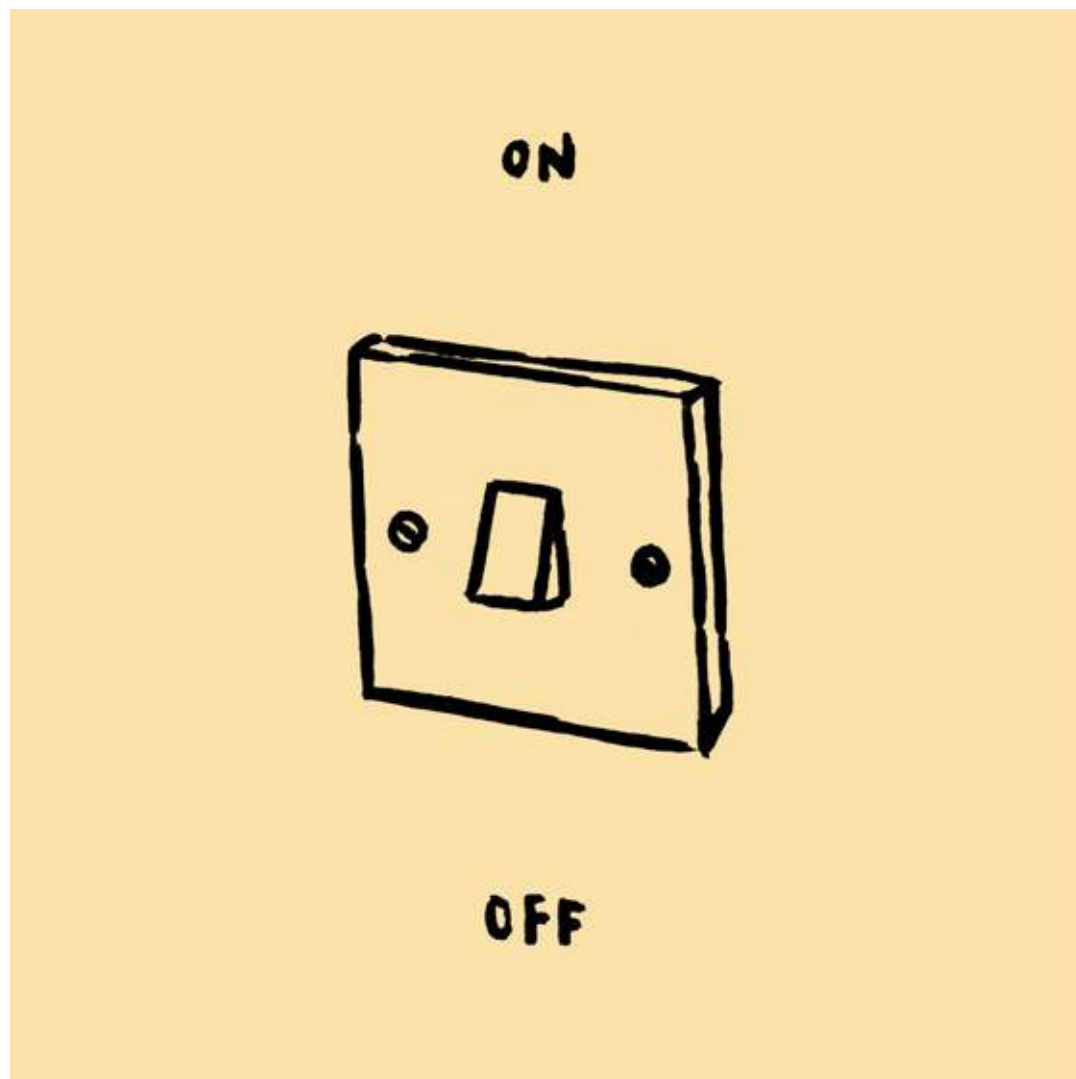
work by Mark Leckey, entitled *GreenScreenRefrigeratorAction*, is perhaps best described as a creative misreading of Speculative Realism, which isn’t necessarily to criticize it (the act of translation from idea to work of art always involves a degree of contextual adjustment, even if this pushes it a bit). Indeed, Leckey’s imaginative infidelity to the idea inoculates his work against the deadly worthiness that so often afflicts works of art determined to merely to replicate or substantiate vogue theories. Speculative Realism was also a marked influence upon the sprawling Documenta 13, curated in 2012 by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (for whom almost everything under the sun, it’s fair to point out, qualifies as a curatorial concern), since when there has been a marked growth in exhibitions considering objects as not only materials for the realization of art but the subjects of it.

As Speculative Realism has become a watchword in contemporary art, the subject of numerous conferences and much critical speculation, it has been joined in the theoretical ranks by another idea pushing for a reconsideration of the relationship between the material and immaterial worlds. The New Aesthetic is a term coined by the artist and theorist James Bridle to describe the increasingly familiar irruption of the internet into the “real” landscape (excuse the scare



quotes). According to this concept, the return to the object isn’t a turn away from the digital realm, but simply a recognition that the two can no longer be disentangled. The internet is no longer (if it ever was) a separate dimension into which we can escape, but a central component of the world in which we live, embedded into IRL.

The anecdotal evidence for this



is, of course, overwhelming. It's barely possible to have a drink with anyone of my generation without coming to talk about the tyranny of the internet-enabled mobile phone and the all-consuming anxiety precipitated by uninterrupted access to our professional email accounts. Put in its simplest terms, we can say that the internet, and the information it communicates, long ago came to exert significant influence over the circumstances in which we live, both individually and socially. The idea of living a "second life" online now seems laughable: we all do, and it is inseparable from our first one. As Hito Steyerl considered in her influential essay "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?", "never before have more people been dependent on, embedded into, surveilled by, and exploited by the web... it is all over!... it has started moving offline."

Steyerl cautions against

assuming that the migration of the internet into the real world must take the form of tangible objects—data, sounds and images, she says, "incarnate as riots or products, as lens flares, high rises, or pixellated tanks"—but the idea is an illuminating one when we come to consider the recent vogue for the physical instantiation of digital concepts, networks or concerns. The work of Trevor Paglen, for instance, seeks to alert us to the fact that the ever-increasing reach of the internet has repercussions beyond our online existences. The internet is not invisible, though the companies profiting from it will go to extraordinary lengths to maintain the illusion that it is so. To illustrate the point, John Gerrard hired a helicopter to document a Google server farm in Oklahoma—a massive agglomeration of diesel generators and cooling plants, and one of the most important

physical sites of the internet—to which he had been denied access. His digitally rendered survey of the complex, entitled *Farm (Pryor Creek, Oklahoma)* (2015), makes visible what is kept from us: the physical infrastructure, with its associated political and environmental implications, that supports our digital existences and that is prudently hidden from us to perpetuate the fantasy that the online realm is meaningfully distinct from the bodily world. Thus the preoccupation with objects, with the material instantiation of ideas and ideologies, extends even (perhaps especially) to artists considering how the internet is woven into our lives.

We can, then, tentatively identify several broader reasons for this renewed infatuation with objects. We might note how it correlates with an increased awareness of how our post-Enlightenment separation from

the physical world—industrialized humanity's steadfast conviction that it could transcend the natural order—has precipitated global environmental catastrophe. Perhaps, too, this new fixation with materials is one repercussion of the global financial crisis, caused by the collapse of a system of exchange which had been abstracted to the point of almost total independence from tangible goods and labour (note how gold, the most familiar and quantifiable of material commodities, enjoyed a spectacular rise in value in the wake of the crash, as investors sought a safe haven in the real world). The tendency might be something like a means of realigning art (and artistic value) with labour in an age where the two seem to have become unlinked, with woeful consequences for the distribution of wealth.

There is a danger that we forsake real engagement with these issues by retreating into nostalgia. The weaker works to exhibit the tendency lay their emphasis on loss, lamenting an imaginary past marked by industrial production, local (as opposed to digital) community, and defunct models of social organization. It's perhaps unfair to single it out, but Stuart Whipps's *The Kipper and the Corpse*—a reconstructed 1979 Mini originally from the factory at Longbridge, which was the subject of a famous industrial dispute—is typical of this inclination, drawing attention to the social injustices of thirty years ago while seeming to pine for a lost age. But instead of retreating into the familiar world of objects, the most important works being made today seek to reconcile the digital and physical spheres, illustrating how the two interact and how it is possible to live, work, effect political change, and create culture in a new era.



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THEY COME FROM ANOTHER WORLD!

“I felt that *Wonder Woman* set up a paradigm that was impossible for me to contend with. They put forth a kind of woman that I could never be.”
Dara Birnbaum’s seminal video work *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* is included in an extensive exploration of science fiction at the suitably retro-futuristic Barbican Centre in London this summer. *Emily Steer* spoke with the US artist and *Into the Unknown* curator *Patrick Gyger*.

DARA BIRNBAUM

What first interested you in working with *Wonder Woman* as a subject for *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*?

I started working with video in 1975 and what I saw by the year 1977 was just how important television was as our dominant language in America. Most people were watching, according to the Nielsen ratings, for seven hours and twenty minutes a day. I was trying to look at the shows that were predominantly in primetime that had the widest audience. There were a number of shows that I call “technology transformation”—I only did *Wonder Woman* but there were other shows at that time like *The Six Million Dollar Man*, *The Bionic Woman*, *The Incredible Hulk*. I felt that *Wonder Woman* set up a paradigm that was impossible for me to contend with. Commercial television had put forth a programme of the kind of woman that I could never be. I was trying to look for a way to grab hold of that imagery and alter it, play with it, appropriate it and fight back against the medium that was delivering that kind of image to us.

It was amazing to me when I first got her image. I only had a black-and-white TV so I didn't realize how powerful that image was in full colour. You have this wasp-waisted woman who's dressed in red, white and blue with stars coming out from her breasts. The character came from popular comics. Its history is way before its history on television and it was just the form of representation that angered me. I thought: “Why are you showing me this image?”—that was very popular. In the year I did it, *Wonder Woman* swimsuits were the hottest items for young girls. So I felt that was a lynchpin in a certain way.

Now we have *Game of Thrones*, *Black Widow* in the *Marvel* movies... strong female characters within comic franchises and fantasy still have a very sexualized kind of power. Has the conversation moved on since the Seventies?

Well, there's a resurgence of *Wonder Woman* now, certainly here [in the US], and I'm quite amazed by that. It's a very conservative political time right now here. I think the image is an idealized Fifties image. Either you're a banal, bland secretary or you're a *Wonder Woman*, but there's no way to live in-between. Right now in the US we're undergoing a strong attack on women's rights and positioning and it's strange to have a character like *Wonder Woman* re-emerge in a really strong way here with very large books coming out on her, as well as a popular feature film.



“EITHER YOU’RE A BANAL, BLAND SECRETARY OR YOU’RE A WONDER WOMAN, BUT THERE’S NO WAY TO LIVE IN-BETWEEN”



Above: Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, ©1978/9, still from the video tape
Opposite: Portrait of Dara Birnbaum, NYC, by Eleni Mylonas
Previous pages: *Star Wars, Episode IV: A New Hope* (US, 1977), film still

You explore other aspects of science fiction, aside from the use of the female character, such as the visual and aural assault of the repeated explosions and effects. Do you have a particular engagement with the genre or did it simply provide a good basis for exploring your wider interests?

I think actually this came from growing up with Pop Art culture and minimalism and conceptualism. I was looking for a way to what I call “arrest the moment”, especially the moment of transformation. I grew up with a group of artists, here in NYC, who were later labelled the Pictures Generation. Many of these mainly “downtown” artists like Robert Longo, Jack Goldstein, and Cindy Sherman reached into popular culture but they put it into a more static platform, like transferring such images into painting or photography. My goal was to use the medium on itself and the way to get that vocabulary to stand

out, to be able to see it for what it was and reveal its hidden agendas, was to do repeat loop editing.

What was it about the moment of transformation, which becomes almost hypnotic in its repetition within your work, that you wanted to explore?

At that time, the special effect was one burst of light that she appears in as a transformed woman. I felt that no one can transform, no real woman can transform, in one burst of light, so I thoroughly rejected that. My thought was to have her caught almost like a little doll, in a jewellery box spinning constantly, who once she's transformed in the role can't get out of it or constantly repeats that transformation from real to wonder. I think that from this use of constant spinning you start to see beyond the immediate subjectification that they gave her and you see, instead of an empowered woman, a woman caught in this

role of representation that denies her any way to live in-between.

You've spoken about first coming to video work while in Florence.

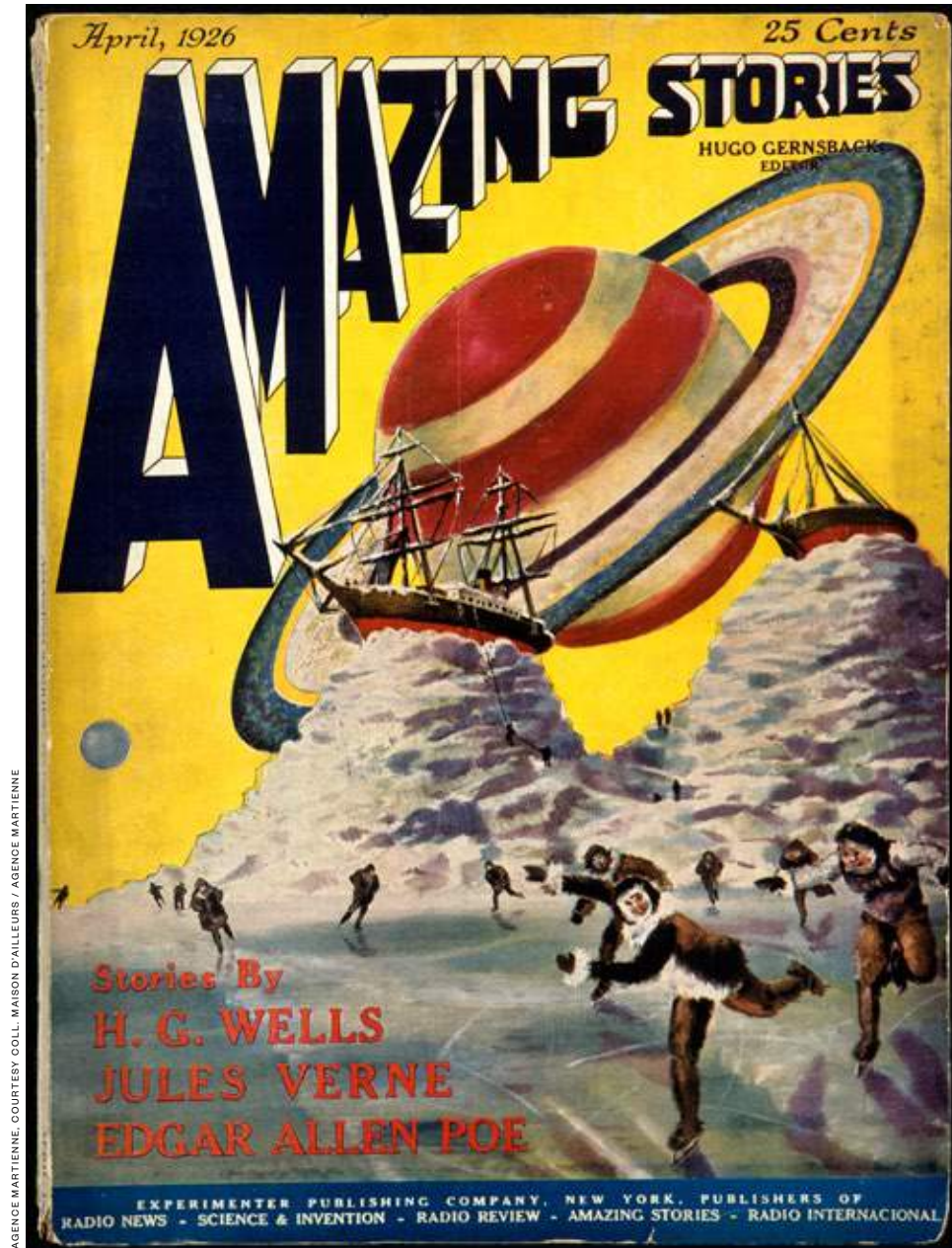
I was in Florence partly to get away from America, to be honest, and I, by accident or by fate, ran into this gallery, Centro Diffusione Grafica, run by a wonderful woman, Maria Gloria Bicocchi, and she was encouraging artists who were in Italy, or who came over from other countries and were dealing mainly with flat work, to experiment in video. I fell in love with this exploration. It was one of the first moving-image mediums that allowed us complete, almost instantaneous feedback and a lot of the early work was about that, including my own. I think my work was heavily influenced by artists such as Vito Acconci or Bruce Nauman. That work was very different from *Wonder Woman*. Also so many writers, theorists, and artists were interested in film language but no one was covering television language.

You took on a medium that had been used widely by male artists, to explore feminist issues.

I think one reason I left Florence is I realized the real exploration of the medium and the control of it, those who were editing or shooting, mostly were men. I didn't see a place for me and I think that was especially true of Italy. Coming back to the States, you could see more women artist role models and it hit me: This is something I can explore. It was still male-dominated, as art still is, but there were exceptions that stood out such as Joan Jonas, Mary Lucier, and Beryl Korot. When I started, to the point now around forty years later, I do see a difference. I see that prominent institutions like MoMA or the Tate are giving large exhibitions to women and this art is being given a stronger profile and more advocacy.

The style of appropriating material in video works, of chopping, reworking and doing so to highlight subtexts and ironies, forms a huge part of online visual culture now. Did you expect video and video appropriation to form such a significant part of twenty-first-century cultural commentary?

I was not conscious of foreseeing a future of that, I just knew it was a language that needed to be used and analysed. When I did *Wonder Woman*, I was doing it on an open-reel system without a computer. Years later I was in a postproduction studio watching someone put together what could have been symbolically another kind of *Wonder Woman*, with computers and repeat edits—just press a button and it repeats thirty times—and that astonished me. I'm kind of amazed that these strategies went into popular culture, but it's nice to understand that you broke ground and were part of starting a movement. I work out of a heartfelt passion, of what I feel needs to be said in the culture, and it's much more that kind of intuitive approach—this needs to be said, this needs to come out—than it is a strategic or analytic approach.



AGENCE MARTIENNE, COURTESY COLL. MAIRON DAILLEURS / AGENCE MARTIENNE

“SCIENCE FICTION IS THE LITERATURE OF CHANGE, AND THE BIGGEST CHANGES ARE THOSE BROUGHT BY TECHNOLOGY”

PATRICK GYGER

Swiss curator Patrick Gyger’s approach to science fiction is broad, taking into account not only the academic and artistic responses to the genre, but also the fetishistic fan culture that surrounds it. For *Into the Unknown*, he considers the influence of works as wide-ranging as George Orwell’s 1984, Frances Bodomo’s film *Afronauts* and Pierre-Jean Giloux’s *Invisible Cities*.

You obviously have a great interest in science fiction.

I was raised on science fiction from an early age. I am really interested in science fiction but I am not a science-fiction fan. I sit between a strong interest in pop and geek culture, and more classical visual arts, high culture. When the Barbican Centre does a science-fiction show it either has to be an artist’s take on the field or what we wanted: an honest, straightforward take. That said, you can find a lot of diversity and different perspectives. We’re mixing films from Ethiopia with *Star Wars* memorabilia and Dara Birnbaum. That tension is going to be interesting for sure and I hope it is going to appeal to a generation that doesn’t have a problem with the mixing of things. People now can watch *Stranger Things* and then come to the Barbican to see a really obscure Taiwanese film and then go back home to watch *Game of Thrones*.

Despite this recent blurring, are you approaching the show chronologically or is it grouped much more thematically?

It’s a bit of a chronological approach but it’s more thematic. The idea of the show is a journey through science fiction. In the first part you take a boat or a train and go the furthest you can, take a balloon and go into the air, then you go into the sea and into the earth. So basically you map the world. In the second part, you continue this journey upwards, to the moon and space and there you meet all sorts of unfriendly aliens. There’s the idea of colonization. In the late Sixties we did go to the moon, and then the new wave of science fiction took us back to our own environment to transform it. How can you control the space you live in? When you can’t control it, you destroy it and then rebuild it. In the last part of the show you come right back in: inside yourself, final frontiers, the limits of the mind, inside the body, transformation of dreams, playing with the space-time continuum.

In the main show we have nine hundred items: books, comics, film clips, props, globes from the nineteenth century, magic lanterns...



Above: Trevor Paglen, *Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite (Design 4; Build 4)*, 2013, installation view
Opposite: *Amazing Stories* (April 1926) #1, magazine cover

COURTESY OF TREVOR PAGLEN STUDIO

So precious items, pop items and also artists’ projects: Dara Birnbaum, Pierre-Jean Giloux, Larissa Sansour, Isaac Julien, Conrad Shawcross. In the exhibition there are also discursive approaches and the politics of the genre. Maybe Dara’s piece is the most discursive and the most ironic. But I didn’t want to use contemporary artists who just simply have an ironic take. Isaac Julien’s piece, for example, is clearly inspired by Octavia Butler who is a very important Afro-American science-fiction writer from the twentieth century. It’s very poetic.

Has science fiction been an overly Western genre historically, or is it just that the Hollywood films have had so much attention?

We have tried in the exhibition to be as diverse as possible. I wouldn’t say it’s a purely Western genre as obviously the Soviets were very big on science fiction. Science fiction has been very big in Japan since the war because they have adopted a lot of American ways. It’s also in the Arab world. But for sure there is a very strong white male Anglo-Saxon tradition because it’s a genre of exploration and colonization. H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* is about Martians,

but it’s also about something else. It’s about the mirror image of colonization. Science fiction is the literature of change, and the biggest changes are those brought by technology.

Have you noticed particular trends in the way that contemporary artists respond to science fiction?

I think there has been a lot of contemporary art that has been discursive, that has taken science fiction and used it and transformed it for moral, societal or political discourse. It’s rarer, like Larissa Sansour’s work, to have a take which is serious, which is non-derivative. It’s her own vision and an original one. That’s probably new. I’m quite excited by the commissions. We have Trevor Paglen’s new *Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite* which is a very poetic idea for a satellite that you could fit into a very tiny box and launch into space and it would deploy and not be seen with the naked eye when it re-enters the earth’s atmosphere. That will be above the well in the foyer like a big shiny beast. We have new Conrad Shawcross work which will include a series of monoliths with cut-out figures and behind there will be a reprogrammed industrial robot with light and sound which will create this shadow

play and react probably to the people around. I think it will be quite impressive and freaky. The Barbican itself is obviously perfect for the utopian/dystopian environment.

I was thinking that as I walked through it. It reminds me of some of the old science-fiction films now, a semi-futuristic vision that now looks a little retro.

It’s like the film *High-Rise*, which plays on J.G. Ballard’s novel and which is very close to the Barbican’s environment. It’s the perfect space for a science-fiction show.

Are there any pieces included that are particularly exciting for you?

I do actually have a favourite piece. We end the show with a cabinet of books that were owned by Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine writer. Because Borges is such an important figure in linking fiction to reality, all those really interesting ideas are there. The idea that fiction creates worlds—that’s the main idea of the show.

“Into the Unknown” runs from 3 June until 1 September at the Barbican Centre, London.



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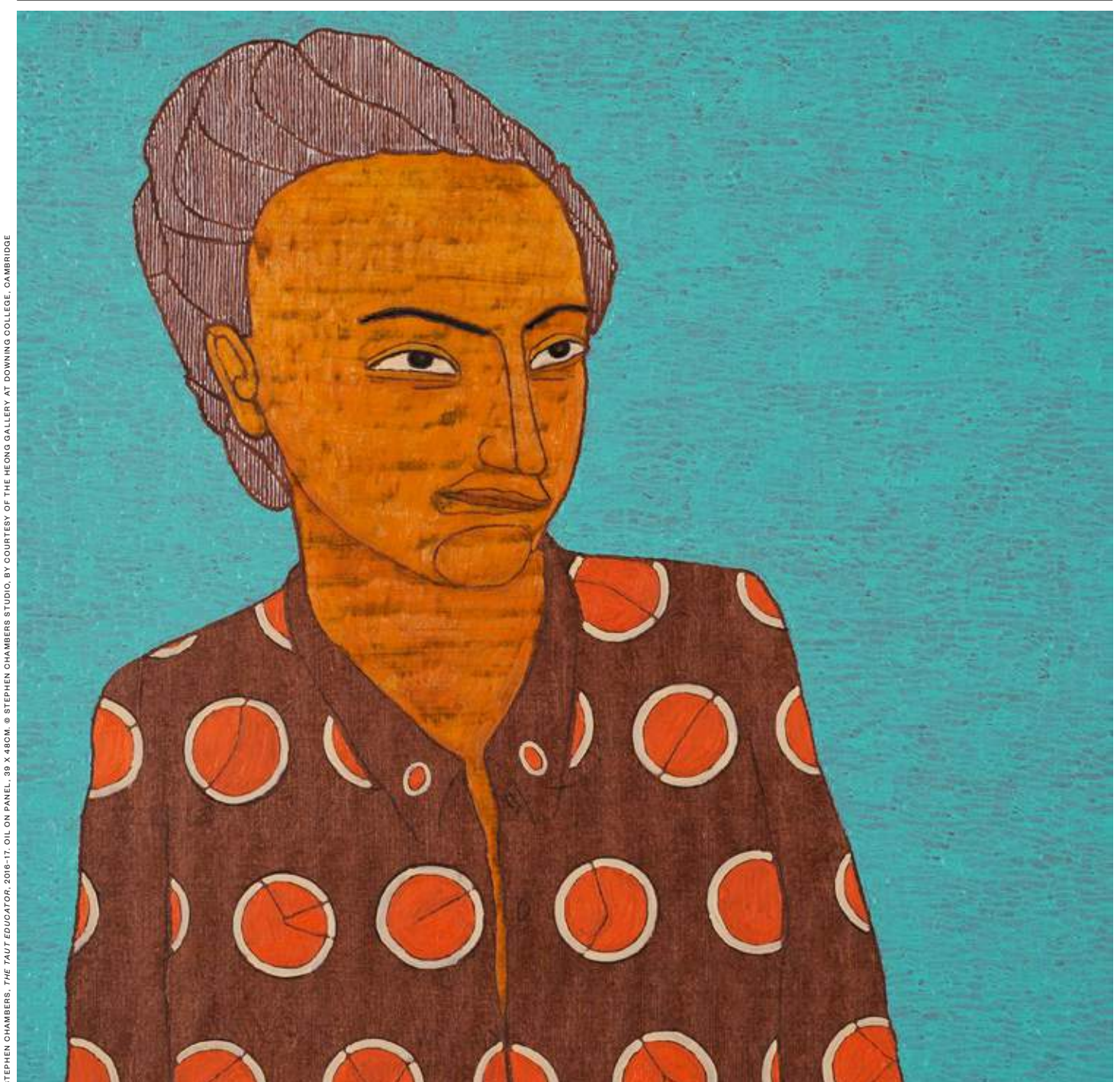
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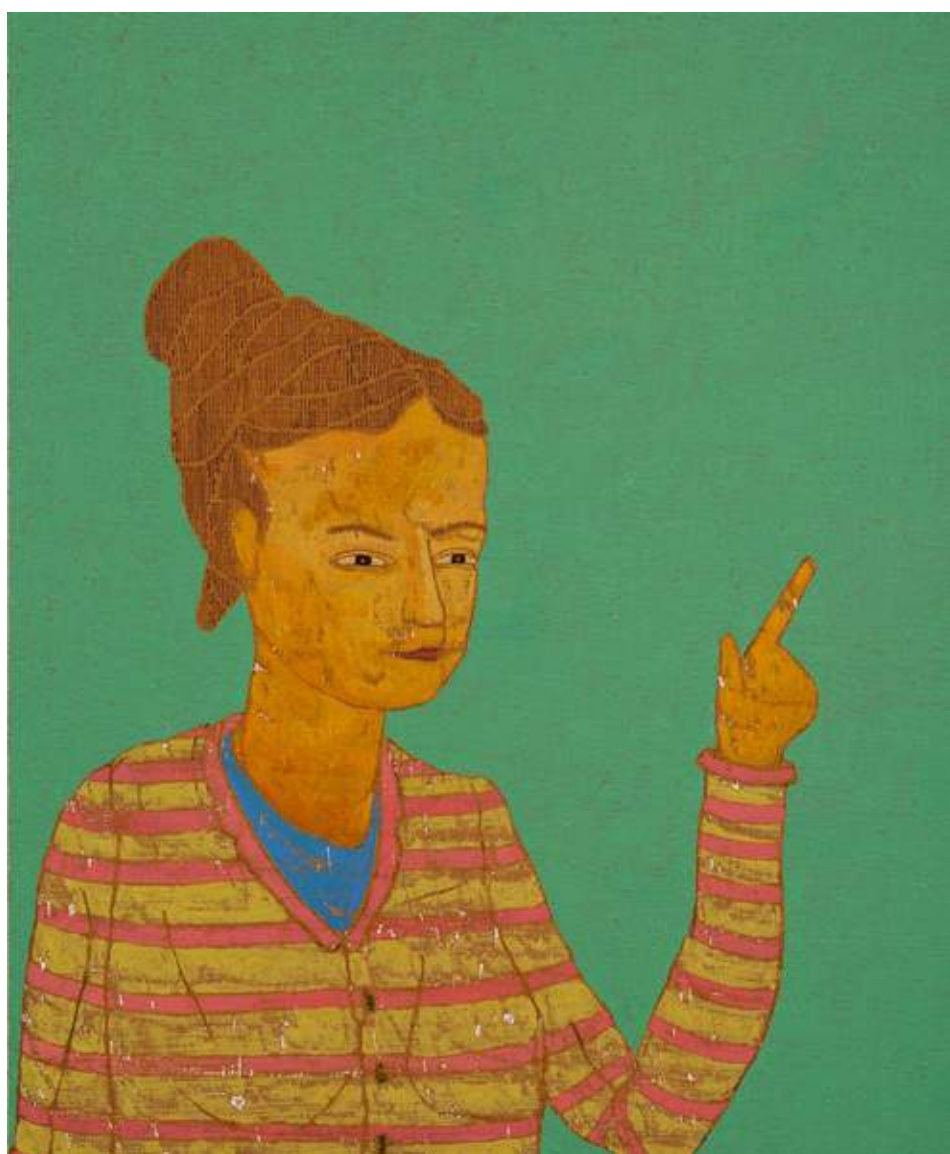
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STEPHEN CHAMBERS, THE TAU EDUCATOR, 2016-17, OIL ON PANEL, 39 X 48CM. © STEPHEN CHAMBERS STUDIO, BY COURTESY OF THE HEONG GALLERY AT DOWNING COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

ROCK ('N' ROLL) FANTASY

The human history of the uninhabited island of Redonda—named by Christopher Columbus in 1493—is short on facts, which perhaps explains why it's such a rich source of inspiration for artistic fantasies. *Sue Hubbard* talks to *Stephen Chambers*, creator of *The Court of Redonda*.



As I do battle with the delays on the District Line to arrive flustered at the Academicians' Room in the Royal Academy to meet Stephen Chambers and discuss his forthcoming exhibition, he is already comfortably ensconced. Snuggled into a big woolly jumper, he's working on his iPad, having beaten the rush-hour traffic by travelling into central London on his ubiquitous scooter. Although for many years Chambers has been a near neighbour, this is the first time we've sat down to have a serious discussion on art. He asks me what I'd like to drink. "I don't normally drink when I'm doing interviews," I tell him. "Well, it is cocktail time," he says. "I'm going to have a mojito." So I join him.

Elected an Academician in 2005, Chambers's trajectory to Burlington House and his show *The Court of Redonda*, curated by the Eagle Gallery's Emma Hill as a collateral event to this year's Venice Biennale, was far from certain. His mother was a book illustrator and his father a building surveyor, and Chambers was brought up in what he calls "the privileged bohemian west London of the sixties". He went to school with Tony Benn's son. Holland Park Comprehensive was much favoured by sixties intellectuals. "But I left with no exams. Just Art 'O' level, and not a very good grade at that," he tells me as our drinks arrive. "I was a posh fat boy at the local comp and just fell behind. When my parents split up I was sent to a grammar school in Hampshire but felt out of my depth academically. I did, though, learn German."

Was he brought up with art? "Well, there were reproductions of Bruegel, Degas and Dufy on the walls. The usual stuff." But it was a foundation course at Winchester that, eventually, led to an MA from the Chelsea School of Art and a clutch of scholarships and awards, including a Rome Scholarship, the Mark Rothko Memorial Trust Travelling Award, and, in 1998–99, the post of Cambridge Fellow at Kettle's Yard and Downing College. Throughout his career Chambers has paddled his own idiosyncratic canoe, eschewing fashion to remain a resolutely figurative and decorative artist, whose immediately recognizable works create esoteric myths and narratives.

So how, I ask, did he get the idea for *The Court of Redonda*? "Well," he says, "I decided to step outside the commercial gallery system. I'm not really a club person, despite the fact that we are sitting in the RA. I began to find making paintings for exhibitions less and less interesting. I wanted to explore bigger themes. My only regret is that I didn't do it years ago. I like to work in different places and in 2014 had a studio in Brooklyn. Just down the road there was a very interesting bookshop. I was on my own so hung out there two or three times a week and did a lot of reading. I discovered the Spanish novelist Javier Marías, whose best-known work in this country is *A Heart So White*." Marías also wrote a novel, *Todas las almas* (*All Souls*), which includes a portrayal of the poet John Gawsworth, the third king of Redonda.



Above: *Count Music*, 2016–17, oil on panel, 39 x 48cm

Opposite: *Lady of the Labyrinth*, 2016–17, oil on panel, 48 x 39cm

Redonda is, in fact, a tiny, uninhabited island in the eastern West Indies. "A round lump of rock," according to Chambers, "that's good for nothing." Discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1493, who claimed it for the Spanish Crown, it was named Santa María de la Redonda. In 1865, it came into the possession of a merchant trader, Matthew Dody Shiell, who claimed it as his own personal fiefdom and later crowned his fifteen-year-old son, Matthew Phipps Shiell (1865–1947), as monarch. The latter subsequently moved to England, where he had some success as a science-fiction writer, popularizing the legend of his royalty to the level of an "alternative fact". Before his death in 1947, Shiell decided that the crown should not be hereditary but passed down through a literary line, and appointed the English poet John Gawsworth as his successor. He assumed the title of Juan I Gawsworth.

"Nobody else wanted the place," Chambers says. "It has no history of substance, no independent raison d'être." Permanently impecunious, John Gawsworth discovered that selling Redondan knighthoods in a variety of London pubs was a good little money-spinner. He bestowed honours on numerous literary friends to create an esoteric court of writers, poets and ne'er-do-wells.

Although the fate of the Redondan monarchy was contested after the death of Gawsworth, the "reigning" king, Jon Wynne-Tyson, abdicated and passed the crown to Marías in 1997; a title he held until 2012. These events were chronicled in his "false novel", *Dark Back of Time*, inspired by the reception of *Todas las almas*. Many claimed—falsely, according to Marías—that they were the source for characters in the book. "A pub in Southampton," Chambers says, "even tried to get round the smoking ban by declaring themselves

to be the Redondan Embassy in Britain, insisting that people could smoke on 'foreign soil'. They took their case to court but lost."

He became, he explains, intrigued by the idea of creating a court of Redonda. To date he has painted around a hundred portraits on wooden panels of 48 x 39 cm—"a convenient size to pack in a suitcase". Painted in oil on wood, they hark back to the archaic panel-painting techniques of the sixteenth century. "There is," he continues, "a degree of narrative within each painting. Some people have hands and hold hats or pens. Others are more truncated. I wanted them to be visually seductive but not too well-bred or elegant." The narratives are largely oblique. I suggest that they conjure up the alternative narratives and fantastical stories of writers such as Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges and Jeanette Winterson, that they don't quite feel modern.

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“I WANT THE WORK TO HAVE A NOT-QUITE-GOOD-ENOUGH QUALITY, OTHERWISE IT’S SIMPLY CRAFT”

“Well,” he replies, “I remember a conversation with Paula Rego, when she said that if you set something now it’s out of date tomorrow. I took that on board. These paintings exist in some recent fantasy past.”

He envisages them as a single work, an invitation to the viewer to speculate not only on the various relationships of those portrayed but a chance to create a silent communication between individual subject and viewer. Never didactic, Chambers wants them to act as catalysts for the fabrication of possible narratives. Executed in his hallmark style, they pay tribute, in their formal construction, to the flattened perspective of il Sassetta and the naturalistic expression of Masaccio, and reflect his many visits to Italy. Although he could, he says, have sold individual “portraits” many times over he has always refused. He’s chosen, he says, to show them behind glass in order to give them a certain gravitas. He enjoys that the glazed surfaces induce a slight reflection of the viewer so he or she becomes a part of the work. Roughly lifesize, his cast of characters invite immediate eyeball-to-eyeball communion between viewer and viewed.

He starts by using charcoal on a coloured ground when the images are, to use his words, “quite raw”. He’s keen that they should not be too generic. “I’m not a portrait painter but I want them to have their own character,” he says. “The job of artists is to be curious and take risks, to make decisions. I don’t want the images to look too finished or contrived. I just do the best I can, with all the inherent awkwardness that entails. I want the work to have a not-quite-good-enough quality, otherwise it’s simply craft. Virtuoso painting is boring.”

The installation in Venice will be arranged in the shape of the island on the walls of the piano nobile of a seventeenth-century palazzo, Ca’ Dandolo, in order to reflect the kingdom of Redonda. The “court” is counterpointed with three large canvases entitled *The State of the Nation*, which, with their tumbling rider, hint at the precarious state of contemporary politics. “The first painting,” he explains, “is about Brexit, the second takes place during the campaign and the third reflects the result.”

I suggest that Venice and its associations with travel and crossroads, with literature and art, is an interesting environment for this exhibition. He agrees. “The umbrella theme is migration and Venice is the perfect location. A port, a hub, the starting point for adventures. These works are the ignition point of unresolved narratives, a web of fact and fiction, a meeting of East and West.” Drawing on a range of narrative influences Chambers has created an extraordinary parallel universe filled with his imaginary courtiers—a world where past and present intersect; where myths and fiction hold up a mirror to a labyrinth of infinite creative possibilities.

“The Court of Redonda” continues at Ca’ Dandolo, Venice, until November.



Patrick Van Caeckenbergh, "Et puis pourquoi sommes-nous faites en viande?" (And Why Are We Made of Meat?), 1993–2017
Mixed media, 26.7 x 38.0 x 16.5cm



David Mach, *Adding Fuel to the Fire*, Metronom Gallery, Barcelona, 1987



Monique Frydman, *L'Ombre du rouge VII*, 1990
Pastel, pigments and binding agent on linen canvas, 154 x 162cm
Collection Mr and Mrs Eric Freymond



Yinka Shonibare, *Un ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball)*, 2004
High-definition digital video, 32-min loop

PATRICK VAN CAECKENBERGH: LES LOQUES DE CHAGRIN

19 May — 1 July
Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

This will be the tenth solo exhibition at the gallery for Belgian artist Patrick Van Caeckenbergh. *Les Loques de Chagrin* presents new sculptural installations which focus on themes of evolution, the human body and cosmogonies. His work often takes its cue from stories and myths, and he is a keen student of the histories and tales of other cultures. His sculptures, though often taking inspiration from fantastical elements, are keenly researched and critically rigorous and are the result of thorough planning processes, building preparatory models and maquettes.

Bio: Patrick Van Caeckenbergh was born in 1960 in Belgium. He has been represented by Zeno X Gallery since 1987 and has also had notable solo exhibitions at Bonnefantenmuseum,

Maastricht, in the Netherlands; Museum M, Leuven, in Belgium; and in France at Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nîmes; La Maison Rouge, Paris; and FRAC PACA, Marseille. He currently lives and works in Sint-Kornelis-Horebeke, having moved to the small town from Ghent in 1997. In October of this year he will have a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent.

Something else you should know: Van Caeckenbergh is known for living a solitary life ("hermit-like", as has previously been claimed). While he acknowledges his life is less connected with the outside world than that of others, he does organize an annual procession through his current home town.

zeno-x.com

DAVID MACH: INCOMING

Until 7 July
Griffin Gallery, London

David Mach's colossal and imposing sculptural installations focus predominantly on themes of mass-production. This exhibition will be his first solo show for seven years, and will feature an enormous multimedia sculpture. This will consist of thirty tonnes of newspaper, cascading down and exploding through the walls of the Griffin Gallery. The mass of variegated newspaper will resemble waves, and envelop objects such as cars, furniture and aeroplanes, creating a majestic collision of man-made and organic materials. The format of the exhibition will be largely improvised, and the three-week installation period will be open to public observation and broadcast live.

Bio: David Mach was born in 1956 in Fife, Scotland, but lives and has his studio in London.

His first solo exhibition was held at the Lisson Gallery, London, in 1982. His work has often been exhibited in public spaces where he assembles and recontextualizes mass-produced objects to form large-scale installations. One of his best-known creations, *Polaris*, was exhibited outside the Southbank Centre, London, in 1983 and comprised around six thousand car tyres forming a life-size replica of a Polaris submarine. He was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1988 and in 2000 was appointed Professor of Sculpture at the Royal Academy Schools, London.

griffingallery.co.uk

MONIQUE FRYDMAN

7 June — 12 Aug
Parasol unit, London

Monique Frydman's abstract paintings are works of dazzling luminosity. In the 1980s she began to use intensely rich colours, especially deep dark reds and blues, creating work that subtly evokes artists such as Claude Monet, Pierre Bonnard and Henri Matisse. Shown for the first time in a public institution in the UK, this exhibition surveys over thirty years of the French artist's career. *L'Absinthe* (1989) is a monumental triptych dominated by luminous hues of green and yellow; the light-drenched green is the colour of absinthe—the alcoholic drink much favoured in Parisian bohemian circles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—and calls to mind Monet's *Water Lilies* series. In 2009–10, Frydman completed a series of paintings entitled *Des saisons avec*

Bonnard that are abstract but mysteriously convey a compelling human presence, deploying overlapping planes of colour that not only evoke the seasons but also the planes of colour evident in Bonnard's works.

Bio: Monique Frydman was born in Nages, France, in 1943. She moved to Paris in the early 1960s after attending the École des Beaux-Arts de Toulouse. Her works have been shown in several gallery and museum exhibitions, including the Musée du Louvre, Paris; the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan; and the Verrière Fondation Hermès, Brussels. Her works are held in major collections including the Centre Pompidou, Paris, and the Fondation Cartier, Paris.

parasol-unit.org

MARCHING TO THE BEAT

14 July — 26 Aug
Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

Marching to the Beat is a group show that brings together the work of twenty-five different artists and focuses on the "energy and joy" of face-to-face engagement in an ever more digital and at times lonesome world. The body is a point of focus for many of the artists included in the show who look at different activities such as communal dancing, choreography and social groupings of people via a range of mediums which include painting, photography, sculpture, performance and video. The show is intended to make a strong mark and offers a comment on our times, claiming to be "a positive affirmation of the generosity of the human spirit and an antidote to the selfish, divisive, reactionary tendencies of factions in our global world".

Artists included: Kutluğ Ataman,

Charles Atlas, Andrea Bowers, Tammy Rae Carland, Chelsea Culprit, Rineke Dijkstra, Nicole Eisenman, Brendan Fernandes, Aaron Garber-Maikovska, Juliana Huxtable, Karen Kilimnik, Becky Kolsrud, David Korty, Paul Lee, Li Ming, Kelly Nipper, Catherine Opie, Silke Otto-Knapp, Puppies Puppies, Yinka Shonibare, Malick Sidibe, Wolfgang Tillmans, Francis Upritchard, Grace Weaver and Carrie Mae Weems.

Something else you should know: The gallery has commissioned numerous mixtapes in line with the show which are available for digital download and feature the work of Kutluğ Ataman, Tammy Rae Carland and Juliana Huxtable.

jessicasilvermangallery.com



Chris Ofili, *Poolside Magic II* (detail), 2013
Charcoal, watercolour and pastel on paper, 39.5 x 26cm

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VICTORIA MIRO, LONDON. © CHRIS OFILI



Tom Phillips, *Alas*, 1998
Plaster, 15 x 13 x 20cm

© TOM PHILLIPS, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FLOWERS GALLERY, LONDON AND NEW YORK



Minjung Kim, *Red Mountain*, 2016
Watercolour on mulberry Hanji paper, 70 x 144cm



Joel Morrison, *Yogurtland Gashuffer (Reagan)*, 2017
Stainless steel, 83.8 x 50.8 x 55.9cm

COURTESY JOEL MORRISON, GAGOSIAN GALLERY AND REFLEX AMSTERDAM

**CHRIS OFILI:
POOLSIDE MAGIC**

Until 1 July
Victoria Miro, Venice

There's plenty to see in Venice just at the moment but one of the highlights outside the Biennale programme is Chris Ofili's *Poolside Magic*, a suite of pastel, charcoal and watercolour works on paper which are being shown together for the first time. What's more, the show inaugurates Victoria Miro's new Venetian space, housed in the former Galleria il Capricorno in the San Marco district of the city. This is not Ofili's first time in Venice, of course—he represented Britain at the 50th Biennale in 2003, and at the 2015 Biennale a suite of his paintings were included in *All the World's Futures*, curated by Okwui Enwezor. *Poolside Magic* riffs on themes of sexuality, mutability, magic and the occult, and draws on the vibrant landscape and culture of Trinidad, where Ofili now lives and works. Ofili also has a show at the National Gallery in

London, *Weaving Magic* (until 28 August).
Bio: Chris Ofili was born in Manchester in 1968. Inclusion in the travelling exhibition *Sensation* (first presented in 1997) helped establish him as one of the leading lights of the generation of Young British Artists. One of Ofili's signature motifs is the incorporation of elephant dung into his paintings, a point of extensive discussion when he won the Turner Prize in 1998. Earlier this year, Ofili was appointed as Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for his services to art.
Quote: "The studio is a laboratory, not a factory. An exhibition is the result of your experiments, but the process is never-ending. So an exhibition is not a conclusion."

victoria-miro.com

**TOM PHILLIPS:
CONNECTED WORKS**

26 May — 1 July
Flowers Gallery, London

This retrospective exhibition at Flowers's Kingsland Road site, which coincides with the artist's eightieth birthday, gathers together a selection of works by Tom Phillips produced across five decades with particular focus on works in three dimensions, tracing the themes, systems and processes that have often corresponded and converged within the artist's amazingly varied durational projects.
Bio: Born in London in 1937, Tom Phillips studied English Literature and Anglo-Saxon in Oxford as well as taking drawing and sculpture classes at the Ruskin School and Camberwell College. Painter, sculptor, opera composer, librettist, set designer and now a judge of the Man Booker Prize 2017, Phillips is also the maker of site-specific mosaics and tapestries which can be seen from Peckham to Westminster Abbey. His portrait subjects have included Samuel

Beckett and the Monty Python team. He curated the 1995 exhibition *Africa: the Art of a Continent* for the Royal Academy and became the RA's Chairman of Exhibitions. His lifelong book project *A Humument*—based on W.H. Mallock's 1892 novel *A Human Document*—is currently being celebrated in a fiftieth-anniversary edition.
Something else you should know: In September the South London Gallery will be hosting the world premiere performance and an audio-visual installation of his opera *Irma*, drawn from his treated Victorian novel artwork *A Humument*.
Quote: "It would be really nice if someone said 'I just read *A Human Document* and it's the most brilliant novel ever, and it's absolutely disgraceful that you've mucked around with it.'"

flowersgallery.com

**MINJUNG KIM:
ONENESS**

Until 30 July
Fondation d'Entreprise Hermès, Singapore

Oeness is the foundation's first exhibition of contemporary ink paintings—in this case, of mountainscapes. The traditional techniques that weave through Minjung Kim's work are intended by the foundation to offer a release from the modern, digital world; the show falls under the foundation's theme for 2017 of reflection. The title refers to the oneness of the self with nature and our surroundings as well as the spiritual unity offered by the Zen state.
Bio: Minjung Kim was born in 1962 in Gwangju in the Republic of Korea. She currently lives and works between France and the United States. In her childhood years she studied multiple painting techniques from specialists, including learning watercolour painting from Kang Yeongyun. She specialized in oriental calligraphy in her teens and twenties.

Her work took on a Western influence later in Milan, where she studied the work of Paul Klee and Franz Kline. Her work is held in public collections around the world, including the British Museum in London, the Musée des Arts Asiatiques in France and Cornell University's Johnson Museum of Art in the USA.
Quote: "When I paint on a mulberry hang paper, I have to wait for the right moment for drawing some lines in ink. Sometimes it takes days and weeks to find the right state of mind. Breathing needs to be absolutely under control in order for me to execute fine lines, especially. I am always aware of the importance of equilibrium. You can call it Yin and Yang as in traditional Asian philosophy or just simply a balance between the opposites."

fondationentreprisehermes.org

**JOEL MORRISON:
NEW WORKS**

Until 7 July
Galerie Alex Daniels—Reflex, Amsterdam

Classical busts adorned with a forest of anvils, a cheekily positioned croissant, or other incongruous street objects. A punched-in disco ball in a bear trap. Joel Morrison's highly polished, stainless-steel sculptures are slick and playful, drawing viewers in with their humour and beauty. This exhibition showcases a selection of Morrison's recent work, alongside four previously unseen pieces. Though funny and aesthetically pleasing, these lustrous sculptures suggest deeper symbolic weight and myriad associations and meanings, though much is left to audience interpretation. Morrison toys with the boundaries between high and low art and consumer culture, urging the audience to look beyond the shiny façade to uncover darker, dystopian themes, where the exterior contradicts underlying motives.

Bio: Joel Morrison was born in 1976 in Seattle, Washington, and now lives and works in Los Angeles. He studied a BA in English Literature at Central Washington University, followed by an MFA in Sculpture at Claremont Graduate University. He has previously had solo exhibitions at Gagosian Gallery in New York, LA and Hong Kong.
Quote: "a huge component of artmaking is being able to hustle the audience to make you think you're an artist. And if you can do that, you can do whatever the fuck you want... for a short amount of time, anyway. People eventually tire of it. And with all these new collectors come teams of consultants, and they're paid to say who's hot and who's not."

reflexamsterdam.com

NEW



ESTABLISHMENT

MI KAFCHIN

The theme of transformation took centre stage in *Mi Kafchin's* recent exhibition at Berlin's Galerie Judin, *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*. Born in the Romanian city of Galați in 1986, and formerly the assistant of Romanian painter Adrian Ghenie, she relocated from Cluj-Napoca to Berlin just over a year ago, working in a studio above the gallery itself. *Words: Louisa Elderton.*



ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE JUDIN, BERLIN



Previous pages
Fishing for Souls
2016
Oil on canvas, 67 x 66.5cm

This page
Between Micro and Macro
2016
Oil on canvas, mounted on wood, 115 x 98.8cm

Opposite page
Portrait by Steven Kohlstock

Overleaf
Schleifenbild
2016
Oil on canvas mounted on wood, 69.9 x 84.5cm

Following pages, left
Fishing for your Zodiac
2016
Oil on canvas, 196 x 190cm

Following pages, right
Fountain of Youth
2016
Oil on canvas, 88 x 139cm

Within her figurative paintings, surreal and strange forms refer to time, Eastern philosophy, cosmology and dystopian visions of the future. In *Fountain of Youth* (all works 2016), people struggle not to be submerged beneath swirling pools of water; a fang-toothed beast stares at its mirror reflection in *Trying to Be Beautiful*; a skeleton's human form is revealed as an amorphous cloud drifts overhead in *Cloud of Life*; and the eponymous *A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy* sees explorers become buried beneath heaps of snow, nearby clocks symbolizing the inevitable passing of time. Elsewhere, terracotta sculptures depict hooded youths lurking behind walls and

a long-haired, heeled woman stirring a cauldron being licked by flames.

Having recently transitioned into life as a woman—she was formerly named Mihai Boșcu Kafchin—gender, identity and autobiographical references are brought to life amid a colour palette of dark greys illuminated by turquoise blues, pastel pinks and vibrant oranges. We discussed the artist's methods, and the fears that ultimately feed her imaginative approach to painting.

Why did you call your exhibition Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?
I search for the title at the end of a series, not before. I thought about

neuroplasticity and how the brain builds concepts from nothing. I liked it as an idea. My art is a self-fulfilling prophecy because I make it from nothing. I have my traumas and fears, my situation, and those are the bricks of my composition. So the works are made by themselves, I never search for something outside of it. Even with my studio, I prefer to have it very empty, without information. Those traumas and fears are the most authentic source material that I have.

One of your works is titled Afraid of Dying. Is that one of your fears?
I think it's a general feeling that we all have inside. It's in our brain, we are all afraid of dying.

Some people say they aren't—but I always think they must be lying. I can't believe that some people don't care about infinite nothingness.

How long do you spend on each of the works?
Sometimes I have a good flow and I can make a work in two hours, but at the end it still feels like I worked a lot on it. Sometimes I start to work with what I think is a failure, and from that failure I can sometimes have something great come out.

So do you discard works that you think are failures, or do you continue working up the surface?
Some of them I cover over, some





“YOU TRY TO PROVE SOMETHING TO THE HISTORY OF ART THAT DOESN’T EXIST; IT’S A PHANTOM, A GHOST”



I like to leave as a surprise in the back of the studio, because for me it’s a failure, but long term, nothing is a failure. I just cover them over and rely on the next generation.

Are you interested in any historical artists in particular?

I had an art education of, let’s say, two or three years. I did high school and university in art and those classes are always accompanied by theoretical classes. But I’m also passionate separately about the history of art. It’s not really a history of art but a history of emotions. If you think about art as an artist, when you create art you fail. I saw this mechanism in myself: it’s to do with ego. You try to prove something to the history of art that doesn’t exist; it’s a phantom, a ghost. I see the periods in art like the rings in a tree. In the Renaissance, people really had this Renaissance mood, everything was so cosy and new—we took the antiquities from the ground and really learnt from them. You asked me what type of artists I like: for example, I like Rubens and the artists where for them it was a

science. It’s not experimental, it’s a science and they did this every day. I think I like artists who had discipline, and it was through that discipline that they spoke to their emotions.

Your work feels disciplined and scientific in places: for example, the sense of perspective in Fishing for your Zodiac.

That was one of the first works I did. Out of all of the paintings, I worked on that the most, because I considered it a failure. The Gemäldegalerie is very close, and I go there almost every day and then come back to make work. It’s a huge mistake. It’s like watching porn and making love after that, a huge mistake! Don’t do this. It shows your primordial revelations. *Fishing for your Zodiac* also represents my situation back then: it depicts an ancestral space, the soul, how in Eastern culture they choose their existence. There are simple questions: why time passes so fast, why memories that are so alive today become like dreams. All of those anxieties help you to feel emotion and make work. It’s

exhausting because you really have to open your concentration.

What about your approach to colour? You combine pastel greens, pinks, purples, with a darker palette. Is that new to this specific body of work?

This combination is new; this atmosphere is new. Because, lately—being trans—I have been taking hormones, and I started to feel colours to be more alive. I have done a lot of paintings and drawings through the years but they’re all—not necessarily masculine—but without colour. Still I feel that I don’t have enough colour in the work, but this dark side I cannot eliminate. The exhibition is a diary: like Picasso said, they are works from a diary, I understand why he said that. During the first months of transition, it was so hard for me in terms of energy. I didn’t have any energy because I killed my testosterone, so I had to find that brain strength that we have, not the hormonal strength.

I’m really interested that you said you felt colour more vibrantly when

you started transitioning.

I don’t know if it’s because of the hormones or excitement. You really see that you change every day; you were a man before and you see this changing. It comes with a lot of excitement and that provides more energy to focus on sensory things like smell, sight, hearing. Before, I would always go to museums and look at how artists built things—the composition—but now, by instinct, I am interested in colours. Let’s say I just take advantage of these new powers.

You tune into them.

Yes, I already had the practice before: draw, do sculpture. I thought: you have to be an apprentice, carry those bricks from there to there. During my childhood I had a Vasari book about artists; I was obsessed with these Renaissance artists like Michelangelo, who worked with Ghirlandaio, and how they would fight! In a way, I experienced that because I always knocked on my teachers’ or on artists’ doors, and I had my years of being an apprentice. So I think, now, what is left is to enjoy colours.

JOSH KLINE

Looking ahead to augmented reality and using techniques of 3D printing, *Josh Kline* uses the technology of today and strategies of advertising to create images of soft dystopias where privacy and civil rights have been eroded in the age of neoliberalism. *Words: Louisa Elderton.*



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND 47 CANAL, NEW YORK. PHOTO: JOERG LOHSE



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, 47 CANAL, NEW YORK. AND FRIENDS OF THE HIGH LINE. PHOTO: YUKO TORIHARA

When entering the world of New York-based artist Josh Kline, you might encounter fully armoured, militant Teletubbies, Barack Obama and Kurt Cobain as you've never before seen them, and obsolete middle-class office workers curled up and sealed in plastic bags. Kline's videos, installations and sculptures have been exhibited internationally, most recently at the Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin, and 47 Canal, New York (both 2016); Modern Art Oxford and the New Museum's Triennial exhibition (both 2015); and at MOMA PSI (2013). Here, we discuss the artist's propensity for visualizing the future and just what it might look like.

Your exhibition at 47 Canal, Unemployment, imagines a future where human labour has become obsolete as the result of intelligent software. How do you see our future subjectively if we can't work? As software gets smarter and eliminates more and more jobs and

careers—generating fewer replacements on the flip side—I think there are a number of possibilities that could play out, ranging from the disastrous to the utopian.

One of the darkest scenarios is the one that America and Britain are living through right now: neoliberalism. Most economic conservatives don't value human life outside of its use as labour and productive capital. For them, unless you're born filthy rich, if you don't work or can't work, you don't deserve to live or deserve basic human dignity. The work ethic is like a hard-to-reach brain tumour—a deep societal neurosis/necrosis. A fountain of sadism, masochism, abuse and suffering.

The elimination of manufacturing and blue-collar jobs in the West is a preview of what's coming for much of the white-collar professional middle class. Working people have been losing their jobs partially to globalized outsourcing—but also to automation—which the

politicians work hard to avoid discussing. The people voting for Trump, UKIP, Le Pen, Pegida, etc—most of these people (or their parents) have lost their livelihoods to these transformations. Technological unemployment is already an enormously destabilizing force. Automobile factories are full of robots. There's a self-checkout station at the end of the cashier line at many stores now. Self-driving cars seem like they're poised to hit the roads in a big way sometime in the coming decade.

If the neoliberals stay in power, it probably means hundreds of millions of people starving in the streets in the near future—homeless and living in tent cities like the ones in downtown Los Angeles and San Francisco. Unless neoliberalism is checked or replaced, it's likely that massive political convulsions will erupt all over the world in the next thirty years as technological unemployment and climate change combine to create

a world of trauma. On the other hand, there's the possibility of a Universal Basic Income, which in some scenarios would involve paying people a living salary just for being alive—in a way sharing the prosperity all this automation is generating.

Your video works often use augmented reality to subversive effect, exposing loaded political, economic and environmental issues. Why do you choose to employ this method?

My work looks ahead to augmented reality, but right now my videos still have their feet firmly planted in the world of special effects. There are no glasses and nothing's happening for the viewer in real time. Special effects are a way of visualizing things that don't exist. Augmented reality is about personalizing that experience. As an artist, the majority of your audience will always live in the future, so I think it's interesting to consider what kind of world

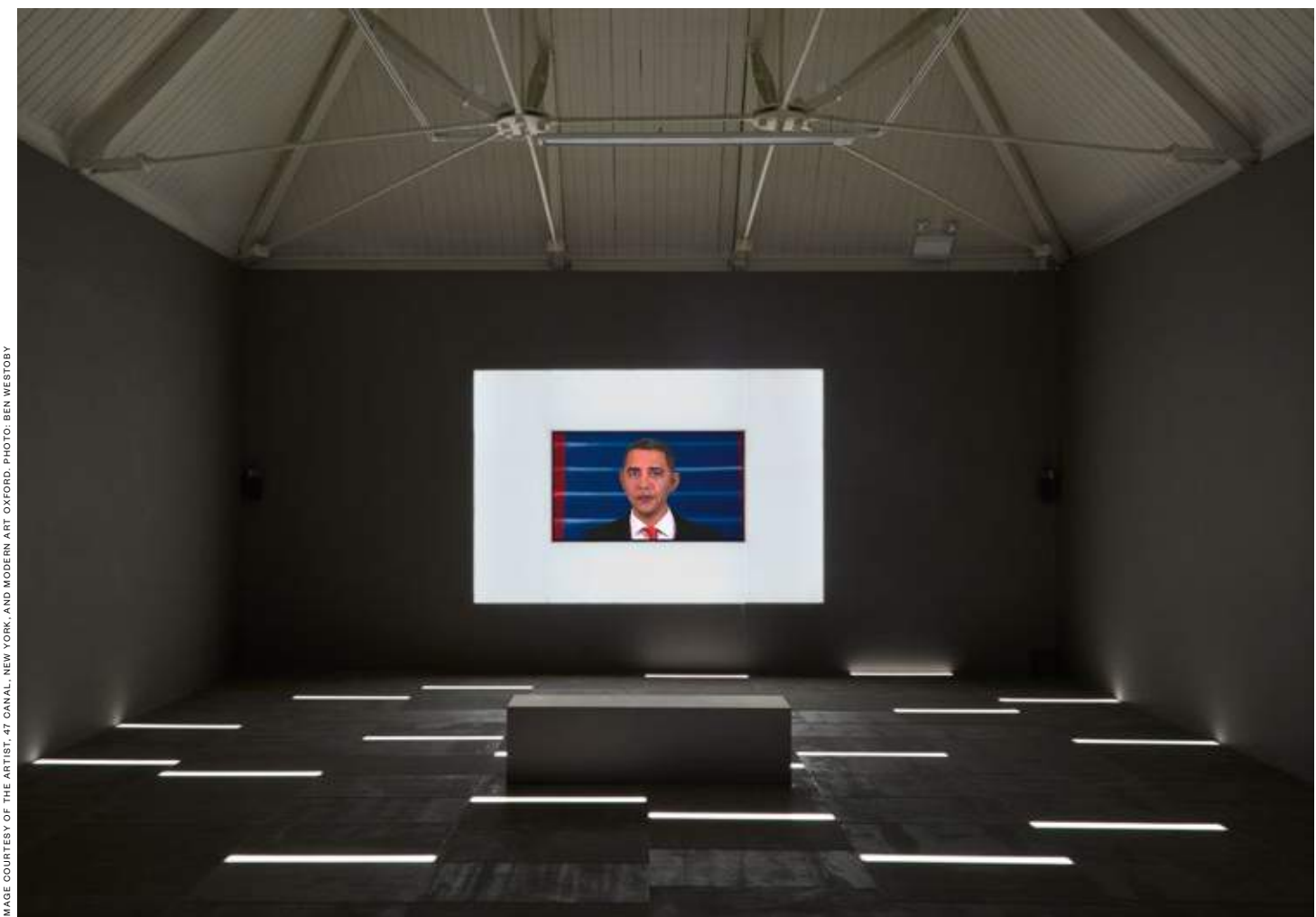


This page and previous pages, left
Unemployment
 installation view,
 47 Canal, New York

Previous pages, right
Skittles
 2014
 Commercial fridge,
 light box and blended
 liquids in bottles, 219.71
 x 323.85 x 104.14cm
 Commissioned and
 produced by Friends of
 the High Line

Opposite page
Hope and Change,
 2015
 Installation view,
 Modern Art Oxford
 HD video, sound,
 colour, 17:10 mins
 Lightbox display:
 Plexiglas, LEDs
 and power supply,
 flat-screen TV, media
 player and wood

**“PEOPLE UNDERSTAND ADVERTISING
 VISCERALLY—EMOTIONALLY. IT’S A LANGUAGE
 OF DESIRE, FEAR AND COMEDY”**



those people might live in, and how their culture will be shaped by the communications media they are likely to employ.

In science-fiction films, special effects are used to visualize the future, which is exactly how I use them. Some form of augmented reality is likely to emerge as a significant form of communication in the coming decades. This period with smart phones and social media webpages we’re in now could be like the radio era in the 1920s or 1930s—before television entered our homes and colonized our minds. All the pieces are scattered around, but we’re not quite there technically or culturally. We can’t assemble the pieces into a full-colour Sony Trinitron and watch reality shows on it yet.

A number of your contemporaries use strategies of advertising and this accessible vernacular in their work. Does this reflect the reality that

surrounds us?
 I think people are drawn to advertising’s strategies for different reasons right now. For me, the allure is advertising’s unparalleled ability as a medium to communicate complicated ideas quickly—and to non-art audiences. It’s a dense shorthand for all sorts of class and cultural information and it often exists without the need for explanation through words. People understand advertising viscerally—emotionally. It’s a language of desire, fear and comedy.

Much of the language used around art shuts out any possibility of engaging with non-art audiences, and with working people—who don’t have the time or money for the education that would allow them access to these ideas.

The community of artists in New York I was a part of in the late 2000s was reacting against this—against work that was mostly happening on paper as writing—and

often in relationship to theory. There was a collective desire for an art that was self-sufficient—where the object or image could stand on its own and communicate independently without any kind of explanation featuring words like “indexical”, “normative” or an eighteen-page paper full of endless references to texts by Adorno or Lacan.

Who do you make art for—the art world? Is anyone else listening?

I try to make art that can reach different audiences. I studied film in college. One of the lessons they drill into you in film school is the importance of your audience. I started out making work for myself and for my friends, and then as more public exhibition opportunities have presented themselves, I’ve opened the work up more and more. For me the challenge is to make art that can communicate complex ideas to and be legible for audiences that

don’t have a background in art. That was one of the most exciting things about the commission I did for the High Line in 2014. Could I make work that would engage with a general audience—with passers-by—even if they wouldn’t recognize it as art?

Until my final year in college, I didn’t know that artists were still making paintings and sculptures—or that contemporary art existed. I think this is the case for the bulk of people in America. For people involved with art, the end of modernism or the structuring of abstraction on a canvas may be burning issues, but even for most college graduates with a liberal arts education, these ideas don’t exist. The distinction between modern and contemporary art is probably totally lost on most museum-goers. I always keep this in mind when making work. The art industry is ultimately a very small and very closed conversation.

MENG ZHOU

For his exhibition *o.064g* at gallery@oxo in London, *Meng Zhou* created works in various media—sculpture, ink drawings, installation and video—centring on his fascination with the silkworm and the metaphor of the cocoon for wider society, especially in his native China. A student keen to push his practice further, this quietly spoken, self-professedly shy artist is definitely one to watch. *Words: Anna McNay.*



ALL ARTWORK IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST

You have studied both Fashion Design and Painting. Now you are studying Moving Image. Your gallery@oxo exhibition incorporated film works, installation, sculpture and ink drawings. How would you describe your practice overall?

All the different media, all the creative forms, are the language with which I realize my thoughts. I have never limited my practice's boundaries. Whenever I want to expand a specific idea, I find the right language to use. I like to explore ideas in many creative ways.

And where do these ideas and inspirations come from?

From the phenomena of nature, engaging with my feelings, living a long way from home, my previous practice or sometimes simply modern existence.

You mention phenomena of nature. The title of your exhibition, o.064g, referred to the average weight of the cocoons created by more than a hundred silkworms, which you collected. In fact, the exhibition as a whole centred on your fascination with this creature, featuring paintings of figures entangled in strands of silk; sheets of silk, daubed with ink, hanging in the breeze; hanging bronze sculptures of the cocoons of two specific butterflies;



and two films projected onto stretched silk cloths, one attached by a mass of cobwebbed thread to a plastic chair. Where does this fascination with the silkworm come from?

My family's business was a spinning factory so, when I was little, I used to keep silkworms. I have always been obsessed with insects and creatures that transform themselves into a different life stage.

One of your ink drawings was mounted on a wheel so that it could be rotated and viewed any way up. What was the idea behind this?

Similarly to my not liking to restrict the media in which I work, I like to

create a form, or an idea, for people to perform with. Everyone has his or her own way of understanding a work. I'd rather not create a specific background. I create multiple backgrounds for people to choose from. There are many visual possibilities.

Does this fluidity and sense of movement and choice relate in any way to the time you spent drawing and painting dancers from Pina Bausch's company?

The first year I was in London I spent a lot of time following these dancers' performances. I went to Sadler's Wells and to the Tanztheater in Wuppertal, Germany [where Bausch had been the



Previous pages, left
Portrait by Benjamin
McMahon

**Previous pages,
right**
IF2, from the series
Loner, 2016
Ink on paper,
61 x 46cm

This page
VVS2, from the
series *Loner*, 2016
Ink on paper,
61 x 46cm

Opposite page
VSS, from the series
Loner, 2016
Ink on paper,
61 x 46cm

choreographer]. I even learned some contemporary dance myself. I find Pina is a figure who reappears and inspires my work every once in a while. Dance is very hard to capture on paper; it contains such live energy. You never want to freeze a moment or take a picture because it never tells the story. Instead, I like to capture the feeling of the performance. I am good at remembering what the dancers are doing and copying that movement or energy afterwards. I think this relates to my previous fashion practice as well. We were trained to draw without models. I have both benefited from and been influenced by this earlier stage of my practice. You can never get rid of your past.

Did you want to be a fashion designer when you were growing up?

No. I began studying a science-related foundation course in California but I wasn't satisfied and I wanted to apply for something more creative, so I joined the Pratt Institute to study Fashion Design. Then I figured out I only liked drawing and didn't like sewing at all! The most important thing for me, whatever I am doing, is to be myself in my work. All the different forms I use have this poetic Chinese rhythm flowing through them, so I just try to let it flow naturally.

The catalogue of your last show is now in the Tate Archive.

We put a lot of thought into the catalogue, even though it was a last-minute decision to make one. The cover material was chosen to resemble silk. I think today, when you are able to access such huge amounts of data online, when you do have something material, you have a different level of attachment to that object. That's why I wanted to select papers and textures to match the show.

What are you working on next?

I want to focus on experimenting with how to present the video work. But, out of the sculptures, drawings and videos, the drawings are what most moved the public in my last show, so it's important for me to keep going with my drawing practice alongside my studies and I'm thinking about breaking out of this small picture size into oils or some other material. I'm still exploring.



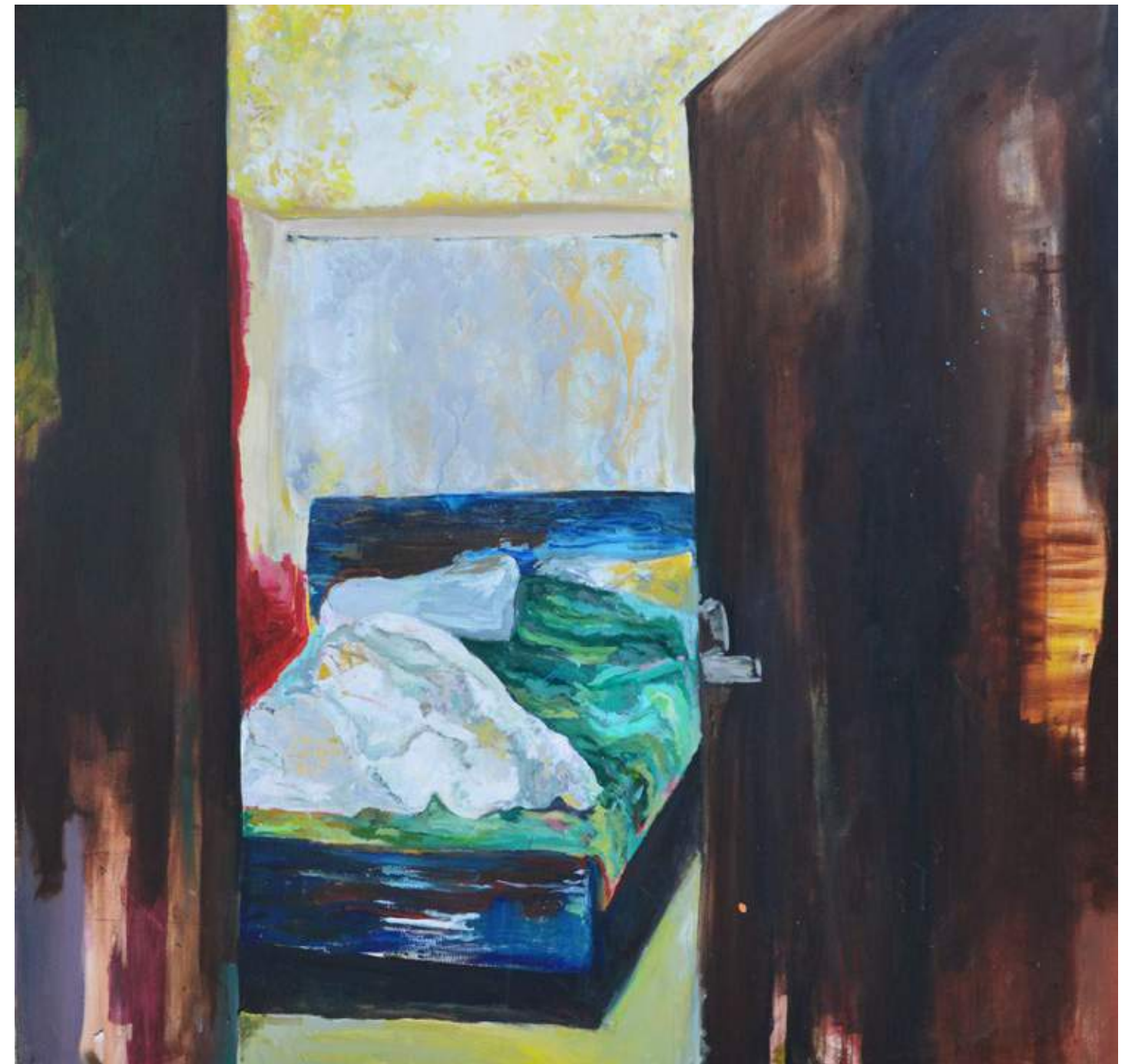
**“ALL THE DIFFERENT FORMS I USE
HAVE THIS POETIC CHINESE RHYTHM FLOWING
THROUGH THEM, SO I JUST TRY TO LET IT
FLOW NATURALLY”**

RANA SAMARA

Rana Samara started painting *Intimate Spaces*—bedrooms depicted in the moments after sex, but absent of people—after she visited a friend living in a refugee camp in Palestine. Her works speak of relationships, sexuality, privacy, intimacy and, in particular, the way in which these themes affect women.
Words: Charlotte Fansen.



ALL IMAGES COURTESY ZAWYEH GALLERY



Rana Samara's paintings don't just interrogate space. In dialogue with the ideas of European modernism, American Pop and the contemporary Palestinian movement in painting, she is developing her own distinctive language in a medium that has traditionally been dominated by a Western, male point of view.

Samara was in her late twenties, with three young children, when she decided to do a BA in Fine Art at the International Art Academy in Ramallah. She recently graduated

and has moved to Chicago to start an MA.

One of your main themes is private space but you never portray people, only the spaces they inhabit. Why is that?

Intimate space is the main focus in my work. I have always been interested in the evidence left by people rather than how they are portrayed directly. My work focuses on women's bedrooms, which reflect their social class, sex lives and the amount of privacy they have; at

times they can even resemble crime scenes. I explore the question of where viewers are positioned in relation to these rooms and how through voyeuristically intruding on the scene we are able to sense the lives of the women who inhabit and perform their sexuality in these spaces and the relationship between place and social norms.

Your journey to becoming an artist hasn't been conventional. Can you remember your earliest encounters with art?

My first academic experience of visual art was at the Palestine Technical College in Ramallah, where I completed a two-year diploma in Graphic Design. However, the programme did not fulfill my desire for knowledge. In the theory lectures we touched upon contemporary art, and it made me want to explore this area in greater depth. I therefore applied to the International Academy of Art in Palestine to study the BA in Contemporary Visual Arts. This provided me with the opportunity



“THE SELECTED PIECES FOCUSED ON THE CONVERSATIONS I HAD WITH WOMEN ON THE SUBJECT OF SOCIAL TABOOS—FEMALE SEXUALITY, VIRGINITY, INTIMACY, SEXUAL DESIRE AND GENDER NORMS”

Previous pages, right
Intimate Space IV (detail)
 2014
 Acrylic on canvas,
 170 x 170cm

This page
Intimate Space XV
 2016
 Acrylic on canvas,
 209 x 180cm

Opposite page
Intimate Space XIII
 2016
 Acrylic on canvas,
 210 x 217cm



to develop a broad understanding and practice of visual arts across the mediums of photography, installation, painting, video, social intervention and theoretical studies.

You graduated recently. What has your practice been like since then? I know that you recently relocated to Chicago.

I showcased two of my artworks at the French-German cultural centre in Ramallah in the exhibition *Disrupted Intimacies*, which brought together a selection of works from the graduates of the International Academy of Art for the first time. The selected pieces focused on the conversations I had with women on the subject of social taboos—female

sexuality, virginity, intimacy, sexual desire and gender norms—and these were shown through the medium of large-scale painting of domestic spaces.

I have also taught part-time courses at the academy to first-year students studying the BA in Contemporary Visual Art. Additionally, I was nominated to participate in a public art workshop in Beirut with Palestinians from refugee camps. I am now studying an MA in Fine Art and Theory in Northwestern University in Chicago and this has come at a pivotal point in my career where it will empower me in the development and evolution of my work.

The language of your painting is

very particular. Can you tell me how your aesthetic has evolved?

I have always experimented in my own studio and also in the International Academy of Art. Trying different mediums made me approach a variety of techniques such as stencilling which has played an important part in my painting. My work has improved over time: the more I paint, the more I discover and the more I feel I develop.

I spend a lot of time viewing other artists' works and I believe this has an effect on my work. I am influenced and inspired by the work of Henri Matisse, Édouard Vuillard, Nabil Anani, Alfred Sisley, Patrick Caulfield, Keltie Ferris and Samir Salameh.

You're obviously very busy.

You already had young children when you started to study art.

How have you managed it all?

I used to give art classes and courses to young children in my studio in Abu Qash near Ramallah. I feel very happy when I discover a talented boy or girl and I motivate them to improve their skills so it reflects their work.

It's very hard for me to manage my time between my passion and my family. I have three children and it is very difficult for me to leave them here in Palestine in order to study abroad. I am here for a vacation just to see my children because I miss them so much. My mother takes care of them while I'm away.

BEYOND

GETTING

GILLIAN WEARING, ME AS OAHU/HOLDING A MASK OF MY FACE, 2012. © GILLIAN WEARING, COURTESY MAUREN PALEY, LONDON, REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES AND TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY, NEW YORK



“If I felt there was a clearly defined place for me to go, where I would be welcomed and at peace, I would surely have gone there many years ago.” Justin Vivian Bond is one of a growing number of artists who explore gender identity in non-binary terms. As Britain marks the fiftieth anniversary of the passage of the Sexual Offences Act, an important milestone in the progressive decriminalization of homosexuality and opening out of gender roles in the West, we look around the world to artists who are redefining gender for the twenty-first century and, in many cases, are doing away with such definitions altogether. Words: Emily Steer.

BEYOND YESTERDAY'S BINARIES

A young man sits on a stone bench, naked except for a flower- and thorn-adorned crown perched on his wavy brown hair. He is winged, but the long, deep purple feathers of his wings are tangled with thorns. He is hunched over slightly. His arms are tied by his sides and his legs are bound together by thick swathes of grey fabric. A woman comforts him, one hand on his arm, from which he seems to flinch away. He gazes solemnly off to the left of her. Sidney Harold Meteyard's 1901 painting *Hope Comforting Love in Bondage* has been included in Tate Britain's exhibition *Queer British Art*, which runs until October and covers the period 1861–1967, ending in the year the Sexual Offences Act was passed.

“It moves from a time in which there were very few words for different sexualities and gender identities, to the point at which our community was starting to find its unique voice,” Clare Barlow, the show's curator, tells me. “There are some tragic stories but also some moments of humour, triumph and liberation. Throughout, we've been careful to present the lives of the different artists and sitters in all their rich complexity.”

As Barlow suggests, as well as frustration and the shackling of true identity and expression, there is also a tremendously joyful aspect to many of the works, exploring a utopian sense of freedom. Henry Scott Tuke's 1927 painting *The Critics* depicts two young lithe male bathers lounging off the sunny Cornish coast, watching a third in the water. The tension is palpable, but it's also innocent and youthful. Similarly, Duncan Grant's *Bathers by the Pond* (1920–21) titillates with the potential of the real. “I love the flirtatious glances being exchanged by these bathers,” says Barlow. “Bathing in the nude was common and many ponds were popular cruising grounds, as Grant was well aware.”

There are also moments of female-identified gender exploration, such as Laura Knight's *Self-Portrait* from 1913 in which the artist is shown painting a nude woman, eyes apparently fixed on her pink-blushed bottom, reclaiming the gaze from the otherwise dominant male perspective. John Deakin's relaxed black-and-white photographs of both male and female friends in drag from the 1950s offer one of the most

natural and impromptu presentations of gender diversity at the time.

This is not the only exploration of the pre-decriminalization era that has come to London this year. The National Archives recreated The Caravan Club in Soho, which was open for six weeks in 1934 and was swiftly labelled both “a place of sexual perversions, lesbians and sodomites” and “London's greatest bohemian rendezvous”.

It is strange to explore this world, contrary to the spirit of liberation offered by these places, via the letters and reports held in the National Archives, and thus through the eyes of those who were policing it. Despite the wide range of artistic approaches to gender at the time—and indeed, the lifestyles led by creative circles such as the Bloomsbury Set (who famously “lived in squares and loved in triangles”)—here we see issues of gender and homosexuality presented in the most simplistic terms.

Another club documented in the National Archives, which was held in a private residence in Holland Park in London in 1932, did not simply allow a semi-private space for same-sex activity but invited guests to question expected gender expressions. The groups, made up almost entirely of men (as one police report confidently states: “There were only five real women present and they were all lesbians”), split into unfixed groups of “Kings” and “Queenies”, dressing in lounge suits or dresses for the night. Records show that the majority of those frequenting queer clubs at the time came from working-class professions.

In the French art scene of the early twentieth century, we can also see moments of great complexity, fluidity and openness. Claude Cahun, the French transgender artist whose work has been on show alongside that of Gillian Wearing at the National Portrait Gallery in London this spring, explored gender from many different viewpoints, posing variously as a weightlifter and Little Red Riding Hood. As Cahun once claimed: “Under this mask, another mask. I will never finish removing all these faces.”

Considering figures such as Cahun and, indeed, the French diplomat and transvestite Chevalier d'Eon, whose portrait sits in the National Portrait Gallery and who lived both as a man and a woman, it

is important to remember that ideas of gender fluidity existed long before the present. And, of course, many of the supposedly “traditional” and “universal” gender categorizations that we have today turn out to be relatively recent and quite specifically Western constructs. Early on, it was noted by Westerners that Native American communities recognized between three to five gender roles. In India and South Asia, the Hijra community, the largest trans community in the world—with an estimated five to six million members—align themselves with neither the male or female gender, and can be traced back to the Kama Sutra.

Of course, a lot has happened in the last fifty years around the world to address prevailing fixed definitions of gender. The Stonewall riots in New York, AIDS and the aftermath of the devastating bombing at the Admiral Duncan pub in London both contributed to a desire—despite still persistent prejudices—to understand and welcome the LGBTQ+ community. Ongoing developments and discussions around feminism have allowed for a broadening out of typical gender roles. In wider culture, a sense of fluidity away from simple binaries has been offered by the popular music industry, most notably by artists such as Boy George and David Bowie. There are also a number of trans roles in mainstream drama now, and they're beginning to go to trans rather than cis actors: television is arguably leading the way with shows like *Transparent* and *Orange Is the New Black*. At the Oscars in 2017, a gender-fluid performer, Kelly Mantle, was deemed eligible for the first time for consideration in both the Best Supporting Actor and Best Supporting Actress categories. Who knows, one day it may no longer be thought relevant or useful to have those two different categories at all?

Ten different countries now legally recognize a third gender, at least in some degree, especially on passports. Facebook has over seventy gender options, while the dating app Tinder allows free input of terms. Although the US is yet to formally recognize a third gender, in Oregon in 2016 a state judge ruled that fifty-two-year-old Jamie Shupe could be legally classified as non-binary—the first ever successful

petition for a non-binary gender classification in the country.

Our exploration of contemporary art's response to gender takes us across the globe. In New York we meet performance artist and activist Justin Vivian Bond. Bond, who prefers the honorific Mx and the pronoun v, discusses the difficult relationship that language and categorization have with the push to see beyond binary options. We also speak with A.L. Steiner who, though a fluent spokesperson on the breaking of binaries, also recognizes the limits of language in this particular conversation and that the hunting for definitions often leads to an oppressive sense of orderliness. Her work is charged, alive and rebellious—a step on again from the challenging works of the previous century—testing the limits when viewing the body. Fists are stuffed into smoothed-out holes in trees, breasts are squeezed firmly around coke cans, bodies wrestle and tumble. A video the artist co-created for the Canadian musician Peaches for her 2015 track *Rub* is a pleasurable assault on the eyes; women rub enormous vaginally shaped rocks, they rub themselves, it ends with mass urination.

Women's traditional roles in Japan are the starting point for Yoshiko Shimada. In her *Repair* (1998), a group of four enormously beehived women inspect a gargantuan silver dildo in space, recasting her female subjects as a mix of pearl-adorned housewife, able mechanic and pleasure-seeker. The luscious visual exploration of gender that is enabled by art allows a more total escape from the world of definition and categorization than that which we can typically achieve with spoken and written language, as we see in the work of Ren Hang, the Chinese photographer who tragically took his own life earlier this year. The artist's photographic images go beyond definitions. We see the body explored curiously and playfully, free from a need to categorize who they are. Bodies are bodies are bodies. Meanwhile African photographer Eric Gyamfi stresses the importance of a relatable and local source for gender exploration.

These artists' practices are self-questioning and nebulous, providing moments of real specificity in parts and total openness in others. Definite answers are not necessary.

A LEGACY OF FREEDOM

“I don’t want others having the impression that Chinese people are robots with no cocks or pussies,” Ren Hang once declared. Following the photographer’s death in February, Charlotte Jansen chronicles the rise and tragically premature demise of an artist who saw beyond gender to capture a world of giddy, boundary-defying freedom.

ALL IMAGES COPYRIGHT REN HANG. COURTESY FOTOGRAFISKA MUSEUM, STOCKHOLM



“HANG’S PRESENTATION OF BODIES, ANDROGYNOUS AND ASEXUAL, IS FAR FROM THE MASCULINE, BALL-SWINGING BRAVADO OF SOMEONE LIKE TERRY RICHARDSON”

The first time I saw Ren Hang’s work was also the first time I experienced an earthquake. I was at a tiny gallery on the fifth floor of a building in Shinjuku, Tokyo. The windows quivered, and the gallery owner, Ken Nakahashi, calmly closed the door, as it jostled in its frame. It was the second exhibition Nakahashi had put on of Hang’s work in Japan. The gallerist’s leg was in a cast. I asked him what had happened, and he said he had broken it while on a rooftop shoot with Hang a few weeks before.

It feels foreboding now, thinking of that dramatic first encounter with Ren Hang’s work. The exhibition featured several of his celebrated rooftop photographs: very vulnerable, very naked bodies, teetering on the edge of inhumanly tall buildings, the kind of skyscrapers that remind us how differently cities in the East and the West are constructed. Looking at those photographs from now on will never be the same for any fan of Hang’s work. On the evening of 24 February 2017 the photographer died in Beijing. His body had fallen twenty-eight floors from a building. He was twenty-nine years old.

Last autumn I contacted Hang’s studio for an interview. A few weeks

later, his responses to my questions came back. He gave very few interviews and offered few comments on his work, and though, I later discovered, he was in the midst of a debilitating depressive phase, he told me his aim for the future was to “keep living”. He refused any suggestion of symbolism in his work, writing that “misconceptions happen a lot” and that he featured so much nudity and material of a sexual nature in his photographs “because I like [the] naked body and I love having sex”. In his work, he told me, “what’s really important is people”.

Hang’s struggle with depression was no secret and speculation about the reason for his death was immediate. He had kept a blog, in Mandarin, *My Depression*, since 2007, and he was a prolific poet, publishing hundreds of works reflecting his emotional turmoil. Posts in the run-up to his thirtieth birthday had suggested suicidal thoughts. One from 27 January read: “Wish for every year is the same: to die sooner”; the words “Hope it can be realized this year” were later added. On 10 March Hang’s friends and family confirmed that he had committed suicide.

Hang’s rise had been rapid, and his output ranged from self-published zines of his photographs and writings to fashion shoots for *Tank*, *Purple* and *Numéro* magazines, as well as for brands such as Gucci, and showing his work in more than ninety galleries around the world. He had only recently published his first international monograph with Taschen, edited by Dian Hanson, and had two museum exhibitions, at FOAM in Amsterdam (after being awarded the Outset Unseen Award in 2016) and at the Fotografiska Museum in Stockholm, as well as a two-person show at the KWM Art Center, Beijing. Given his fragile mental state, was it too much too soon?

The photographs are what remain. And what photographs they are.

“It was Ren’s honest and straightforward view of the world and his place in it that drew us to his photography. His way of presenting his own reality through his photography, where none of our conventional rules apply,” says Johan Vikner, who worked closely with Hang on his Stockholm exhibition, *Human Love*. “I believe this honesty and openness in his way of expression is part of why he became

so successful and appreciated in the art world. A unique view into an otherwise closed world, but also a fearlessness in expressing his own reality.”

In part, that has to do with the exoticization of Asian bodies in the West: so many nude bodies, and depicted by a Chinese photographer, is not something we’re used to. “Ren Hang and his artistry is such an interesting portrayal of a generation and culture rarely shown, especially here in Northern Europe,” Vikner adds. “We thought his work would give an interesting eye-opener into the world far away for our guests, which I believe it has.”

Hang’s originality wasn’t only in the allure of the unknown terrain he documented. Like Ryan McGinley and Terry Richardson (photographers Hang admired greatly), he took pictures of people he knew: many of his male subjects were friends, a very close-knit group, and he even photographed his mother for one series. It gives his works a particular urgency and intimacy. Unlike McGinley’s exploration of the innocence and freedom of youth, Hang’s young subjects are often entangled, their limbs intertwined with one another’s, upside



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY REN HANG

**“THERE WERE SO MANY THINGS—
THE FRESHNESS OF THE MODELS, THEIR
PHYSICAL AMBIGUITY—WHICH
WERE SO MODERN, SO APPEALING”**



Hang’s work reminded me of the early work of Terry Richardson, from around 2003, 2004.

“But there wasn’t one thing, there were so many things—the freshness of the models, their physical ambiguity—which were so modern, so appealing. No one looked like a professional model, they weren’t artificial, there was his unusual use of animals, the city he loved and the integration of nature.” The book reveals the full extent of Hang’s experiments with human bodies. It’s intoxicating and offers a different perspective on Hang’s sensibilities, compared to what you get when you look at the images on screen, which is what most people do (the Instagram community was an early adopter of Hang’s work). The cover is an unflinching red, a star from the Chinese flag cut around a picture

of Hang’s long-term partner, Jiaqi, who often appears in Hang’s work. It’s an ode to youth, to freedom, to China—a place Hang loved—and to life.

I ask Hanson what she thinks led Hang to end his life. “I can only conjecture; he never wanted to put meaning on anything, but others in his circle were disturbed by what they were seeing on TV, including the elections in the US, which made it look like big shifts were happening in the world, making everything more threatening.” It seems that Hang didn’t have access to psychological help. “I’ve been told there’s shame in admitting any kind of psychological problem in China.”

Hang never spoke about politics, and although his work is regularly interpreted as a statement of defiance by a liberal young generation of Chinese, he never claimed

to represent the Chinese perspective or to comment on what that might mean. Often, it was others who made that connection on his behalf: in 2013, Ai Weiwei included Hang’s work in *Fuck Off 2* and later curated an exhibition of his photographs in Paris. If anything, his use of nudity and sexuality was designed to alert the rest of the world to the fun young Chinese people were having. “I don’t want others having the impression that Chinese people are robots with no cocks or pussies,” he once declared. He belonged to a generation who were starting to see beyond gender, and not to feel it necessary to address ideals of gay, straight, bisexual. All bodies, in Hang’s work, are equally seductive, and equally grotesque. Hang didn’t see gender, he saw desire in the human form.



Yet living in Beijing, where he was arrested by the Chinese authorities on more than one occasion, did affect his work. “As much as Ren tried to stay out of politics, he couldn’t help but be affected by his country’s laws. They impacted what he was able to show, how he was published,” Hanson says. That’s why Hang turned to self-publishing. In 2016, he put out a photo zine every month around a different theme, from boys’ orgasms to survival and love, shooting the images all over the world.

Hanson was planning an exhibition of Hang’s work at the Taschen Gallery in Los Angeles, but it is unclear if it will now go ahead. “When he visited LA I asked him about it [the danger of his shoots]. I said: ‘Ren, don’t you worry, is it safe?’ He shrugged his shoulders and said: ‘Life isn’t safe.’”

Artists who live fast and die young are often mythologized. Hang emerged out of the digital, and it was there that news of his death first broke. Tributes have flooded the internet since. What will his legacy be?

“It’s all in question, because his parents are his heirs,” Hanson says. “He was so active on social media, that’s where everyone went to see his work, but those accounts will stagnate and eventually disappear. He always said it was the moment that mattered, he didn’t like to look into the future, but we will have to work hard to ensure it’s not going to be a Snapchat legacy. One day all of the work could be swept away, taken offline. I’m just glad we were able to do the book.”

I never imagined, when I started to write this article last year, that it would end as an elegy. Hang’s death resonated deeply with millennial feelings of anxiety, fear and self-doubt, but his work gives us the best of what he saw around him.

I’m Back.

*You still stand there
I’m back again
You still stand there*

*I’ll go back
The door closed
I can not see you
But I know
You still stand there*

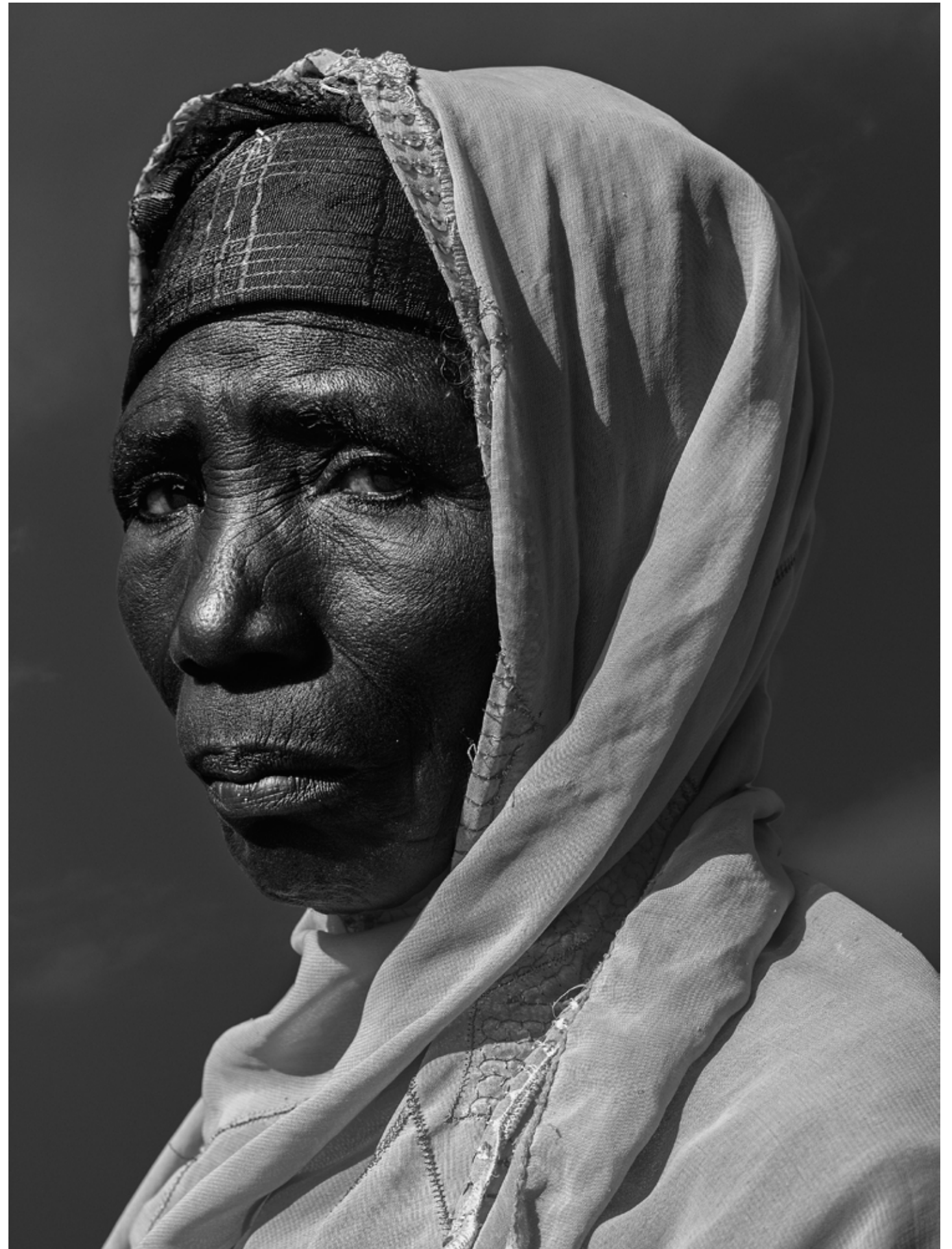
—Ren Hang.

MAKING HISTORY

Investigating universal concepts of gender and how they inform the notion of binary sexuality, Eric Gyamfi's photographs are nonetheless strongly rooted in the local. "We have come to understand how active the process of making and creating our history as a people is," the Ghanaian artist tells Charlotte Jansen.

ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST





Previous pages

Baajuri Jijuru, Halima Baaku and Guman Wuni
From the series *Witches of Gambaga*, 2014

This page

Shana meets her girlfriend Ama, after work and Some of the queer community members organise a night of dance after the international day against homophobia and transphobia event as a way to get to know other community members
From the series *Just Like Us...* 2016

Opposite page

Self-Portrait
2015



Gyamfi began by exploring himself through self-portraiture, but his project has gradually broadened to investigate the various ways queerness and otherness are perceived in different communities in Ghana, where he lives and works. Rather than applying a Western ideal of equality, Gyamfi's black-and-white photographs suggest a pre-colonial history of his homeland, when the lines of identity were blurred, and what you could be was more fluid and open.

Your most recent solo exhibition, See Me, See You, was at the Nubuke Foundation in Accra. Can you tell me more about the exhibition? How was the response?

It was work that was really close to me and, after almost a year of making the images, we spent some months putting together the exhibition experience with some audience-participation features to help instigate conversations around our ways of perceiving the “other”, using sexuality within the Ghanaian space as catalyst. The responses were as diverse and complex as our humanity itself, but the most important part, for me, was the fact that people were willing to engage in a dialogue where they otherwise wouldn't. For me that is an important first step.

You've said that you are interested in the ways photography can be used to interrogate social systems. When did you first realize photography could be an effective tool?

Art imitates life and otherwise. We have come to understand how active the process of making and creating our history as a people is. It is not a passive activity. Many forces and elements come together to make this happen, and photography as a tool for visual representation makes the photographic artist an important participant in the forging of said histories. But this doesn't just happen, it goes through an evolutionary process, and it is in the process that I feel photography can intervene by positioning itself as an introspective tool through which questioning and evaluation can lend themselves to the reshaping of histories. Zanele Muholi's work is an example of how such interventions can shape the bigger story/history.

Definitely—Muholi's work as you say has literally given a face to a community that had otherwise been invisible in South Africa, and now that community is recognized around the world. Your earliest experiment with this idea was Asylum, I believe, in which you look at sexual identity in Ghana.

From the point of view of a young Ghanaian man growing up with an “alternative” sexuality, there is a certain level of confusion and paranoia. The absence of a local reference point from which to start finding answers to questions one may have can have some dire consequences, both psychologically and otherwise, and it was some of these tensions and confusions that I sought to articulate using self-portraits.

I was also very struck by the Witches of Gambaga images, portraits of women you took at the infamous “witches camp” in the East Mamprusi District inhabited by 130 women aged between seventeen and ninety. How did you gain access to that community?

When tensions arise between groups of people, it becomes quite easy to forget our shared humanity and the universality of some life experiences. That all people feel and are subject to joy, dejection and trauma. It is also in our nature as people to seek affinity with people we deem to be like ourselves and consequently create a wall with people outside of these groups. But thank God for intersections. It is an understanding that people are human first, and that sexuality, gender and ethnicity don't change them as much as culture and social grooming do. My point of action then was to draw attention to this shared commonality.

As you say, there is this tension between tradition and modernization that you experience in Ghana, and you very much bring that out in your work. What do you feel about this present time in your country, in terms of attitudes towards gender and sexuality?

What I really meant was tradition as a fixed past, whereas tradition in actuality isn't fixed and can be added to or otherwise. I feel the internationalism of sexuality and gender may have a lot to do with it. I will quote a few things from Kenne

“TRADITION ISN'T FIXED AND CAN BE ADDED TO OR OTHERWISE”



Mwikya's “The Media, the Tabloid and the Uganda Homophobia Spectacle”, where she posits at one point that Western paradigms of activism with regards to gender and sexuality may not necessarily be feasible or applicable in totality, and advocates for more localized and critical ways of dealing with the subject. I'll quote a few lines: “but tensions between the aspirations of the West and the needs of places such as Africa and the Middle East cannot be blanketed by internationalism. Their paths are markedly different, as are the immediate needs that befall countries such as Kenya and Uganda as opposed to the US and Britain... The actions of queer internationalism only go to engender the belief that LGBTI activism, just like homosexuality,

is a Western import, and an imposition on a people's sovereignty.” Attitudes towards gender and sexuality are not the most progressive here, and there is a lot of room for improvement. Gender can become that intersectional ground upon which women and queer people can seek equality.

How difficult is it to speak about sexuality, and homosexuality, in Ghana? Male homosexuality has been illegal since 1860 and can be punished with three years in prison, while the laws on female homosexuality remain ambiguous.

Well, these laws are first of all one of the remnants of British colonial rule. Sexuality is not openly spoken about for the most part, regardless of whether it is about

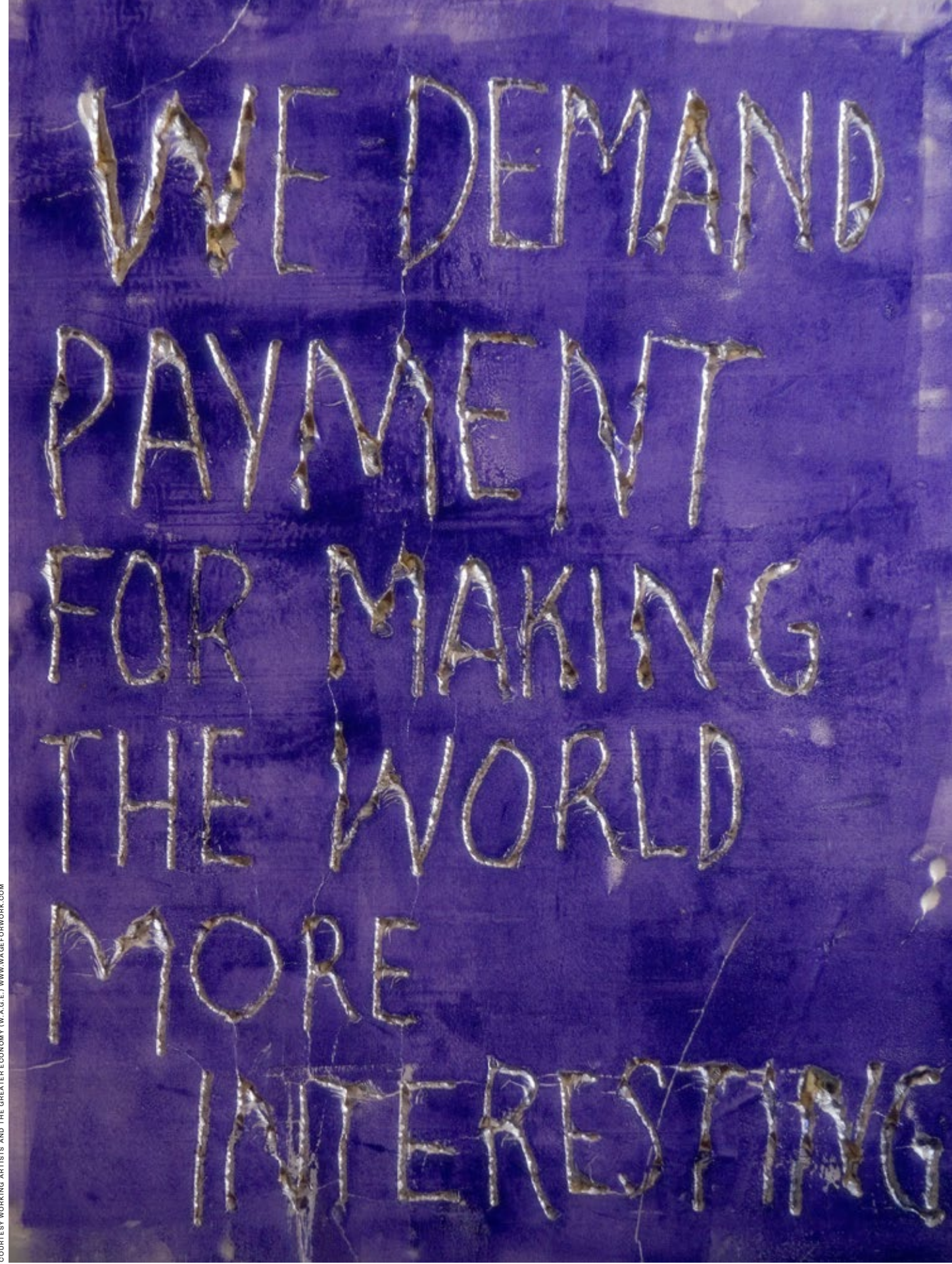
heterosexuality or homosexuality. (Granted there is more taboo surrounding open conversation about homosexuality/queerness apart from those instances where it fits into the church's and politicians' rhetoric of equating queerness to perversion and the eventual annihilation of the human race as a result.)

But there was an aspect of our culture in times past as I have read and heard (maybe still is in certain parts) that allowed for a level of social inclusion of people of diverse sexualities, and didn't even deem it necessary to name these ways of being. Certain ambiguities and contradictions were also allowed to be without the necessity of separating or labelling them. And it is these ways of inclusion that I want to draw our consciousness to.

URANIAN PERSPECTIVES

*“Genders can be attached and detached from the body. Like dildos, you can have many.”
On the theme of gender, there could hardly be a better conversational partner than the multimedia
artist, activist, curator, collaborator and self-described “sceptical queer ecofeminist androgyné”
A.L. Steiner. Words: Anna McNay.*

COURTESY WORKING ARTISTS AND THE GREATER ECONOMY (W.A.G.E.) WWW.WA.GE.FOR.WORK.COM



Born in 1967 in Miami, Florida, she “came out of the closet” when she was twenty, and her work epitomizes queerness, although, when asked about preferred terminology, Steiner opts for “Uranian”. “There is no definition of genders and/or sexual identities,” she explains. “We, as a species, are currently oppressed by societies built on indouchetrialized [*sic*] patriarchal structures, which command offers or denials of such things as ‘rights’, ‘freedoms’ and ‘equalities’. These structures are dependent on categorical, rigid formalizations of identity.”

Nevertheless, in a 2014 feature in *Frieze*, Steiner set out: “Queer is empowering, offensive, visible, academic, passé, over, urgent, over-used, everything, irrelevant, empty, hurtful, hateful, possible, broad, narrow, nothing, futurity, hope, not enough, too much, just right. Queer are the things that bad things are not.” Reading or speaking to Steiner is like reading or hearing a form of political poetry—peppered with neologisms; full of to-the-point, could-be soundbites; trippy, in the sense of being taken somewhere you’ve never been taken before; but enlightening and motivational at the same time.

Steiner grew up as one of three girls, with a mother who owned an art gallery for thirty years, so she was immersed in the art world from a young age. She studied Communications and worked as a magazine photo editor for eleven years prior to following in her mother’s footsteps and becoming a fully integrated member of the art world herself. At the same time, however, she has always been involved in community activism and direct action, working at the HIV/AIDS service organization Whitman-Walker Clinic in Washington, DC, after graduating from university, then joining Queer Nation and the Women’s Action Coalition in San Francisco, and eventually the Lesbian Avengers in New York. This involvement offers her a sense of feeling at home with people of shared gender and sexual identities. “Coming out of the reigning oppressive cultural paradigms of heteronormativity and heterosexism is never an easy or comfortable action,” she says. Her collaborative curatorial initiative Ridykeulous, founded with fellow artist Nicole



COURTESY ARCADIA NISSA, LONDON + DEBORAH SCHAMONI, MUNICH



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND OTHERWILD

“MAKING ANYTHING IS AN ACT OF OBJECTIFICATION”



COURTESY GRAND ARTS, KANSAS CITY, MO

Previous pages, top left
A.L. Steiner, *Greatest Hits*
(installation detail), 2016

Previous pages, bottom left
A.L. Steiner, *Puppies & Babies*
2012, offset poster

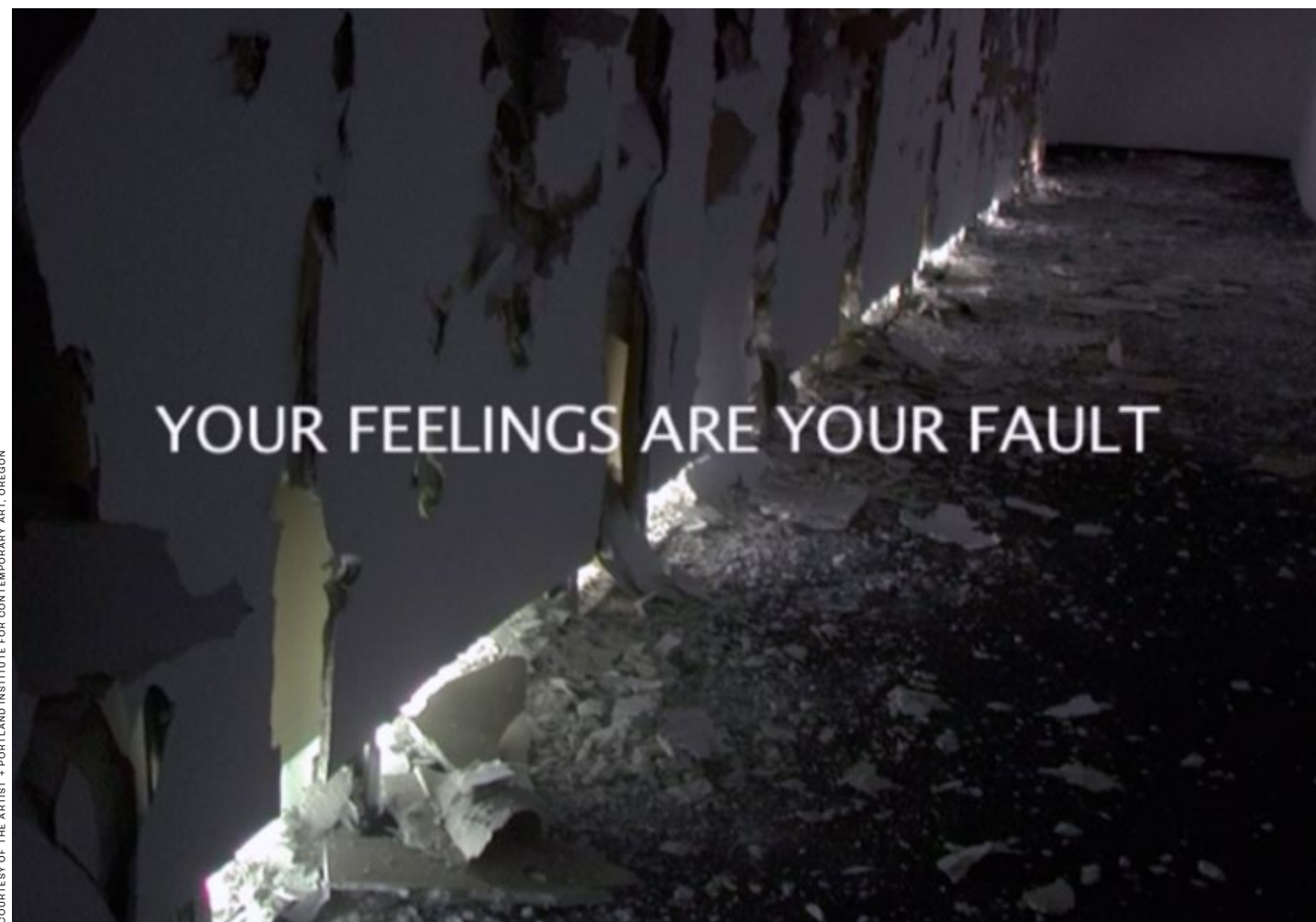
Previous pages, right
A.L. Steiner, with Donnie
Cervantes (pictured),
Positive Reinforcement
installation in progress, 2009

This page
Van Barnes, Zackary Drucker,
Mariah Garnett and A.L.
Steiner, *You Will Never Be a
Woman...* (see below for full
title), 2008, digital video still

Opposite page
A.L. Steiner, *Your Feelings
Are Your Fault*
2013, digital video still



COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS + VIDEO DATA BANK



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST + PORTLAND INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, OREGON

Eisenman in 2005, accordingly mounts exhibitions and events primarily concerned with queer and feminist art, and uses humour to critique both the art world and culture at large. “We need Ridykeulous and Ridykeulous needs us,” says Steiner matter-of-factly when asked to elaborate. They were threatened with being sued the year of Ridykeulous’s launch by an artist who claimed the project was discriminating against bisexuals. The alleged crime was the omission of the plaintiff’s work in the zine they published, despite the fact that other bi-identified artists appeared in the project—a reminder that no matter how inclusive one seeks to be, someone will always feel left out.

Seeking equality on another level, Steiner is also co-founder of Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), a New York-based activist group advocating for financial compensation for the content that artists provide to

non-profit institutions. A survey the group carried out in 2010–11, gathering information about the economic experiences of visual and performing artists exhibiting in non-profit exhibition spaces and museums in New York City between 2005 and 2010, flagged, among other things, gender differences in the coverage of travel expenses, with 69 per cent of female respondents reporting that they did not have any travel expenses, compared to just 45 per cent of male respondents. Nevertheless, Steiner has spoken to the terms of “feminist art”, which she identifies as “languages and ideologies which establish lived practices running counter to competitive, omniscient crapitalist [sic] patriarchy”. Asked whether she sees the current vogue for all-women or feminist exhibitions as ghettoizing and reinforcing inequality, she is clear that “the corporatocratic cultural institutions which uphold, reinforce, perpetuate and provide

cover for the violence of the fiduciary nation-state reinforce inequality, not exhibition themes”. Equally, however, she maintains that “patriarchy is an ideology, not a gender. Any body can enact oppressive patriarchal psychological and structural oppression.” Perhaps it is for this reason that Steiner so strongly holds that everything we do is—or ought to be—collaborative. “The belief that there’s anything that’s *not* collaborative is the root of our problems.”

The blurry distinction between love and hate, collaboration and treachery, is explored in the short film work *You Will Never Be a Woman. You Must Live the Rest of Your Days Entirely as a Man and You Will Only Grow More Masculine with Every Passing Year. There Is No Way Out* (2008), made together with Zackary Drucker, Van Barnes and Mariah Garnett. Two trans-identified women share moments of love, insult and masochism, preparing each other for a larger, more

dangerous culture of intolerance and violence, and occupying multiple roles. All gender, according to Steiner, is a drag. “Genders can be attached and detached from the body. Like dildos, you can have many.” In her multimedia artworks, she often juxtaposes images, bringing them together in a collage form, to create and offer multiple readings. “I wholeheartedly believe in the truths of multiplicity,” she says, “and fully reject the false-flag operation of individualism.”

Steiner’s work sometimes seems to seethe with anger—she was once asked by a reporter if she was an angry feminist—and she has commented before that “if you’re not angry, you’re a crazy person... Whether ecstatic, pleasurable, or angry, there is so much that I am dealing with in the space, the mood, the show, the curator, that factor into how a piece comes together. I use the pictures to mine my subconscious state.” Now she adds: “Some

humans are angry that there’s not enough hate in their world to perpetuate their anger; others are angered by how much pain humans create in this world. I fall into the latter category.” Shock, on the other hand, she sees not as an effect of the artist, or of the audience, but “a result of what is deemed culturally transgressive at any given moment in time. What we feel to be shocking is a temporal affect, a psychic experience of time travel.” She has called this the “Mapplethorpe effect”, pointing out that the shock value of an artwork doesn’t mean that the artist is setting out to shock people, although they may acknowledge the work is culturally transgressive. The public’s shock originates from the viewer’s position, as succinctly described in the title of Steiner’s video *Your Feelings Are Your Fault*.

Steiner—perhaps controversially for an artist seen as “queer” and “feminist”—considers Gustave Courbet’s *Origin of*

the World (1866) an attempt to revere and embody, rather than to objectify. “I believe gaze is determined by cultural signifiers that define power relationships,” she explains. “Understanding W.E.B. Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness, or reading Monique Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body*, can help snap one out of the de rigueur psychosis of the heterosexist, white-identified supremacist patriarchal haze.” Steiner’s projects and collaborations are described as “celebratory efforts in dismantling notions of normativity and the sources of constructed truths”. In her photographic work, women are seen naked, perhaps as sexualized and eroticized by some. “Nakedness, nudity, the Nude, body parts, flesh and flesh eaters populate this exhibition,” wrote the gallerist Pascal Spengemann of Steiner’s 2009 exhibition in his now-defunct Chelsea (NY) space. “Some flaunting and others demure. Transparency,

honesty, and forthrightness are all demonstrated here, but perhaps with a false promise, a come-on, a fantasy, a mirage.” While clearly intending both subversion and irony, Steiner still maintains: “Making anything is an act of objectification.” In terms of viewing and interpreting her work: “50 per cent is me, 50 per cent is you.” The viewer’s physicality is important to her in relation to viewing: “I don’t want a sensation of overwhelmed, I want there to be a sensation of infinity. That this isn’t finished, it’s never-ending.”

In *Puppies & Babies*, an exhibition for 3001 Gallery, Los Angeles, in 2012, Steiner brought together inflated images of “pets, pregnancy and children”, collaging the abjection of childbirth with the soporific of puppy love. In a conversation with Steiner for *Bomb* magazine, the American writer Maggie Nelson says: “This is what I like so much about your work. You acknowledge the fear that you might be pushing

toward a place that you aren’t sure will be a good one to go to—in the case of *Puppies & Babies*, into the sentimental, or banal, or clichéd, or whatever. You push on anyway, you respect your impulses, until you find/make something completely worthwhile.” Steiner responds by acknowledging her investigation of “the unsustainability of the binary—normative on one hand, and transgressive on the other”. And certainly much of her work is an open investigation, as, indeed, are her answers to me:

“Does the body represent or define identity?”
“Yes.”
“Or is identity beyond the body?”
“Yes.”
“What about the collective/ community body?”
“What about it?”

Perhaps this is the 50 per cent that is left for the viewer to decide.

V FOR VICTORY

“I love the idea of v as my pronoun because it’s a symbol that might be on the wall of an ancient cave—two equal sides that meet in the middle. It represents somebody who’s not one thing or the other.” Mx Justin Vivian Bond talks to Ariela Gittlen about what it would be like to live in a world without binaries.

PORTRAIT BY DAVID KIMELMAN



“THE MOST EXHAUSTING PART OF BEING TRANS IS THAT YOU CONSTANTLY HAVE TO INSIST ON SOMETHING THAT’S A GIVEN FOR SO MANY PEOPLE”

Justin Vivian Bond has a platinum-blond fringe, an East Village flat in some disarray and a sweet old cat, who sleeps, silent as taxidermy, for the duration of my visit. The flat will soon be traded for a house in upstate New York—hence the mess, the artist explains, and as for the cat: “She’s been my most ardent and tender lover for many, many years.” V’s rich voice dips to deliver bon mots, followed by trills of laughter. (Bond, who is transgender, prefers the honorific Mx and the pronouns v, they or them.) Even off stage, v’s delivery is flawless.

A self-described trans-genre artist, Bond is a prolific artist, activist and curator. V is the author of the heart-grabbing coming-of-age memoir *Tango: My Childhood, Backwards and in High Heels*, has acted in numerous films and has had solo exhibitions of painting, installation and performance in New York and London. But v is perhaps best known for performing as the louche, foul-mouthed singer Kiki DuRane, half of the cabaret duo Kiki and Herb. Although the act emerged from the rough-and-ready San Francisco drag scene of the early Nineties, by the mid-2000s they were playing Carnegie Hall and nominated for a Tony Award. Now fifty-three, Bond performs as Mx Justin Vivian Bond, a hard-won identity long in the making. An upcoming musical tour will follow the credo “glamour is resistance!”

In the meantime, Bond has been hard at work curating New York Live Arts’ *Mx’d Messages*, a festival of art and ideas held this spring. Its offerings were widely interdisciplinary, including panels

on Afrofuturist art, trans theology and the influence of the Queercore punk scene, as well as workshops, performances and film screenings. At the heart of each *Mx’d Messages* event was a central question: What would it be like to live in a world without binaries?

Why was it important that Mx’d Messages include artists and creatives from so many different disciplines?

People assumed that because I’m transgender the festival would be about trans issues, but to me that includes everything. If you’re capable of seeing that gender is not binary then you can see other things in non-binary ways as well. Religion, for example. The differences between religions are very minor, but the struggles and fights over those minor differences are extraordinary. If we can find ways of approaching these subjects without being so radically extremist, that would certainly be to everyone’s benefit. So I wanted to have a panel on trans theology. How do we know that God is gendered? What gender is the Holy Spirit? That sort of thing. There’s a rabbi named Mark Sameth on the panel who wrote an article in the *New York Times* called “Is God Transgender?” about how early biblical texts used non-specific and non-binary gender language and that people’s genders would change.

In a past interview you referred to God with the pronoun v, the same one you prefer for yourself.

Did I? Although I’m comfortable with they and them now, I love the idea of v as my pronoun because it’s

a symbol that might be on the wall of an ancient cave—two equal sides that meet in the middle. It represents somebody who’s not one thing or the other.

Is a world without binaries a practical possibility or just a utopian ideal?

I don’t know if it’s a utopian ideal, but I do think it’s an interesting point of departure, especially considering how polarized the world is right now. One panel is organized by Siri May who works with OutRight Action International, advocating for the LGBT population at the United Nations. They don’t really use the term LGBT, they use “sexual orientation and gender identity” because people throughout the world don’t think of themselves as LGBT—they have different ways of categorizing themselves. So if you take away binaries and you take away these categories, how do you advocate for people? I don’t say that a world without binaries is the ideal world, but there are new ways of looking at things that hopefully we’ll discover.

In your memoir Tango you wrote that when you learned about the burgeoning Women’s Lib movement as a child, you made a sign and marched around the neighbourhood in a bid for kids’ liberation. Why did you see the struggle for women’s rights as connected to your own?

As a kid, I felt that if feminism was successful, the roles that men and women could play would completely open up. It would allow people who felt trapped in the roles they were assigned to be liberated

from them. That was my mistaken childish perception which I have somehow retained through all these years and that I’m still working for.

Was there a moment when you realized how powerful having the right words could be?

I remember being a kid and I would be doing something and my father would say, “Boys don’t do that.” Having just done it, I thought: Well, either boys do that or I’m not a boy. I realized that the most logical explanation was that my father was wrong. Many people are aware of the limitations of language around gender, but because we don’t have the words to express it we’re stuck in patterns of behaviour that limit us and our interactions. I’ve tried to popularize certain words that created new ways of dealing with concepts that there wasn’t previously language for, such as non-binary or gender-fluid, using the word Mx, and throwing v out there as a gender pronoun. I want a medical and social record of who I am so I’m not effectively put back in the closet in twenty or thirty years when I’m no longer able to articulate who, or what, I am. The fact is that if you’re trans and not insisting you’re trans and on the use of the proper pronouns, your family and friends are more comfortable completely ignoring your truth. The most exhausting part of being trans is that you constantly have to insist on something that’s a given for so many people.

Does the generation that followed you have a different relationship with the language of gender?



PORTRAIT BY DAVID KINELMAN

In many ways they’ve surpassed me. When Kate Bornstein and I were touring with her play *Hidden: A Gender*, in which I played an intersex character who had secondary sex characteristics of both genders, we didn’t have words like “non-binary”. That was in 1990–91, when all of a sudden queer studies and gender studies started to be taught in colleges so there were all these students who had access to all of this information. I would have coffee with them after the show and they would teach me all these things. They were putting language to the things I already knew because I was living them. So it’s not just a one-way street; it goes in many different directions again, part of the non-binary nature of it. The generation that came after me is in many

ways much better educated around these issues.

You work in many media. Do you jump back and forth daily between disciplines?

I do sort of jump back and forth because I manage my own career. I don’t like to plan too much. That’s why this year all my shows are called *Justin Vivian Bond Shows Up* because I want to be able to respond to whatever’s happening in the world at the time. I sing and I talk, that’s what I do. Hopefully the combination of words and songs adds up to something more than just words and songs.

So there’s an element of surprise?

It keeps my musicians interested and it makes me feel free. It also

keeps me engaged in the process, as opposed to just playing something and not thinking about it.

Last year you began teaching a course on installation art at Bard College.

Did anything surprise you about teaching?

That the students are very intelligent, but they don’t actually know anything. The richness and depth of this world is something you can’t know by the time you’re twenty-one. I was lucky—one of the benefits of being socially ostracized and having a bipolar best girlfriend was that we mostly just stayed indoors, read a lot and listened to music. So I knew a lot more than most people about the McCarthy era, feminism and ridiculous romance novels from the book of the month club. She was

into science fiction and I was into biographies, so between the two of us we went through a lot of books.

I was forced to read a lot too as a kid because my parents refused to buy a television.

In seventh grade my grades were bad so I was grounded from the TV for a marking period. That’s when I started drawing, painting and reading. It was the smartest thing my parents ever did. If they hadn’t, none of this would be here and I’d be a complete fucking idiot. I worry because most people skim the surface of so many things, but they don’t have the opportunity and the time to get to know about anything deeply.

What about the internet? It can be as distracting as TV, but it also allows people to build communities and access information in new ways.

I think the internet is really important. My mother is an intelligent woman, but when I was young, her ability to deal with the issues that I was facing was non-existent because she had no context for me. She still doesn’t really, but she’s a little bit more open. If I had insisted that she learn about these things because I knew where to tell her to look, it might have made it easier on both of us. What I do now as an artist is contextualize things. I’m a contextualizer. That’s what *Mx’d Messages* is about, contextualizing all these ideas.

What’s your next big project?

I’ve been commissioned to do a new piece that will be shown at SFMOMA in March, so Bard is giving me development space and resources to create a performance. I’m not calling myself the director or the writer, I’m the facilitator of this idea and I’ll have lots of people help me put it together. I’m giving everyone little roles. My friend Michael is really good at connecting people, so he’s the door. Nath Ann is my memory bank because he’s an ex-lover and really good at memorizing facts. I keep him on stage so I can go: “What am I thinking about?” He knows everything.

You must have a talent for staying friends with your exes.

I’d be so lonely otherwise! Generally, once I love someone, I love them. But like I say: The truth changes.

MINORITY REPORT

“I was in a minority, that’s for sure. I’m still probably in a minority.” There are vcontemporary Japanese artists whose practices have come to be understood as feminist abroad: Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono and Mariko Mori, for instance. But artists who frame themselves as feminist in Japan are comparatively rare. Charlotte Jansen meets one of the great, outspoken exceptions—Yoshiko Shimada.

ALL IMAGES © YOSHIKO SHIMADA, COURTESY OTA FINE ARTS



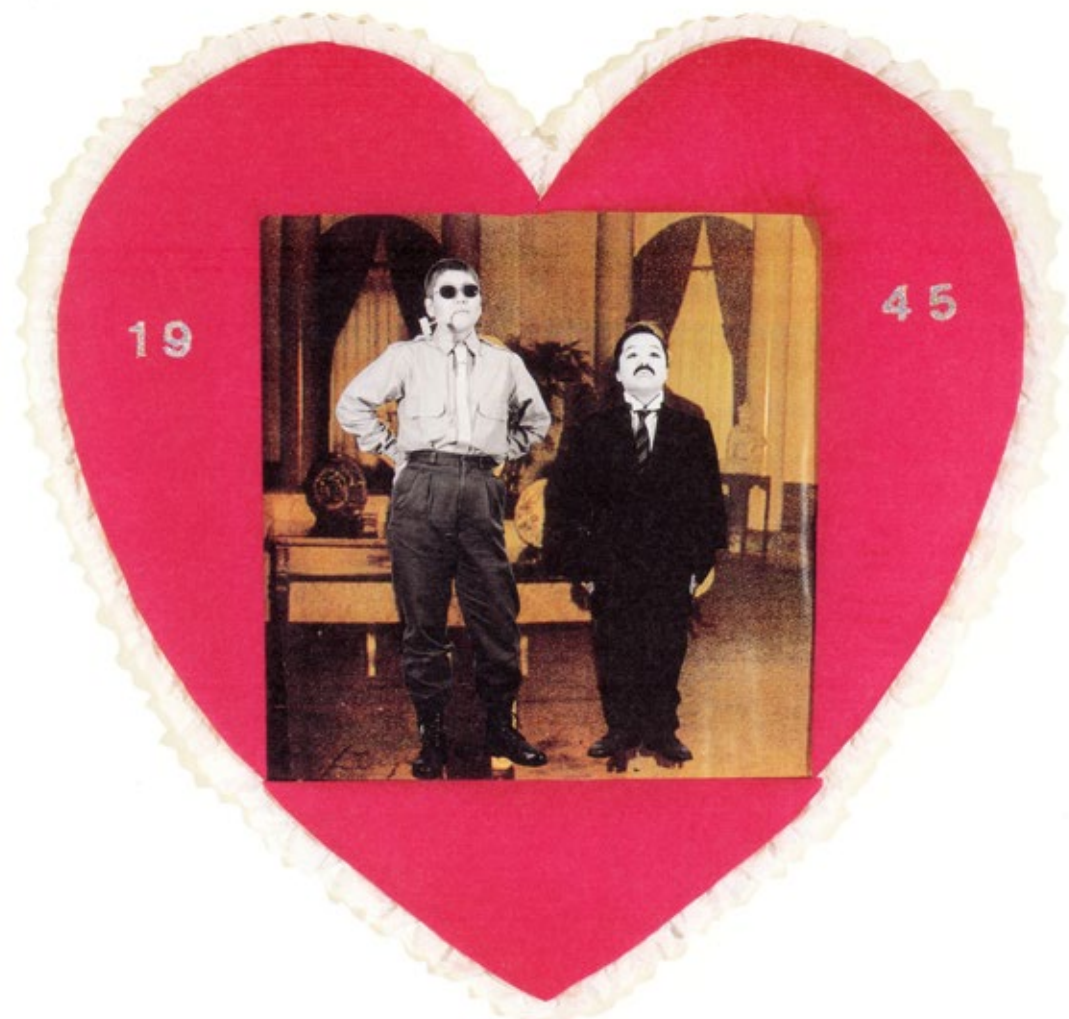
Previous page
A Picture to Be Burnt, 1993
Etching, 59.7 x 39.7cm

This page
1945, 1998
Photo, collage, 60 x 60cm

Opposite page
A House of Comfort, 1993
Etching, 59.8 x 39.8cm

Overleaf, left
Baby Contest II, 1995
Etching, 39.5 x 56.3cm

Overleaf, right
Repair, 1998
Photo collage, 260 x 365cm



Few curators dabble openly with feminist art in Japan, where such exhibits tend to be presented as “socially engaged art”. That might lead you to think that there are no feminist artists in Japan. But it isn’t true—for a start, there is Yoshiko Shimada, who has been brave enough to call herself a feminist since the 1990s. There was, as Eliza Tan has remarked, some momentum in the Asian feminist art movement in the 1990s. Shimada was part of it, but she is not as well known as she might be. Perhaps that’s because her work isn’t very commercial, but it may also be because the ideas she brings up through her work are not always popular—even among her feminist peers.

Over the past two decades,

Shimada’s work has focused on women’s roles in war and the military, their participation in acts of violence, and the insidious use of the female image to promote destruction and peace at the same time. She has made etchings, photographs, publications, installations, videos and performances, and written essays, challenging the usual perception of women—especially Asian women—as passive and pacifist. She participated in some of the pivotal and pioneering attempts to galvanize Asian feminism: in 1995 she took part in the first *Womanifesto*, the biannual event for international women artists in Bangkok, and in 1996, she was the only Japanese artist included in *Gender beyond Memory* (1996), a groundbreaking

exhibition of women feminist artists at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, where her work was shown alongside that of Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson and Hannah Wilke. In the 1990s, Shimada was also involved with the Women’s Art Network (WAN), and later, in 2003, she founded her own feminist art group (Feminist Art Action Brigade/FAAB), which disbanded a year later.

Although her work is concerned with women, her idea of feminism is not limited by sex or gender. As she wrote in her essay “Escaping Oneself”: “I imagine this multi-directional and multi-layered way of connecting oneself to others and to society as the ideal of feminism... I use the word ‘feminism’ as opposed to a vertical, masculine

construct of current society. I don’t mean to say it is uniquely feminine, or can only be understood by biological women.”

Shimada was raised during the post-war period in Tachikawa, a western suburb of Tokyo. There was a US military base there, so she grew up surrounded by the vestiges of war—side streets where she glimpsed bars and sex workers catering for American soldiers. At school, many of the students had American fathers, and “the ones who had a Japanese surname and an American first name, people assumed that their mother had been a prostitute”. Aged sixteen, Shimada travelled to the US for the first time, on an exchange visit to San Bernardino, “a smoggy, dusty, typical American suburb in

Southern California, and huge, compared to Japan, too loud and with too much of everything”.

I wonder how this first trip abroad changed her understanding of Japan, and the relations between Americans and Japanese there, where “on the surface everything was friendly”—pretty miraculous only a decade after two atomic bombs had been dropped by the US on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She recalls she interviewed a first-generation Japanese family living in California, whose version of history “made a big impact on me”. This new perspective on Japanese history led to her making more discoveries closer to home—including a cousin whose name she had never heard mentioned who had married a black American soldier. “When I was growing up it was just everyday life, you didn’t think about it. I didn’t even question why the Americans were there. I think when I went to America and studied history—from their side—I learned more about it.”

In Japan, Shimada attended a school modelled on the pre-war system, where most of the students were boys. Later, she left Japan to study art at Scripps women’s college in California, and it was there that she made another discovery about herself. “I don’t think I ever heard the word feminism before I went to the States. The high school I went to was mostly for boys, they accepted only a few girls. In that kind of environment I just hung out with boys and did the same thing as them, and I wasn’t very aware of my gender. When I went to college in America it was the opposite: I realized I was a woman—and that there were so many varieties of us!”

She is talking to me as we sit in her studio in Chiba Prefecture, on top of a mountain in a quiet fishermen’s village overlooking the sea. Here she has her library of books—collecting and archiving printed materials is a hobby of hers—and her extremely heavy etching press. She explains that at night she doesn’t stick around, as she doesn’t want to meet the wild boars who roam the mountain’s heights, so she heads back down to her house on the beach and her cats.

Being at university in the States in “this totally new environment”, she says, “gave me some space to think about being a woman, and



“I WAS INTO PUNK. I NEVER REALLY LIKED THE MAINSTREAM”



also about being an Asian woman. When the majority of students are white, inevitably you're aware of being gazed at as Asian." In what sense? "We're much smaller, so they had the assumption that the Asian girls are easier to deal with, and you just feel it, the way the guys talked to other, taller, white girls. The tone of voice and the way they looked at them, compared to us, was very different."

After graduating, Shimada and her foreign student peers wrote to George Deukmejian, then Republican governor of California, to ask if they could extend their stay in the US. They received a letter back suggesting they find American husbands. Unwilling to marry to stay in America, Shimada returned to Japan in 1983. "I was sort of lost—I had to find my way back to Japanese society. Japan had changed a lot: the bubble economy was going on—the

1970s were gone, and everything was market-oriented. And in popular culture all kinds of American things were in, like surfing and American cars, music, etc—it was like a 1950s revival. I really hated it!" Shimada laughs—she laughs often and easily, even when discussing the serious obstacles she's faced. "I really don't like the 1980s, it was all about money, glitter, noise—horrible music and horrible fashion!" She joined a print-makers' association in Tokyo, but struggled with the hierarchies and the stoical dedication to technique. "I was into punk. I never really liked the mainstream—I guess I was kind of rebellious. I wanted something more powerful."

The television in Shimada's living room carried images from Tiananmen Square, of the Olympics in South Korea, and of Emperor Hirohito's illness. When

Hirohito, who had been head of state during the period of Japan's militarization and involvement in World War II, eventually passed away in 1989, Shimada was reflecting on what to make of this particular moment in history. "After he died, historians tried to make it into a neat package: we had a hard time, bad things happened, but now it's over. I thought we had to keep thinking about it. We didn't think long and deeply enough about this. I thought if this idea was filling up my head and I didn't have an outlet for it—if I didn't connect my hand to my brain—I thought I would explode."

Looking through photos of the period she had been collecting, she was struck in particular by the images of women at war. One was of a woman wearing a white apron, holding a pistol up, pointed to shoot, her expression hard and

determined. "Those to me were the most shocking images—up until then I didn't know what Japanese women did during the war. They were always shown as victims."

When an opportunity came for her to exhibit at the gallery she worked at—the now-defunct Aki-Ex gallery in Tokyo—she presented her first etching experiments with the found photographs of women at war. A second exhibition followed in 1991, in a larger space in Meguro, where she presented forty etchings. She also met Hidenori Ota, the owner of a burgeoning contemporary gallery in Ebisu, now one of the city's leading contemporary galleries, representing Yayoi Kusama among others. Shimada became Ota's first artist and has stayed with the gallery ever since. The women-at-war etchings were a strong statement about women, Japan and responsibility.

They revealed the hidden histories of women who had actively, willingly, participated in war and violence, a radical overturning of the idea of women as peacekeepers.

In the following years, Shimada often exhibited alongside Ito Tari, a performance artist and the founder of the Women's Art Association. "Always, when it came to gender shows, it was Ito Tari and me, Ito Tari and me!"

"I was in a minority, that's for sure," she muses. "I'm still probably in a minority."

Following her participation in the seminal 1995 Power Plant exhibition *Age of Anxiety* in Toronto, Shimada came into contact with BuBu de la Madeleine, a sex worker, performance artist and member of Dumb Type. Over the next decade, they collaborated on a series of works, including performances and videos such as *Made*

in Occupied Japan, for which they interviewed women in the Self-Defence Force in Kumamoto. This work brought Shimada full circle back to her roots, growing up in the aftermath of war. In one image, BuBu and Shimada play the roles of soldier and sex worker in front of a chicken-wire fence; in another, dressed as nurses, they doctor a giant penis, its formal similarities to a weapon very clear.

Many of the women's art groups she has been involved with over the decades have fallen apart, or failed to cohere, ideologically or aesthetically, and turned, she says, into something more like self-help groups. Feminists remain polarized and marginalized in Japan, unable to agree on core issues relating to sexuality and definitions of gender. Shimada thinks them insufficiently critical too. Her own stance has proved controversial: her recent

feminist reading of the schoolgirls in paintings by Hiroshi Nakamura, for example, created uproar among Japanese feminists—how could a male artist possibly be feminist? "In art criticism and in art, the artwork is an independent entity," she says. "You have to look at it as an autonomous thing. The painter's gender almost has nothing to do with it—unless it's reflected in the work itself."

I wonder how Shimada defines feminist art now. "I used to think of it as breaking down the system, but now I think it's more about making it possible to imagine an alternative, rather than thinking that what's happening now is everything. In that way feminist art can contribute more to changing people's vision."

Does she think she's been able to achieve anything in her practice? She is modest in assessing her own

accomplishments. "Probably not—there might be greater awareness about gender among male artists, but I don't see it that much." She mentions a book, however, written by Tomoko Kira, who visited Shimada's exhibition in Meguro in 1991. Ten years later, Shimada received a copy of *Joseigaka tachi no senso (War of Women Painters)* containing a personal dedication of thanks to her for inspiring the research. Perhaps it's unexpected outcomes of this sort that validate the art for her. "It's really nice to know that this small thing has grown into this research and a good book. You never know—you're just planting some seeds, some might grow, some might not, but I think it's worth the effort." With that, Japan's most rebellious feminist artist walks me back down the hill towards the sea, before the wild boars come.

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Lucid Dreaming

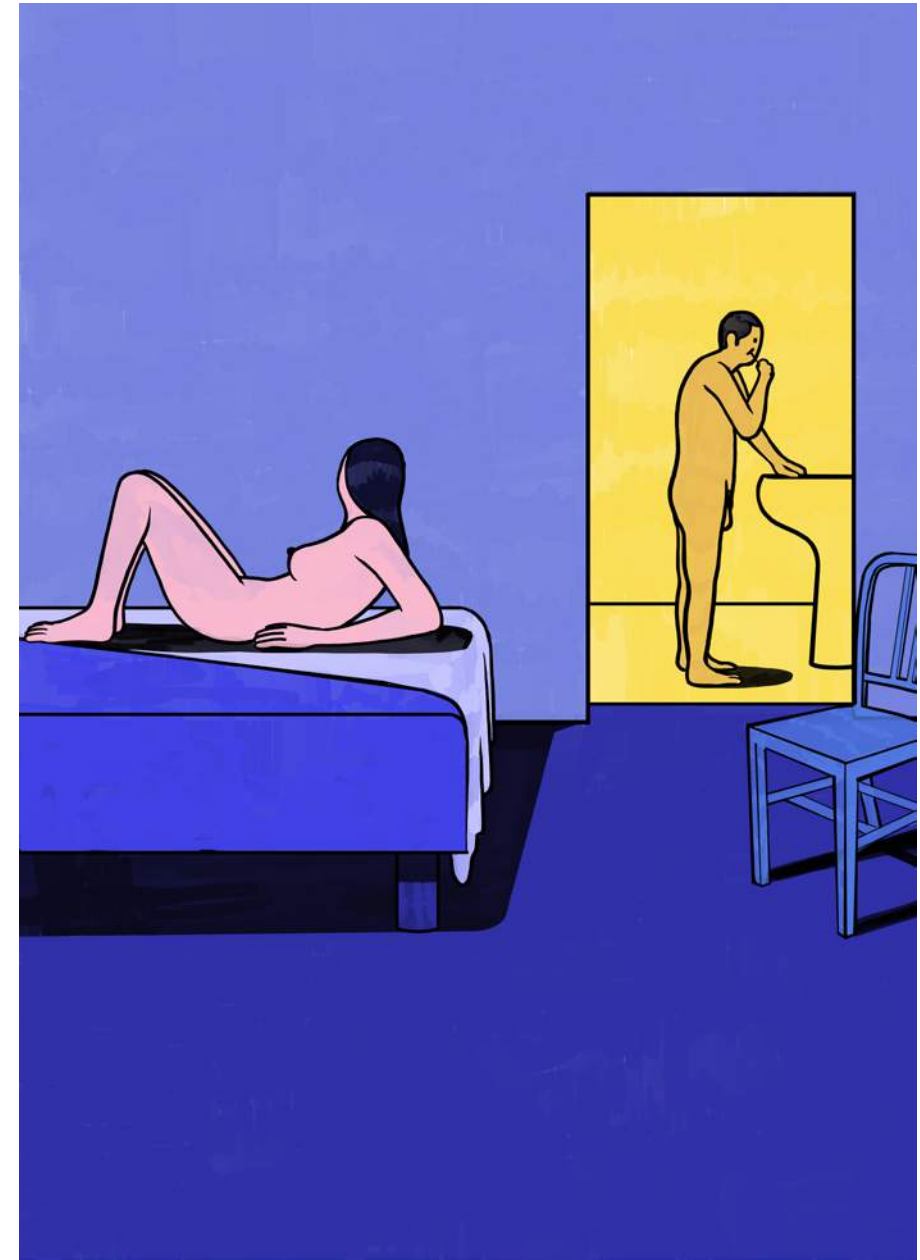
KLAUS KREMMERZ

“Drawing is a way of dreaming with my eyes open,” says Klaus Kremmerz, who conjures scenes of bittersweet drama from a variety of sources. He cites fellow artists Wesley Willis, Marcel Dzama, Alex Katz, Raymond Pettibon and Andrea Pazienza as influences, but pulp EC Comics publications from the Fifties and Sixties such as *The Vault of Horror* and *Tales from the Crypt* also leave their trace on his work, as do contemporary cartoon series like *Ugly Americans* and *Adventure Time*. “I strive for contrast,” Kremmerz says. “I like using elements of comics’ visual language to say something which is not comic at all.” *Sicario* was influenced by *Reservoir Dogs* and *The Sopranos*; *After Midnight* was created listening to Ornette Coleman; *Fall* was inspired by a scene Kremmerz witnessed in Central Park. “I’m really not into surrealism or conceptual illustration... Ionesco, Pinter and Beckett are my references, not Magritte,” he says. “I try to tell a story using a single image.”



ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST

After Midnight 1, 2016



After Midnight 2, 2016



Fall, 2016



Crash, 2016



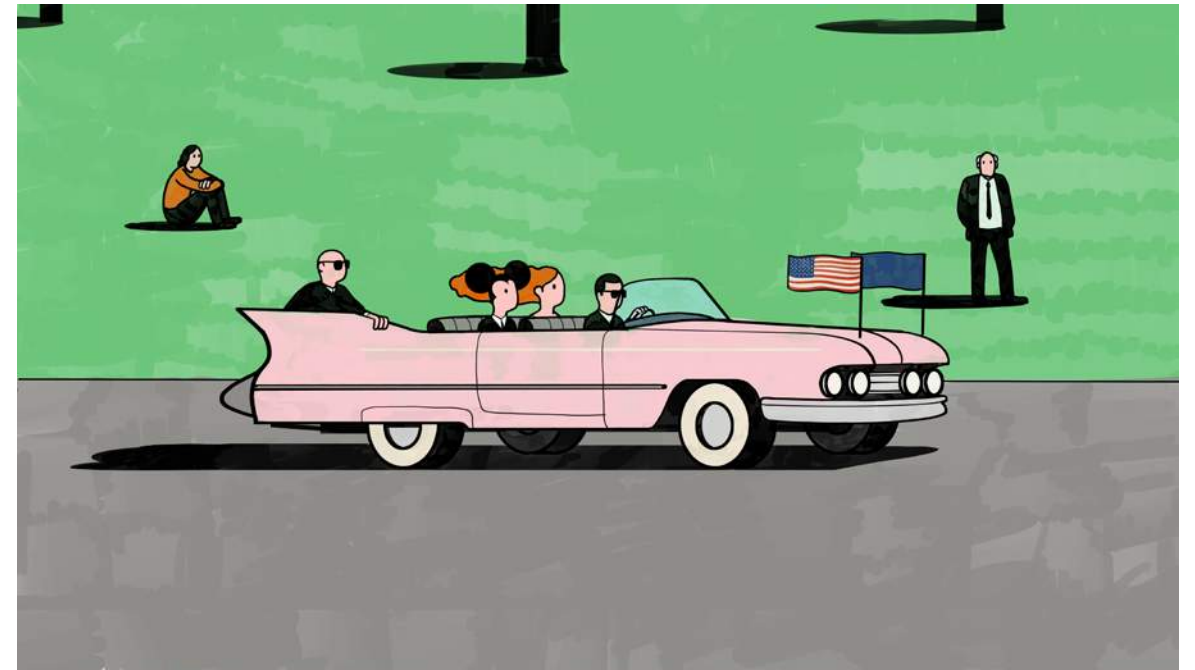
Brooklyn, 2016



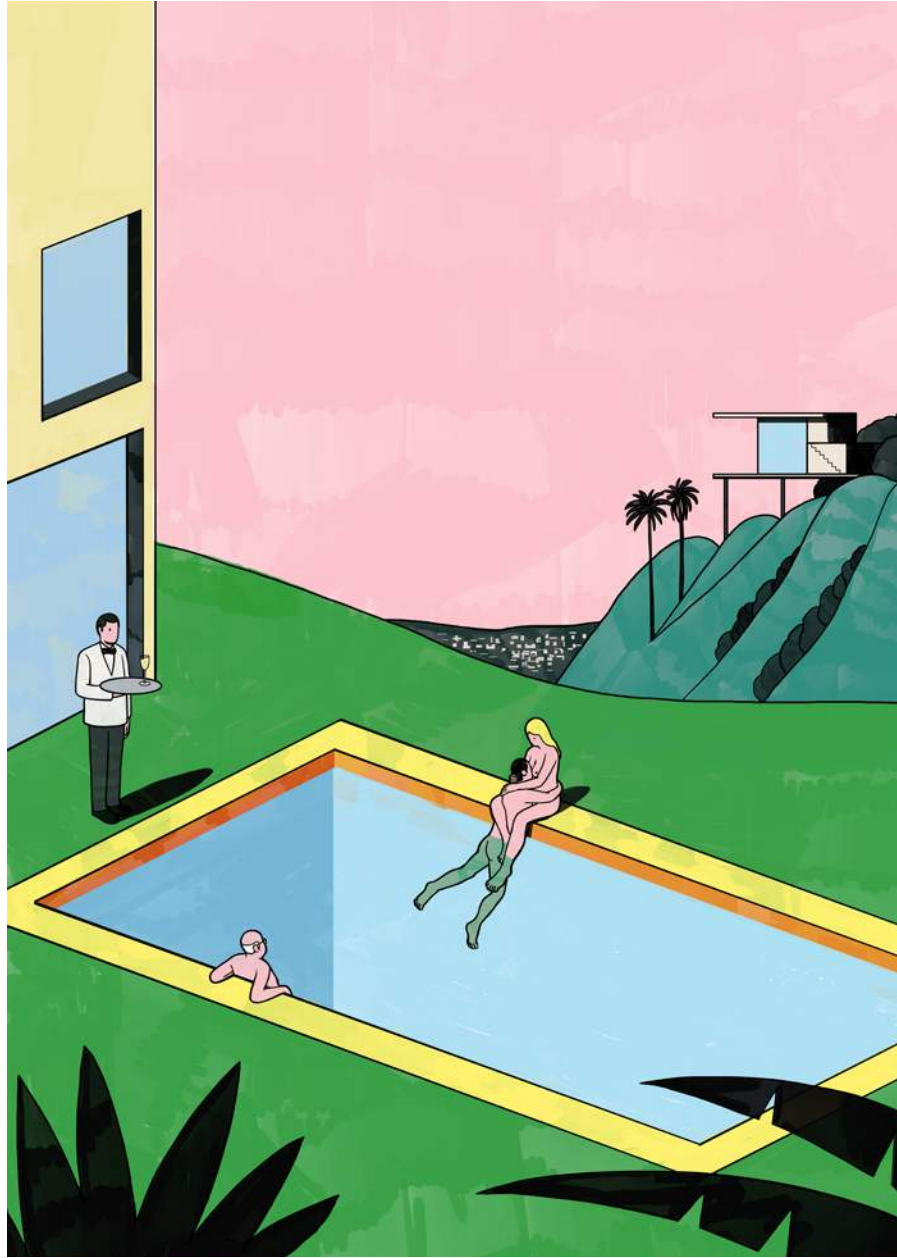
Self-Portrait, 2017



The Nix 4, De Correspondent, 2016



The Nix 1, De Correspondent, 2016



4 People, 2016



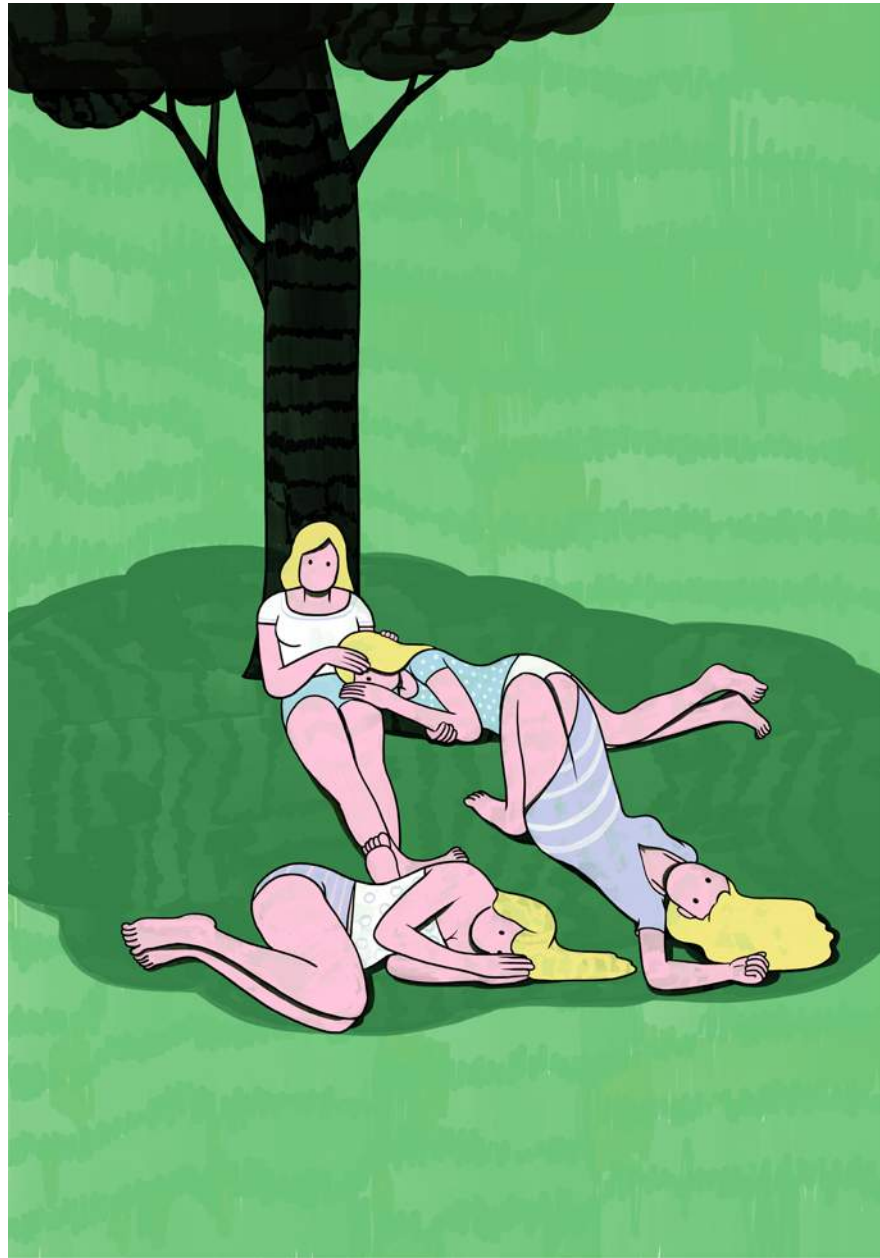
Sicario, 2016



Portugal, Monocle magazine, 2017



The Nix 3, De Correspondent, 2016



The Virgin Suicides, 2016



Cumhuriyet 2, Die Zeit Magazin, 2017



The Nix 7, De Correspondent, 2016

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ENCOUNTERS

The Frankenstein Aspect
Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster



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Caught in a Spell
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THE
FRANKENSTEIN

DOMINIQUE
GONZALEZ-FOERSTER



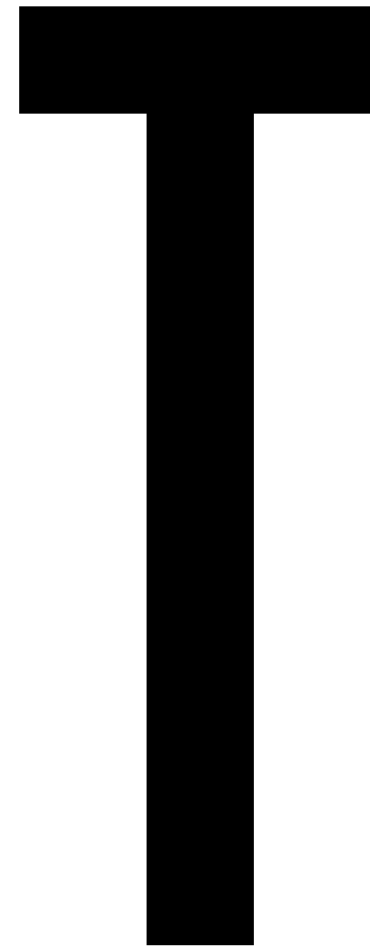
AS

PECT

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's work unfolds as an ongoing sequence of times and spaces circulating the viewer between different registers of reality, periods, places, narratives, genealogies, world views and historical personalities—as demonstrated by the ghostly appearances of Sarah Bernhardt, Marilyn Monroe and Maria Callas at her recent show at the Esther Schipper gallery in Berlin. "I am always fascinated by the capability of the artwork to constitute artificial life, by the Frankenstein aspect of the artwork, by its type of life," she tells Ory Dessau.



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The conversation I have with French artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster opens in a discussion about the importance of an accurate vocabulary when it comes to her work. Subtle and indeterminate, her arrangements in space are relatively empty, sketchy, propositional, but are also calibrated and effective. They operate as a sort of autosuggestion, drawing viewers into their own predetermined yet open chains of associations and intersections. Scarcely filled with elements and objects, they are more a process, an experience, an event, an encounter, than a conventional form of an exhibition.

Your work is often identified with the work of Relational Aesthetics artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and Philippe Parreno who practise art as a social structure, as a real-time social activity, rather than as production of objects. Is the concept of an exhibition still relevant to your work?

I still think in terms of an exhibition, and I think an exhibition is an amazing medium. As much as I reject words and categories such as installation, performance and video art, I still think that the notion of an exhibition as an audience-based medium is open enough and can still take us beyond the field of visual art into the field of real experience. Though it has its splendour rooted in the context of the late nineteenth century, the term "exhibition" can still refer to a space where one is able to walk around and make one's own time in relation to different situations and

moments; but what is really interesting to me in relation to the exhibition as a medium is that, unlike cinema or theatre, it is not time-based but audience-based. This is where I think that the exhibition as a medium is still very attractive since it produces a viewer who has the qualities that Walter Benjamin, following Baudelaire, attributed to the urban *flâneur*; a viewer who has the possibility of being inside and outside at the same time; who is not fixed to his or her seat, or to a single viewing point for a predetermined duration.

Within the historical narrative of your work 2016 can be considered a significant year. During 2016, 1887–2058, your non-linear, future-anticipating retrospective, occupied the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and K20, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf. The exhibition was organized as a circumferential collection of environments and rooms, each evoking, and to a certain degree actualizing, specific points in time between 1887 and 2058. At first glance it seemed as though the works on view were insubstantial, gestural outlines of periodical rooms, but as the viewer accumulated the different historical-cultural-artistic contexts and discourses suggested by each of them, the exhibition began resonating on an epic level as a peculiar form of Gesamtkunstwerk, a total work of art. In my practice, there is a strong economy of signs, references, effects, forms of art. It is a genealogy of works that produce other works

that produce other works, and so on. There is no limit to the amount of quotes, references and characters it includes. This limitlessness is expressed in many ways. For example, in the original display of *Splendide Hotel* in the Palacio de Cristal in Madrid in 2014, the Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas told me that he didn't know where the work ended, if it was the sky, the birds or the glass structure in which it was displayed.

Within the orchestration of 1887–2058, Splendide Hotel served as a launch pad to 1887, the year the Palacio de Cristal and the original Splendide Hotel in Lugano were built. The limitlessness of the work stemmed from the fact that it superimposed the two buildings one on top of the other, then superimposed their superimposition on top of the glass room it occupied in the Centre Pompidou, which was later superimposed once again on top of its room in K20.

I like this blending of the art into the real, into historical reality. In the version of *Splendide Hotel* in Madrid there was a transparent room where objects appeared and disappeared in between the wooden rocking chairs that were scattered in it. Even though it was not announced, it was inspired by Arthur Rimbaud's wish to expose himself publicly in one of the world exhibitions, which he expressed in a letter to his mother during his travels. In recent years I have explored the medium of the exhibition from the point of view of ephemerality and disappearance



Opener and previous pages
Cinema (QM.15), 2016
HD video, projector,
laser sensor, Plexiglas
screen, media player,
amplifier, speakers
200 x 300cm
(minimal projection size)

Second spread
Portrait by Ériver Hijano

This page
BLESS, Dominique
Gonzalez-Foerster and
Manuel Raeder,
*Costumes & Wishes for
the 21st Century*, Schinkel
Pavillon, Berlin, 2016



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS, SCHINKEL PAVILLON, BERLIN, AND ESTHER SCHIPPER, BERLIN

“I LIKE BLURRED SITUATIONS. I AM COMPLETELY ALLERGIC TO DIRECT INDICATION TO THE VIEWER”

and not from that of permanence, presence and fixity, in order to undermine the notion of the eternal shape of the artwork and the idea that it only has one place.

The effect of each work catches the viewer by surprise. One suddenly finds oneself in a mental space, in an intersection between reality and imagination, actuality and history, here and there, without knowing how what is seen, or how the very few things that are seen induce the effect of an overlap, of elastic time-space.

I can understand your comment that my practice raises the question in regard to what exactly the viewer sees, what the work is, what it has and does, and how, on the one hand, it plays with the code of an exhibition or even a retrospective, but on the other, how it does so in an unstructured manner, which is parallel to the unstructured viewing experience the viewer is being led through.

The elements in your environments generate uncertainty. Their status and purpose are never clear. It is never clear whether they are there to be seen or to be used.

I like blurred situations. I am completely allergic to direct indication to the viewer, and to what many call activation of space. I let viewers build their own desire, choose to sit on the bed or not, enter this place or not. I provide a set of potentials and intentions. I try hard to become the viewer, to be in this position. But not one type

of viewer. I don't work for one viewer.

Your work relates to history as material. In 2008 you presented TH.2058 at Tate Modern. The work envisioned the world in 2058 during an endless flood, in reaction to which it transformed the museum's Turbine Hall into a shelter for people and a storage place for artworks and other objects of culture, while filling the space with metal bunk beds, books and a giant single-channel projection of The Last Film, a video work composed of excerpts from cinematic dystopias. In addition, it occupied the space with replicas of iconic sculptures from the Tate collection, enlarged by 25 per cent. For K20, you slightly modified the work and manifested the passage of time from 2008 to 2016, by changing the title to TH.2066 and including replicas of other sculptures, enlarged by 35 per cent. Would you consider your work apocalyptic?

I never use the word apocalypse. Sometimes people mention this word and I always disagree. I perceive the shelters in Tate Modern and K20 as a story about the wish to preserve and value cultural achievements, more than a scenario of apocalypse and loss. As humans, we produced all these materials, sculptures, things, and we should decide whether it is a failure or whether there is something there we ought to keep. This is the reason I like Fitzcarraldo as a character, and find him very representative of the Anthropocene because he wants to build his opera in the jungle, and at the same time he is willing to move mountains and cut down

thousands of trees. He shows the ambiguous human relation to the biotope versus culture.

You marked the end of 2016 with two exhibitions you opened almost simultaneously in November in Berlin. The first was a joint exhibition with BLESS and Studio Manuel Raeder at Schinkel Pavillon entitled Costumes & Wishes for the 21st Century; the other was a solo exhibition at the Esther Schipper gallery entitled QM.15. Both exhibitions involved your stock of historical figures whom you re-enact as apparitions throughout your work, by means of projected performances, photographs or, as in the case of the exhibition at Schinkel Pavillon, by costumes. How would you distinguish these exhibitions from your earlier work?

The show at Schinkel is like a graph, with costumes placed in space like points in a graph. Some costumes represent characters from the nineteenth century and others from the twentieth century. The graph-like structure connects between the costumes and gathers the characters to discuss whether opera is possible in the twenty-first century. The costumes, the characters they represent and the work associated with these characters are like devices, and I use the word devices because I cannot think now of a better word, for travelling in time, for unfamiliar kinds of presence and existence. I am always fascinated by the capability of the artwork to constitute artificial life, by the Frankenstein aspect of the artwork, by its type of life.

SPONTANEOUS,

“For thirty years now I have tried to say: What is reality? What is life? Life is constant movement and transformation. I decided to devote my life to mastering spontaneity. That is not an easy thing!” A big ask, indeed, yet Fabienne Verdier seems ideally suited to the task. Emily Steer meets the French artist in the Parisian countryside to discuss superconsciousness and enriching the language of abstraction.



SUPERCONSCIOUS

**“SOMETIMES
DOCTORS TELL
ME MY PAINTING
SESSIONS ARE
VERY DANGEROUS.
SOMETIMES
I NEED WHISKEY
TO RECOVER”**

After a brief meeting with the arrestingly warm artist at *Rhythms and Reflections*, her solo exhibition at Waddington Custot gallery in London in November 2016, I have crossed the Channel—Brexit notwithstanding—to visit Fabienne Verdier’s two studio spaces about an hour’s drive outside Paris.

Verdier’s works are large-scale and impactful. She paints from above with a variety of large and often unconventional tools including a brush made from twelve horsetails and a funnel-type contraption that delivers paint directly onto the canvas. In positioning the canvas on the floor, gravity pulls the paint directly towards it. It’s a force that is evident in the weight of the painted line.

Her paintings are generally made in two stages. First, a single-colour background is created and meticulously worked into to give it a tremendous amount of depth. Against this, she then creates single or multiple lines with her enormous alt-brushes. The lines are created with minimal sweeps, perhaps a single continuous movement, from which smaller, vein-like marks often track away. Watching the artist at work, on film, I was surprised by how quickly she moves when applying her line.

“It’s between control and uncontrol,” she tells me. “It’s the great mystery of painting. If you completely control it, the mystery could get lost in the paint. If you don’t control it at all, nothing happens. It is death. But when you are there with the brush there’s an intuitive experience, where suddenly your brain and your nervous system understand that something has happened. I always play with this, as if I’m waiting for the accident.”

This forms the very dynamic part of the artist’s practice, for which her first studio space, sitting in an industrial complex, seems ideally suited. This morning, three white-suited, masked assistants are testing finishes in a glass-doored booth, conjuring visions of *Breaking Bad*. One of Verdier’s large, bicycle-handled brushes hangs from a mobile metal beam at least twice human-height overhead, red- and black-tinged with paint. There are large canisters full to the brim with painty water, brushes of every size and shape hang from the wall, and sunflower yellow, bright blue and black freshly painted canvases are propped against tables.

The second studio space is calmer, almost Zen, built into the grounds of the cottage the artist shares with her husband and son. It fuses Eastern and Western architecture. In the grassy area between house and studio, little can be heard but a quiet trickle from the perfectly rectangular pond. To one side of the garden is a circle where Verdier burns the works that haven’t quite made it for her.

“I want to learn a lot before and do research and wait for the maturation of the abstract mind to talk with some substance,” the artist says of the many notes and marked books that lie about her black-walled library, stacked floor to ceiling with books, natural forms, skins, fossils

and semi-precious stones and notebooks. “But I never want to import that in a figurative way. I like to learn about the history and background of which artist turned around which idea, and how they painted and represented it. How Anish Kapoor turned around the idea of the circle, or a Flemish master of the fifteenth century, or Leonardo da Vinci. This makes the form I have to invent much more vivid, and also I try to see the whole human artistic experience together to enrich the abstract language.”

It’s easy to find yourself reading natural forms in Verdier’s non-representational work—mountainscapes, branches of trees and clusters of capillaries. For the artist these are all one and the same.

“I am nature, I have all these forms in my brain, in my memory, in my bones, in my blood,” the artist says with characteristic passion. “We have a huge force as human beings. That connection is the most interesting thing in the whole world. We often learn that there is you and the whole. But in fact we are one. It’s a beautiful thing because, despite the huge complexity, there are rules behind it. Painting allowed me to understand all of that.”

Verdier has had a tempestuous relationship with rules throughout her life, throwing off many traditional techniques and expectations, but dedicating herself wholeheartedly to others. “At six my parents divorced. I was the first of five children and it was very difficult for me,” she tells me. “I have a kind of hypersensitivity. On the weekends when we visited my father, I would often go to the museum and suddenly I was in contact with artists like Yves Klein and I felt so well in that kind of art milieu. At that time I said to my father: ‘I want to be a painter.’ He taught me with a traditional easel. He really wanted me to encounter reality through perspective. The thing he wanted, I didn’t see. He said I was a rebel. During all my life after, in art school, it seemed that all traditions were death for me. I wanted to catch the spirit. At that time they said: ‘Maybe only in Asia can you train yourself to have this mastery of spontaneity.’”

Verdier moved to China in 1985, aged twenty-two. She studied at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, and also trained under a Chinese master, Huang Yuan, learning the grueling processes of spontaneous painting.

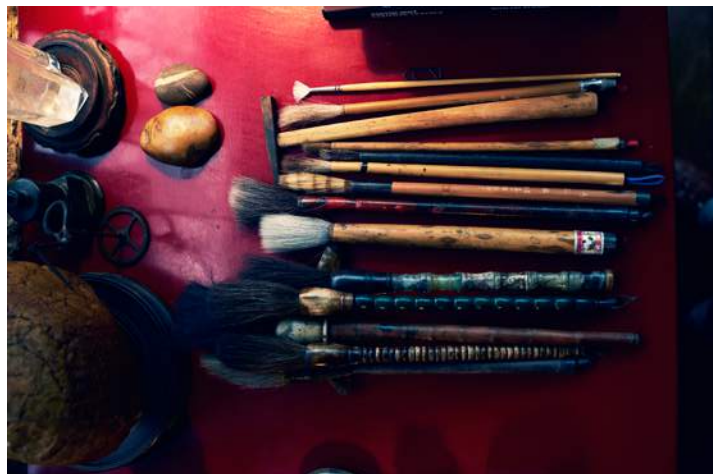
“The traditional training [in China] could have broken me forever,” she says. “It was so hard, and so strict and demanding. You have to recognize that you are nothing. At that moment, something, some integrity or some natural spontaneity, and a clear vision of what reality is, appeared. You have to understand that after years and years I am just beginning to have that freedom. You have to paint like you breathe. I learnt how to master spontaneity in one brush stroke and one energy line, and once you transform that one energy line you can suggest every form in the world.”

She doesn’t like to align her Chinese training with her practice too closely now, however,



IMAGES OF ARTWORKS COURTESY WADDINGTON CUSTOT





“THE PAINTING SENDS ME WHAT SHE WANTS TO SAY. I’VE BEEN WAITING FOR THAT FOR THIRTY YEARS”

and in many ways it has moved past any specific location or culture. But there is certainly a sense of landscape and the natural world within those lines that makes it difficult to ignore the Eastern influence entirely.

Her process is meditative, but also physically demanding. “I put my whole self into it,” she tells me. “It’s very strange because in one way I forget who I am and what I want to say because I become the subject of my painting. In fact, you are in the non-being attitude but in this non-being ritual, during the painting session, maybe finally you find the deepest state of being you ever knew.

“Is it unconscious or superconscious? I don’t know. You are in hyperconcentration and suddenly the tree appears by itself. Because I am in total devotion, I give all my energy. Sometimes doctors tell me my painting sessions are very dangerous. Sometimes I need whiskey to recover... But at the same time I am born and reborn again. This revitalizes me enormously. Painting has helped me to survive in this world, perhaps. If I do not paint every day it is difficult for me.”

Of course, the dynamic, physical gesture within the work—the line—is very much in dialogue with the backgrounds; sometimes dramatically contrasted tonally with the powerful lines, at others, created black on black. “For me, it’s the idea that the void is not a void,” she says. “So first I have to create a universe with fluctuations, vibration. If there is no vibrational environment, the form cannot appear. I realized that I couldn’t create that microstructure only with the brushes so I create with mixed techniques, with layers of painting and then some layers of screenprinting. I continue with glaze and light like the Flemish masters. After twelve or thirteen layers, some vibration appears.”

Although Verdier’s work has had a lot of formal and conceptual consistency over the past three decades, in the last couple of years she has taken steps in new, experimental directions. The first of these was a substantial project in collaboration with the Juilliard School in New York, where she painted alongside musicians. The results were shown in *Rhythms and Reflections*. In these works, one line becomes two, three and four. They spread out across the canvases, flowing and rippling like water, forming patterns and repetitions in some places, and moving off into their own tempo in others. It was a demanding journey.

“Over the years I have built a strong aesthetic concept,” she tells me, “but when I encountered the music... What a big mess for me! Great musicians invited me to play with them and they said: ‘You have to play with your other painter’—which is to say, don’t stay in your aesthetic thought, but forget everything and let your brain, heart and body catch the wave. Suddenly there were a lot of new abstract structures: my abstract paintings with my aesthetic abstract construction and the music’s abstract construction also. It didn’t work together. So I had to destroy all the

things I thought I had built and I tried to accept this new experience.”

This summer Verdier will be the first visual artist in residence at the 69th edition of the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence, painting to music in live workshops.

Recently, words have also found a way into her practice, as she has created works that formally explore the French dictionary *Le Petit Robert*. “The great master of lexicography Alain Rey knocked on the door. I told him I was afraid. In my mind I had just music at that moment and he said: ‘Words are music. I am eighty-seven, I have devoted my life to those dictionaries. But now I realize that I created for each word an objective text. We need a poetic view. With your abstract painting you could enrich our experiment in a subjective way.’”

True to form, once she committed, Verdier *really* committed. “At the very beginning I decided to read the whole dictionary,” she laughs. “Every page. I realized it was impossible. I thought maybe it’s an idea to create a kind of inventory of all the forms I turned around during my thirty years as a painter contemplating the natural world. I decided to create twenty-two paintings. At the beginning I chose one word and it was too simple, there was no creative shock for people to discover something new. So I decided to create couples. When you put two words together you open a new poetic field.”

I view the resulting works in their development stage—bold and energetic, related to word couplings including “labyrinthe, liberté”, “esprit, évasion” and “force, forme”.

It feels as though, after following a very direct and considered path for a long time, Verdier has recently changed tack. “You often have your old patterns disturb you and it’s very difficult for me because I have this great matter in my mind,” she says. “I recognize de Kooning, I recognize Rothko—all the great masters of strong energy and action painting. But I have to find my little path. Recently, really after thirty years of hard work, very hard, you have no idea, something free appeared and it’s not for me to decide: I want to paint this. The painting sends me what she wants to say. I’ve been waiting for that for thirty years. And I can’t explain it. It’s a mystery.”

This page and portrait

All photographs
by Benjamin McMahan

Previous pages

Impermanence III (detail)
2016
Acrylic and mixed media
on canvas, 150 x 226cm

Opening pages

Mutation (detail)
2016
Acrylic and mixed media
on canvas, 183 x 407cm

G

THE FIGHT
AGAINST



PHOTO AGUSTIN ARGE

RAW

JOSE
DÁVILA

ITY

The pleasures of Jose Dávila's work are akin to those of a great novel: suspense, wit and the thrill of recognizing an old idea born anew. The Mexican artist is best known for his photographic cutouts and for his sculptures, which appear to have conquered gravity. Trained as an architect, Dávila still sometimes operates within that profession's vocabulary and concerns—while at the same time carrying the weight of art history lightly but persistently. Words: Ariela Gittlen.



PHOTO: JASON WICHE, NEW YORK. ARTWORKS © JOSE DÁVILA. COURTESY SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK.

J

ose Dávila's ongoing series *Joint Effort* combines ordinary construction materials in restrained yet surprising ways. Panes of glass and blocks of marble are leaned, tied and balanced, sometimes at the height of tension, but always with engineered precision.

Dávila also revels and romps amid the visual language of Western art, reproducing Donald Judd's pristine boxes in cardboard and repeatedly reimagining Josef Albers's *Homage to the Square* series in gilded ceramic, coloured glass, and, most recently, as a collection of lazily spinning mobiles. In his recent show at Sean Kelly, he investigated the language of art-historical scholarship by painting over the top of captions culled from a textbook, the airy blooms of paint taking the place of faded cave paintings and other ancient artefacts.

This will be a busy year for Dávila, who has solo shows at the Kunsthalle Hamburg in Berlin and Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst in Vienna. In September, he will participate in the Getty Museum's initiative *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*, an array of Southern California-based exhibitions. With a grant awarded by LAND, Dávila will create a large-scale, modular public artwork that pays homage to the diversity and character of Los Angeles's many neighbourhoods.

When I spoke with the artist over Skype, he had just returned from New York to his studio in Guadalajara, the city where he was born and now lives and works.

Was there a moment during your training as an architect when you realized that you wanted to make art instead?

Since the very beginning I was very dubious about whether to go to school for art or architecture. I was more interested in going into art school, but what I found here in Guadalajara was not exactly what I was looking for and when I visited the architecture school I was immediately drawn to what I saw: models and space-making lighting, etc. So I went to architecture school, but no more than a year and a half into it I had already started thinking I wanted to do art. At that school, classes like history of art, sculpture and painting were already embedded in the architecture school and I was drawn to that.

Did studying architecture give you any tools that you still use in your work?

It certainly did. This capability of being able to draw what you're thinking, to make it real by downloading it onto paper, is a powerful tool, and one I use every day. I think a lot about materiality, fighting the force of gravity, proportion and scale. All things that were part of my education in architecture are perfectly applicable to sculpture making.

In your recent show at Sean Kelly in New York, your ongoing series of Joint Effort sculptures looked less precariously balanced than they have done in the past. How has this body of work

changed since you began balancing glass and stone?

Other works I've done previously with glass, marble and ratchet straps were intended to make the fight against gravity visible. As you point out, they often had a more precarious balance, but in this case these sculptures are actually in a state of rest. The glass is straight because the two pieces of marble beside it are an opposing force. As with the others, it's still an equation of balance, but in this case the forces are horizontal and the glass is perfectly vertical. It's a moment of stability in a way.

Why did you jettison all that tension?

I think it's just a natural result of working with different balances. When the glass is stable it shows another aspect of gravity. I wanted to have something that looked more solid.

Are the new glass and marble works site-specific, as others from this series have been in the past?

In this case I used the space only as a vehicle to put this work into. It was more about the sculptures themselves than the space that surrounded them, which is also a shift in my practice. At other times I have always been very aware of the space where the works would be, but in this case I just wanted to fully concentrate on what the sculptures would ask me, what they needed. Therefore, I answered those questions only in regard to the sculptures themselves.

You were more interested in the relationship between the sculptures and the viewer than between the sculptures and the space?

The important relation was about how the sculptures functioned in the space, how people would interact with them as they moved through them, how they change your experience of the exhibition by blocking or directing you in a certain way.

Your photo cutouts based on Roy Lichtenstein's Femme d'Alger are also a departure from your previous strategy, because instead of only altering a single image, you show the same print in thirteen variations, each with an increasing number of elements cut away. Why did you approach these pieces differently?

Normally when I work with cutouts, I do many proofs, cutting different parts of the same image in order to choose how to show it as a final work. But when I saw these proofs I decided to show them all together as one work because it would demonstrate how much you can affect the original image by intervening in it. Sometimes when you only see one image, you don't have a very fresh memory of the original one, so you don't know the extent of the intervention.

Was it a demonstration of the way you test ideas as part of the creative process?

That's exactly what that piece was. It was the first time that I used the whole process to make the work, not only choosing one part of it, but rather showing it as a whole.



This page
 Portrait by Don Stahl at
Jose Dávila: Stones Don't Move
 at Sean Kelly, New York

Opposite page
Untitled
 2014
 Glass, boulders, ratchet straps, glass
 190.5 x 129.5cm each,
 overall 190.5 x 287 x 165.1cm



PHOTO JASON WYCHE, NEW YORK

**“THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO ARE
 NEIGHBOURS, WE ARE INDIVISIBLE. EVEN IF [TRUMP]
 WANTS TO DIVIDE US, IT’S IMPOSSIBLE”**

Y

our new works on paper, A Copy Is a Meta-Original, are captions copied from an old art-history textbook and spotted with paint. What is the relationship between text and image?

I was very interested in this art-history book because all the captions that are supposedly descriptive are actually very abstract, even poetic. They include the opinion of the author. They're also trying to explain something that was made thousands of years ago, so they're guessing in a way, because the intentions of the artist are unknown. When I was reading these captions I realized that they are opinions that could very well be applied to anything.

When I draw something that is obviously *not* being described on top of these captions, it opens a free flow of associations. Because what you see isn't what you're reading, you're compelled to make connections between what you're reading and what you're looking at.

The captions read like they're from another era.

How old is the book?

It's an antique from Oxford University, published in 1919.

So it's a little window into what art history was like in the early twentieth century, on top of which you've layered your own associations?

The newer books about art history are just more dull, I don't know why. The captions are more often very dull descriptions, there's no interpretation. If you read the same caption from a 1919 book and a 2009 book, you'd be a little bit sad about how it is described today.

It reminds me of the difference between reading the King James Bible and then reading the newer translation. The newer version is clearer, but you lose so much of the beauty of the language.

There's a way art historians understood art a long time ago that was by looking at the past and making an interpretation of it. Now scholars are more concerned with the philosophical aspects of art, rather than taking an archaeological approach to discovering what made art happen. Today it's just more about what art is trying to tell us about our current state of affairs.

Your work often references images from the art-historical canon, and relies on the viewer sharing this visual language. Do you ever worry that we're losing a set of common touchstones when it comes to visual culture?

I don't think so. I see a lot of things repeating because they're grasping at the very same ideas and concepts. No matter where they come from, a different country, a different artist or a different age, they are very similar because we are involved in this process of globalization which channels into thinking about the same ideas.

Your references are very Western. You don't venture too far outside that narrative.

My references are a direct result of studying art from books. In Mexico we have a huge deficit

of books about the current state of local artists. If you go to a bookstore, normally they only have foreign books. The publishers were mainly American, German or English, and therefore I go along with that narrative.

Can you talk a little bit about your contribution to the Getty Museum's Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative?

It's a public sculpture that starts as a cube made out of twenty-three different pieces. Once the cube is installed in Hollywood Park it will slowly start to disappear because the twenty-three pieces will be separated and taken to iconic parts of Los Angeles. One will be installed in a skatepark in Venice. Another one will become a bench in a public basketball court. After about six months the pieces will start to return to Hollywood Park and the cube will form again, but maybe some pieces will have the traces of what's happened to them, graffiti or whatever happens. The sculpture is really about unity and disintegration at the same time. In a way Los Angeles is a city of many cities together, no? It's actually very different, one place to another, and each has its own character and demographics. They are together by proximity, but they are different cities within.

In the face of Donald Trump's promise to divide the US and Mexico by building a border wall, Pacific Standard Time's theme of "LA/LA" (Latin America/Los Angeles) seems more potent than ever. Especially since you don't have to go too far back in history to when the western US was effectively part of Mexico.

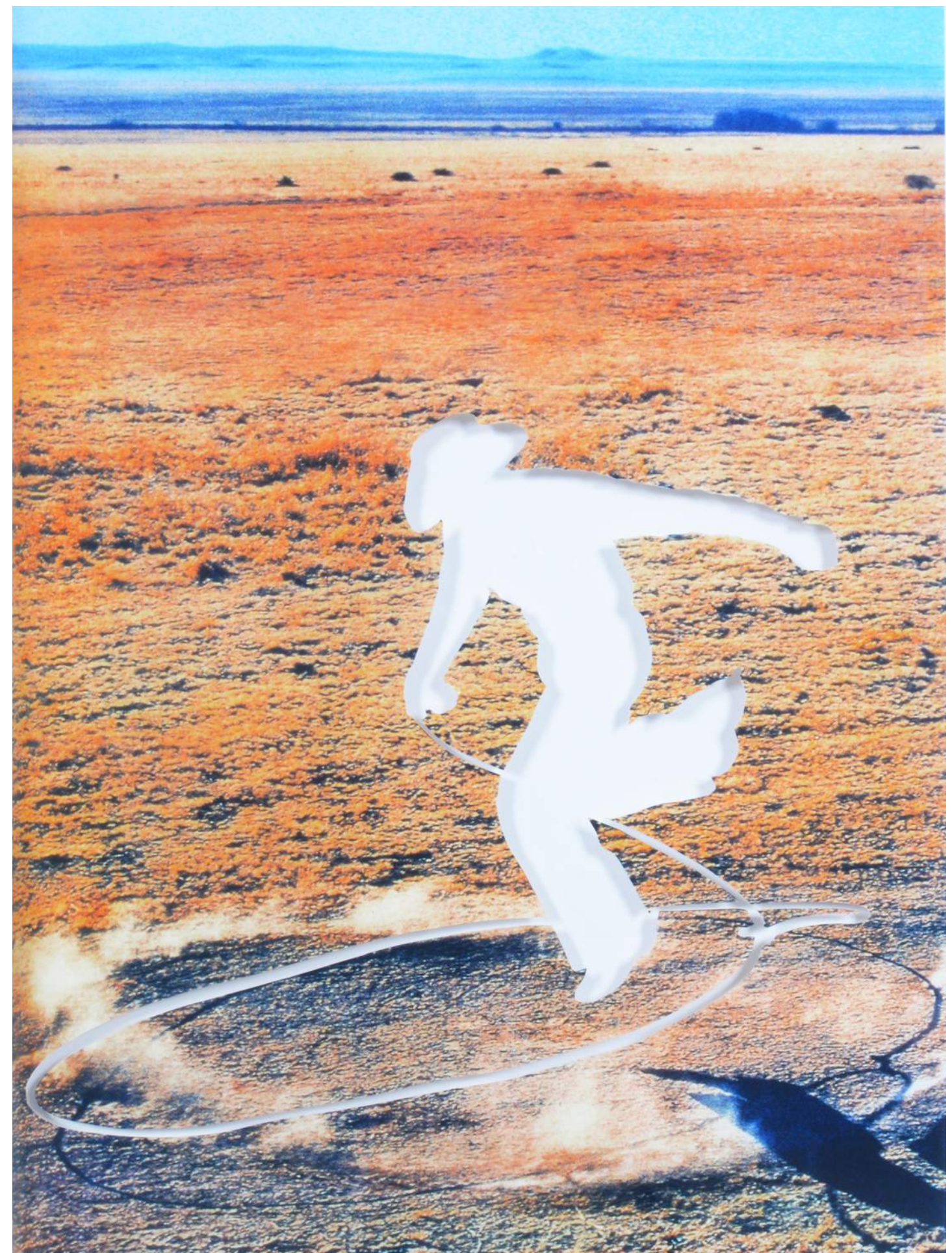
Exactly.

So much is shared between the two places that any kind of division seems false.

Right. For example, my mother's family is from Texas, they've lived there for generations, when Texas was Mexico. Suddenly, when Texas was annexed by the US in 1860, the border moved, but because they stayed living on their land they became Americans. It's funny because I have a lot of family who don't even speak Spanish, but their names are Spanish, and they are still seen as immigrants in Texas even though they've been living there for over 150 years.

What is the role of the artist in politics? In these difficult times has it become important to make art that's political in some way?

I think we have to be very engaged politically as citizens. Whether you're an artist or a cook you have to be involved in these times. Especially when we are being attacked as a country, and called names by this insane and stupid human being, Donald Trump. The United States and Mexico are neighbours, we are indivisible. Even if he wants to divide us, it's impossible. Artists don't have to express their political views through their work, because sometimes art might not be the most effective vehicle, but we do have a responsibility as citizens.



Opening spread

Untitled

2016

Smoked glass and marble
130 x 190 x 121.1cm

Second spread

Untitled (Ohhh... Alright...)

2016

Archival pigment print
67.6 x 70cm
(framed 70.3 x 72.9 x 7.6cm)

Opposite page

Untitled (Cowboy), 2013

Archival pigment print
96.6 x 70cm
(framed 99.5 x 72.9 x 7.6cm)



W

W

W

W

IN THE ZONE, WITH A "Z"

Entering Marcel Dzama's imaginary world is a bit like stumbling into a strange medieval fantasy—part Bayeux Tapestry, part Alice in Wonderland—inhabited by bull-headed figures, harlequins, authoritarian queens, masked girls in stockings, gangsters and chess figures. It's one reason why Dzama doesn't do hallucinogenic drugs, he jokes. "I have all this dark imagery in my drawings anyway," the Canadian-born artist tells Elizabeth Fullerton.



ALL ARTWORK IMAGES COURTESY DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK/LONDON

Time is collapsed in Marcel Dzama's drawings as exotic figures from fairy tale, mythology, history and art history collide in a carnivalesque pageant filled with violent ritual and erotic acts that have no rhyme or reason.

The artist has garnered international acclaim for his richly inventive iconography, which has spilled into paintings, sculptures, dioramas and films, and spawned multidisciplinary collaborations with the likes of Spike Jonze, Bob Dylan and Dave Eggers. Last year he added a new string to his bow, designing the costumes and sets for a high-profile New York City Ballet production with resident choreographer Justin Peck and Bryce Dessner of indie rock band The National.

Dzama's latest project is something of a departure—a film he describes as a “full-blown satire” about the art world and himself as an exaggerated celebrity artist. Called *A Flower of Evil* and riffing on Charles Baudelaire's influential poetry volume, it will star the actress and comedian Amy Sedaris as a crazed, egotistical Dzama, who is haunted by nightmares that come to life, while regular collaborator Raymond Pettibon will play art dealer David Zwirner and actor Jason Grisell will take the part of Pettibon. A sort of film within a film, the action is documented by a “pretentious” art interview programme called “The Artist Stripped Bare”. (All references to Marcel Duchamp are entirely deliberate, of which more later.)

“Key themes are making fun of myself and

the world we live in now, with time moving too fast to react to it,” says Dzama, whose open, friendly demeanour is a world away from the frenetic, self-important artist played by Sedaris.

A Flower of Evil grew out of a short video in which Sedaris plays Dzama directing dancers in avant-garde modernist costumes, who perform a ballet routine until she screams “cut” and the music dissolves into disco. For the film's soundtrack, Dzama plans to enlist his friends in the bands Arcade Fire, The National and LCD Soundsystem, as well as using his own composed material and Sedaris's voice. If it sounds like the artist is a serial name-dropper, he isn't; he just happens to have lots of famous mates. The film will be shown in 2018 at his gallery in New York.

When I meet Dzama, he and Pettibon are busy putting the finishing touches to a gigantic mural for a show at David Zwirner's London gallery—a dancer in a spotted onesie here, a swirling wave there. The room has been turned into a life-size comic strip, crowded with superheroes, bats, three-eyed girls and a giant Cheshire cat, against a doom-laden backdrop of engulfing waves and an oil refinery gushing flames that send animals scurrying.

“It's a bit of a panic. We did the drawing in July in the Zwirner gallery's garage space in New York and it was breaking records so it really felt like global warming,” says Dzama, who lives in Brooklyn. The exhibition also reflected the apocalyptic mood ahead of the US presidential election. The preponderance of superheroes suggests

we need rescuing? “Yeah, exactly,” he grins. (A footnote to that: the artists have recently released their fourth zine, entitled *Illegitimate President*, with a dictatorial bull figure on the cover, riffing off Francis Picabia's sinister 1941–42 painting *The Adoration of the Calf*.)

Dzama first worked with Pettibon in 2015, when they made a zine for a book fair at the Museum of Modern Art's outpost PS1 by improvising on each other's drawings in the mode of the exquisite corpse game beloved of the Surrealists. The pair are generous collaborators, assimilating each other's motifs so you almost can't tell who drew what. The appeal for Dzama of collaboration lies in the “freedom to disappear and experiment a bit more, it just opens up everything”. Plus, he notes, “Drawing on my own is kind of lonely.”

Drawing has been Dzama's mainstay since he was a child growing up in Winnipeg, where the freezing temperatures kept him inside. It was a lifeline at school; he did poorly academically as he was dyslexic but it went undiagnosed for a long time.

So where did his extraordinary image bank come from? One imagines him poring over encyclopedias or listening rapt to fantastical tales told by his mother. In fact, he confesses in his deadpan way, he watched a lot of television as both his parents worked. “That was like my babysitter. I was like a latchkey kid, so I'd come home, microwave something and watch cartoons with my sister.”

**“I'VE ALWAYS BEEN
OBSESSED WITH THE MYTHOLOGY
OF THE TRICKSTER FIGURE”**





Opening pages
The Renowned Union Jackoff
 2013
 Ink, gouache and graphite
 on paper, 43.2 x 35.6cm

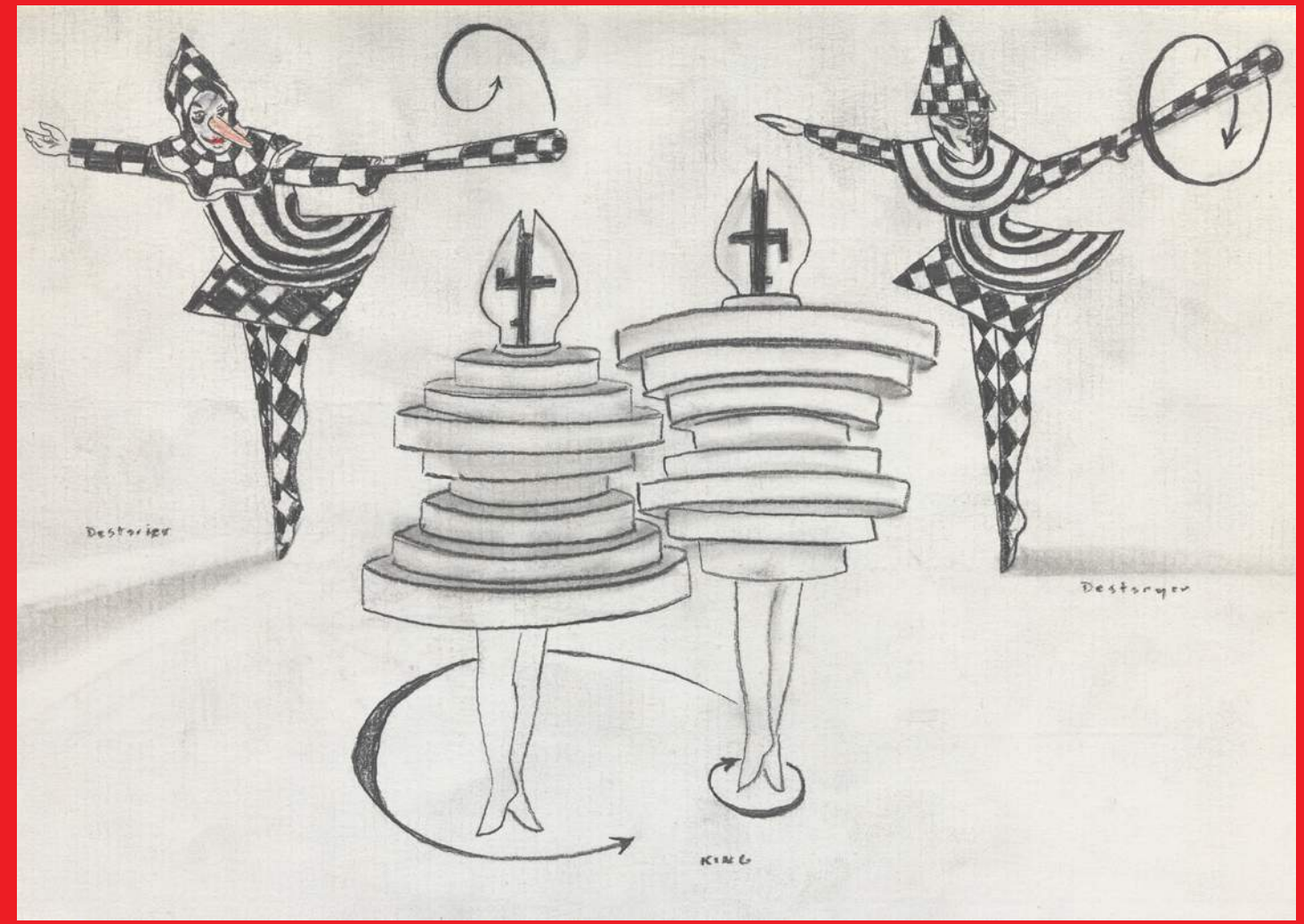
Second spread
 Portrait by Benjamin McMahon
 at David Zwirner gallery,
 London, 2016

Previous pages, left
The King's Head
 2013
 Ink, gouache and graphite
 on paper, 35.6 x 27.9cm

Previous pages, right
*A Creature, That Did
 Bear the Shape of Man*
 2013
 Ink, gouache and graphite
 on paper, 43.2 x 35.6cm

Opposite page
I Fear I Am Attended by Spies
 2012
 Ink and gouache on paper
 35.6 x 27.9cm

This page
 Costume sketch for *The Most
 Incredible Thing*, presented
 by the New York City Ballet
 2016





“TIME MOVES REALLY DIFFERENTLY WHEN YOU’RE DRAWING, TIME JUST DISAPPEARS... SOMETIMES”

But that’s far from the whole story. Dzama’s father was a big fan of military history and the Winnipeg Art Gallery had one of the largest collections of Inuit art, so those were important influences. Also significant was a long sojourn with his grandparents in a small rural town, which accounts for many of the moose, bears and other wild animals that inhabit his early work. The cowboy figure comes from the same period. “Everyone was heavily into country music and they wore cowboy hats to school. I was this skinny kid with Sid Vicious hair who was really into punk rock, so I felt like I had zero masculinity,” Dzama laughs.

Dzama’s surname is East European, from his father’s side, which is where it gets complicated. Dzama’s grandparents split up temporarily because of his grandfather’s alcoholism, during which time his grandmother had an affair and produced Dzama’s father. “He doesn’t know who his father is... And so I have this mystery side,” says Dzama. The surname came from the alcoholic, who is no blood relation to the artist but, he says, “The name Dzama’s good. It’s nice to have a ‘z’ in it.”

He’s particularly fond of his first name, which he shares with one of his heroes, Marcel Duchamp. This discovery prompted a long-standing fascination, which intensified after Dzama saw Duchamp’s famous nude-through-a-peephole installation *Étant Donnés* at the Philadelphia Museum in the early 2000s. “That definitely set me into making dioramas and installation pieces or assemblages, and then

from there I just wanted to know everything about him,” he explains. “I just loved what he said about art and he felt like this trickster in the art world. I’ve always been obsessed with the mythology of the trickster figure.”

His Duchamp infatuation has manifested itself in chess-themed motifs across his often surreal work and culminated in his dreamlike film *Une Danse des Bouffons* (2013), which animated the sprawled nude in *Étant Donnés* and spun an elaborate tale of love and redemption, good and evil, around the characters of Duchamp and the Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins.

In this “Dadaist love story” Maria is eventually reunited with Duchamp after an ordeal involving an impish trickster, various masked characters, a maniacal clown and again the Picabia-inspired bull-headed authority figure, which gives birth to Duchamp from a vagina in his chin. “I referenced all my favourite pieces of art by Duchamp and Picabia. Those moments when it all came together I felt like I met them... It’s almost like a collaboration,” says Dzama.

His homage continues in his new film *A Flower of Evil*, in which the Sedaris artist figure has more than a hint of Duchamp’s female alter ego *Rrose Sélavy*. But his dialogue with art history extends beyond Dada and the Surrealists to Bosch, Goya and even the Russian Constructivists.

Dzama’s interest in collaborating with artists of the past and present goes back to his days as a student at the University of Manitoba, where he co-founded a collective of fellow creative types,

who eschewed self-promotion and made drawings together that were never signed.

However, any hopes of remaining anonymous were dashed when Zwirner saw a show of Dzama’s in 1998 and signed him up, aged just twenty-three. Six years later he moved to New York which had a striking impact on his practice. The artist slaughtered swathes of characters in such rite-of-passage drawings as *Making Room for the New Ones* (2008), where hunters shoot down animals from the sky. In response to the big city, his scenes have become busier and more theatrical. “Since moving the drawings got very claustrophobic. There were a lot of characters so I almost feel like I’m placing them in order of a stage scenario,” he notes.

You get the sense that Dzama’s fertile brain is constantly drinking in its surroundings and spewing out ever weirder characters. A new one with a foetus head, for instance, emerged around 2012 inspired by the birth of his son Willem.

Right now he’s preparing for solo shows at Madrid’s La Casa Encendida and the Mistake Room in Los Angeles in the autumn. He’s working mostly on drawings for these, as well as a short dance film, possibly a puppet theatre and an interactive shooting gallery.

Puppets, dance, films, installation. His works connect across disciplines but drawing still forms the backbone of Dzama’s practice. “Time moves really differently when you’re drawing, time just disappears... sometimes. It’s like a meditation, like being in the zone. That’s what they say, right?” he laughs.

K J

Kahlil Joseph's dreamlike visual work for the likes of Kendrick Lamar, Flying Lotus and Beyoncé has rapidly established the young LA-based director as one of the most in-demand names in music-video circles. But his magical, hypnotic films are proving just as popular in the art world.
Words: Charlotte Jansen.

CAUGHT IN A SPELL



“It’s the equivalent of asking you when you realized you were a girl. Or asking Stanley Kubrick how early he came into contact with white identity. I can’t imagine you telling him that ‘white consciousness is a recurrent theme in his work’ (and it very much is). I understand how you would feel like it’s a thoughtful question in such a racist world; and I appreciate that—but what individual is not conscious of their race as soon as they’re born, just like one’s gender? It’s low-key degrading and I wish people would stop calling attention to how Kerry James Marshall is a great black painter... as opposed to one of the best living painters alive, period. No one called Lucian Freud a great white painter. The question itself implies low-threshold thinking and a certain alienness around blackness and black people that frankly I think only reinforces and perpetuates the very thing you’re trying to transcend.”

This is not going well. After three months trying to pin down the elusive LA-based director Kahlil Joseph, I finally send my questions over by email. I ask: “Black consciousness is, of course, a recurrent theme in your work. How did you come into contact with the history of black identity?” What I don’t know—until afterwards—is that he’s sick of being asked questions about blackness. Yet black history is very much present in his work, not as a separate, shut-off thing of the past, but as part of the present moment. Notably, author and civil-rights activist W. E. B. Dubois’s idea of “double consciousness”, a description of the psychological conflict experienced by African-Americans, has been proposed as an influence for the split-screen *m.A.A.d* and appears to have informed the title of the exhibition when it was shown at MOCA: *Double Conscience*.

Perhaps the question was insensitively phrased. Race is such a vast, complicated topic, especially now, especially in the US. When we

write to one another, it’s only a week after Trump’s election. But race is certainly not something I have ever taken for granted. I grew up with a Sri Lankan immigrant father who didn’t identify with the white culture of Britain as a youth. I had no history handed down to me, and at school Sri Lanka was never mentioned. I’ve always envied people who have a strong sense of their history and culture.

Of course, Joseph doesn’t know this. And I don’t know him, except through his work. When you watch his films, made up of so many stories, real and imagined, personal and public, forgotten and remembered, your own stories intertwine with his: for example, *Wildcat* (2013), the seven-minute film Joseph shot at the rodeo in Grayson, Oklahoma, formerly known as Wildcat, and that brought attention to the majority African-American community and its legacy of cowboy culture; Aunt Janet, one of the rodeo’s founders, is embodied by a young girl who has dreamlike visions. So the way he weaves together the threads of black history, whether consciously or not, seems a natural talking point.

Joseph rarely gives interviews—his films aren’t didactic, they’re dreamlike, made up of metaphors, and explaining them would surely destroy their magic; this is why they’ve been called “sacral”, and even “spiritual”; they feel as unconscious as a heartbeat—and keeps a low profile, difficult for someone who has worked with such stratospherically famous artists as Beyoncé (he is one of the seven directors behind her Grammy-winning visual album *Lemonade*), Kendrick Lamar and Flying Lotus. I wonder if having a voice in American culture brings a certain pressure. “I’m still surprised when people know about my work,” he responds. “Honestly, it never occurred to me that I have a voice in ‘American culture’; I’ve been making things quietly in LA for a couple years now, but more than that, I’d really like to start making films and

maybe some more art—and, if I’m lucky, people will like the work I want to make.”

And people do like the work he’s made so far. Ralph Rugoff, curator of the exhibition *The Infinite Mix* in London, where Joseph’s *m.A.A.d* appeared for the first time in the UK at the end of 2016, says: “I chose Kahlil’s work because it was an outstanding work of art that perfectly dovetailed with the territory that the exhibition explored. The audiences to *The Infinite Mix* loved this work—I’d have to say it was one of the popular favourites. Like all great works, it doesn’t require any specialized knowledge of contemporary art to appreciate. It is adventurous and experimental and at the same time seriously entertaining and moving.”

The film was made in response to Kendrick Lamar’s 2012 album *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. It’s made up of fragments of found footage—home videos shot by Lamar’s uncle in 1992—alongside cut-up news footage of police brutality and material shot by Joseph in Compton and Los Angeles. It’s an emotional, continually surprising 360-degree portrait that plunges you under water and pulls you up into the sky, Joseph’s rhythmic editing carving new meaning and nuance out of Lamar’s poetry. Joseph’s sensibility for music is as clear as his mastery of the moving image.

Of his process, Joseph writes: “Over time I noticed that from the beginning I’ve quietly yearned for a traditional approach to making work, but when I’m finished with a project and I look back on how I got somewhere, it’s like I was able to crystallize or manifest a kind of non-verbal frequency that I can never completely articulate beforehand with words, or even with images.”

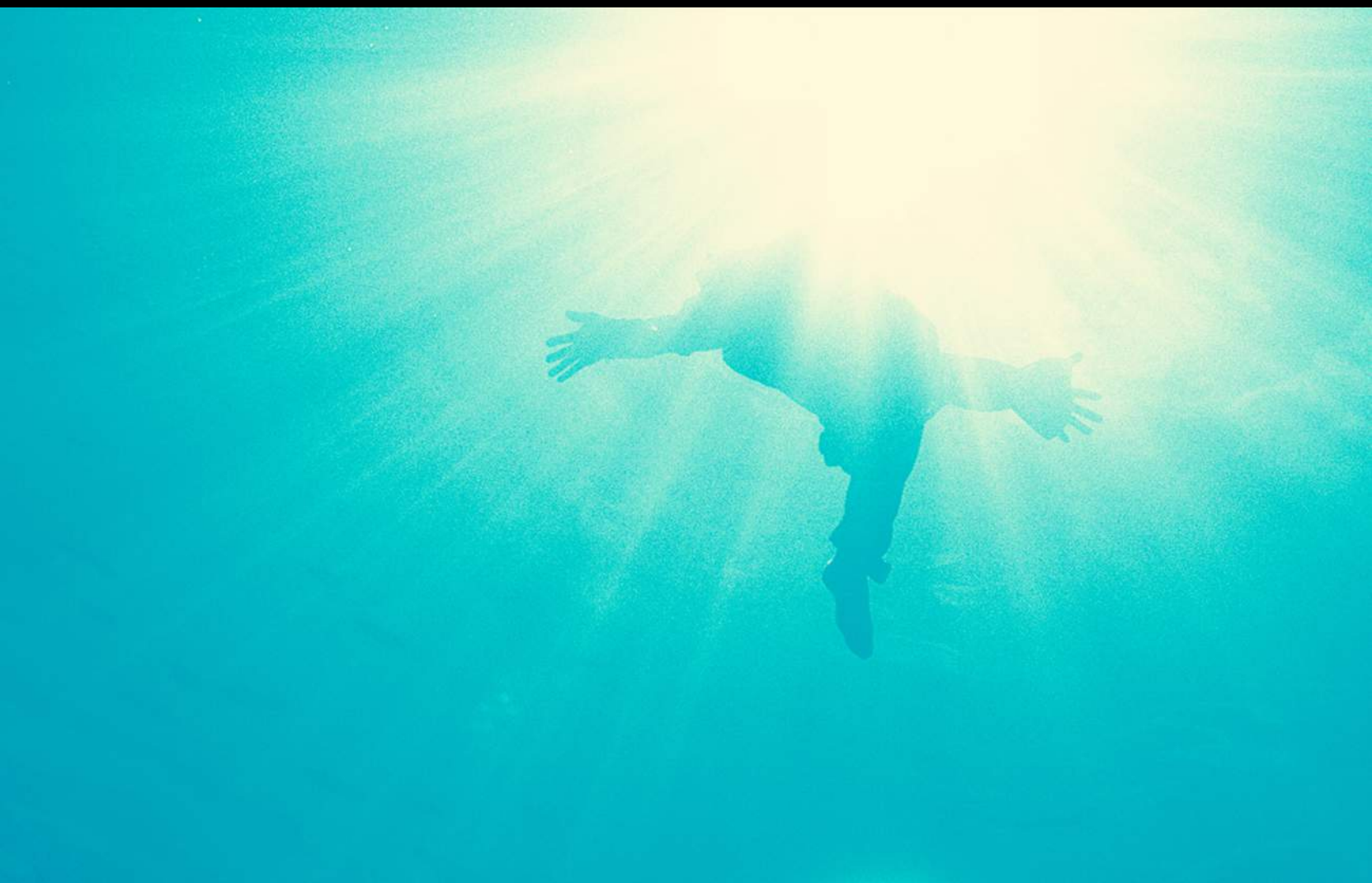
Joseph is happier, it seems, to talk about other artists, like his friend the artist Henry Taylor, with whom he recently collaborated for Taylor’s exhibition at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles. “I met

ALL IMAGES COURTESY KAHILIL JOSEPH



“I THINK THERE’S A LARGE COMPONENT AND RESPONSIBILITY OF BEING AN ARTIST THAT IS MADE UP OF THE LIGHT”







“I THINK THERE’S A LARGE COMPONENT AND RESPONSIBILITY OF BEING AN ARTIST THAT IS MADE UP OF THE LIGHT”

HT 6–7 years ago through my brother and he’s one of the most amazing people I know—he’s an incredibly special artist and I know he will be one of the artists people talk about 50 years from now... Since my brother died we’ve become a lot closer. Earlier this summer we both ended up in Greece at the same time. We met up in Athens and had a lot of fun visiting the ancient ruins and going to see a lot of local and international art. Late one night (2am I think) we were watching soccer at an outdoor bar and amongst other things he started telling me about his show and what he wanted to do. I remember mentioning some ideas in passing that would be cool to see in a white-wall gallery based on stories he’s told me... and that was it—I forgot about it. A month later back in LA he called me and said ‘I can’t get that shit out of my mind since you said it—’... I had never really done anything in a big-time gallery and when he said it, the thought of collaborating with HT was super-fresh and original to me...

“Henry took me to his gallery and we ended up talking to [the gallerist Jeff Poe], told him the idea and a couple days later it was happening full throttle... The opening was two weeks later and it was one of the most electrifying experiences I’ve ever had in a gallery space.”

He’s open to talking about his brother, Noah Davis, who passed away in 2015, aged only thirty-two. Davis was an exceptional artist who had also moved to Los Angeles from Seattle, and his legacy continues in the Underground Museum, a non-profit gallery he founded with his wife, Karon, in Arlington Heights. Joseph and his wife, film producer Onye Anyanwu, help run the gallery alongside Karon. It continues to play an important role for Los Angeles’s artists and thinkers—a community that Joseph says has “a

very real presence” for him and that includes young artists like Henry Taylor, Martine Syms and Deana Lawson, as well as MOCA’s chief curator, Helen Molesworth, artist Arthur Jafa and academic Fred Moten.

It was at the Underground Museum that *m.A.A.d* first appeared in 2014, at a group exhibition called *The Oracle*. Of Davis, Joseph says: “He saw through all the bullshit so easily, it’s profoundly inspiring on a personal/spiritual level and on a creative level. Knowing him as closely as I, and a handful of others, did was a priceless gift. We had the best artist of our generation around us all the time, breaking it all down for us in plain speak.”

In 2016, Joseph showed the film he says means the most to him, *Alice*TM (*you don’t have to think about it*), an intensely emotive piece shot at a recording session of the singer Alice Smith (who also appears in *Memory Palace*, Joseph’s collaboration with Martine Syms). It was presented in an exhibition with his late brother at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle, where they grew up. The exhibition revealed the influence they each had on the other’s practice: Davis paints Joseph, his brush acting like a lens, while Joseph films his brother in a documentary split across four screens that shows a thoroughly painterly understanding of light and shadow.

“I’m interested in energy,” Joseph suggests. His work displays a radiant energy, alive with flashes of light that sometimes interrupt the frame or act as pivots for scenes. It’s an energy that’s unstable, constantly transforming, but eternal.

It’s also, perhaps, what attracts him to the work of Andrei Tarkovsky. The metaphysical Soviet filmmaker’s work, with its long, panning camera movements, clearly resonates with

Joseph, who prefers to complicate his visual narrative by using two-, three- and four-screen displays, across which images are continually juxtaposed, sometimes meeting and merging. Characters might appear in one screen and then re-emerge on another.

There’s a Tarkovskian quality about the way Joseph places people in expansive environments too—as he does in *The Mirror between Us* (2012), the first screenplay Joseph wrote, based loosely on a poem of the same title by the thirteenth-century Persian scholar and Sufi mystic Rumi.

Joseph’s films never follow conventional time. How does he achieve this blurring of past and present, fiction and reality? “That’s a difficult question to answer without thinking about things too much,” Joseph replies. “I mean, the imagination is more real to me than the perception of reality, or the acceptance of reality—from the perspective of quantum physics the past, present and future are all happening simultaneously; I’m from Seattle, which might explain some preference for a moodier palette—but I also love comedy and drama so... I don’t know.”

Like his films, this interview leaves me with a lingering feeling of melancholy, like the uneasy feeling you can’t shake off after a strange dream. As Tarkovsky once said, when faced with art, audiences experience a discordant feeling accounted for by “the friction between their souls and the outside world... Let them be helpless like children, because weakness is a great thing, and strength is nothing.”

Joseph gives us all of life at once, the mysterious chain of being born, loving, celebrating, dying, grieving. It’s universal, and that is kind of reassuring. Is he an optimist? “Yes—I think there’s a large component and responsibility of being an artist that is made up of the light.”

BLACK FLAG



WHITE NOISE

The work of Santiago Sierra has gained notoriety for the uncompromising way it lays bare the power structures of an unbalanced society. But his recent project Black Flag sees this most divisive of artists taking a darkly utopian turn.

Becky Haghpanah-Shirwan, director of *a/political*, talks to Sierra about this shift.

Adopting social architecture as a mode of critique is a technique that has become synonymous with Santiago Sierra's artistic practice. If the results are often painful, the frequent criticism made of his work that it perpetuates the brutality of an already merciless society is misleading. In 2006, Sierra stated his work is produced not as an *image of society*, but as society itself: "the only thing that the work does is tell [the audience] in which direction I want them to look."

On 14 April 2015, Sierra completed Part 1 of *Black Flag*, planting the universal symbol of the anarchist movement, the black flag, at the geographical North Pole, latitude 90° N. On 14 December 2015, exactly 104 years after Roald Amundsen's Norwegian expedition, Part 2 of *Black Flag* was completed when a second black flag was planted at the geographic South Pole, latitude 90° S.

Answering the question "Why is our flag black?", the sociologist and anarchist Howard Ehrlich explained: "black is negation, is anger, is outrage, is mourning, is beauty, is hope, is the fostering and sheltering of new forms of human life and relationship on and with this earth. The black flag means all these things. We are proud to carry it, sorry we have to, and look forward to the day when such a symbol will no longer be necessary." This sentiment captures the binary antagonisms that function as guiding paradigms of several aspects of Sierra's work: in his subject matter, method and in the monochrome of black and white.

Bracketing the entire globe between the two poles, *Black Flag* positions itself in the ambivalent grey area of the in-between. It stands as an *a-national* claim to the spaces of an *a-territory*, a claim made in the name of all people, above and beyond states and borders. *Black Flag* conflates and rejects both histories and ideologies in one minimal stroke.

With an established reputation as a "divisive" artist, in *Black Flag* Santiago Sierra presents a clear disjuncture from the past, a utopian grand gesture—sympathetic and absolute.

Rather than being invited to respond to a particular context, here you were given carte blanche to create an artwork you may previously have thought impossible. When did you initially conceive of this work and how was the idea formed?

In the last few years I have put up black posters in different European cities: Berlin, London, Madrid, Basel, Istanbul, Viterbo. Someone connected it with Malevich's *Black Square* and the series was included in an exhibition dedicated to the continuity of his legacy at the Beyeler Foundation in Basel. The most radical black square on white background, however, is an anarchist flag on an extremely snowy landscape. I also had in mind Piero Manzoni and his pedestal for the world (*Socle du monde*, 1961). This was a work that appropriated the whole world and made us think of the earth as one whole thing. Of course I wanted to create an anarchist icon that was a source of pride and courage, that

made you think that the planet is ours when you saw it. I have created many works of a hurtful ugliness. However, I see *Black Flag* as the most poetic of my works, without doubt the most beautiful of the ones I've done until now.

The idea of beauty is intriguing as it marks a departure: your work is often seen to be coarse and "without enthusiasm", to use Gustav Metzger's term. Here, in the aesthetics and in the scale, there is a sense of the sublime. Do you feel that you have become more hopeful than in your younger years?

Hope, like fear, paralyzes, and I don't like either of them at all. In Spanish "hope" is *esperanza*, which implies waiting for something. I see very few reasons to sit and wait, even less so with age. Hope evolves in the opposite way to what you describe: the older you get, the less there is left. And that helps when facing the artworks. What has indeed eased off is the intensity of my rage, or at least the way of channelling it. Somehow I have gotten used to it.

Your gestures are documented by way of video and photography. For Black Flag, photographs are presented alongside the master records pressed with the sound at the geographic North and South Poles. There is also the flag, which we should stress is not the one in the photographs—these were left in situ. Can you say something about the objects that were produced to represent the project?

It is a way of telling the story. There are other ways that I have discarded, such as video or any figurative or theatrical approach. I like the



ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF SANTIAGO SIERRA STUDIO & A/POLITICAL

“THE BLACK FLAG IS THE FLAG OF ALL OF US WHO DON'T IDENTIFY WITH A FLAG OR DON'T WANT TO HAVE A FLAG, SOMETHING TO VISUALLY SET AGAINST THE MULTIPLE COLOURS OF THE PATRIOTIC CLOTHS”







Opening spread, left
Black Flag, North Pole,
 14 April 2015

Opening spread, right
Black Flag, South Pole,
 14 December 2015

Previous spread, top images
North Pole Documentation,
 2015

All other images
South Pole Documentation,
 2015

document and the “relic” that result from a performance. They are the tangible remainders that speak of something that happened in a place and time different from ours. In my work the facts are very important, what happened, as something documented and subject to verification. The idea of the sound recording was particularly attractive because it invites you to listen. The replica of the flag gives a lot of solemnity to the act.

We should think more about the sound element of the project, the recording of what you describe as “white noise” and how it acts as volume. Your work crosses between installation, performance and photography; however, to me, the overall impression is one of sculpture. This can be seen without doubt in Protected Building, at Manifesta 11, where you asked us to engage with the actual, physical space and its vulnerabilities. In your question you describe it perfectly: white noise is a noise with volume that takes up space and gives it texture and life. I really like the sound works by Francisco López precisely because of that sculptural dimension he gives to a sound, which can almost be touched. He also interests me for the imposing character of his perception. We can close our eyes but not our ears, which is why we feel invaded by the perception of a sound.

If we refer again to the flag as an object, it represents a nation state; its purpose, socially, is to connect individuals under a shared identity, incentivizing patriotism and hope. Politically, the flag is a symbol of power, influence and domination. You used the Spanish flag in your work Black Flag of the Spanish Republic (2007); in Black Flag (2015) you chose the symbol

of anarchism. What does the status of the flag mean to you, in a world that bears constant witness to the individuals who die for it?

With *Black Flag of the Spanish Republic* I was looking for an association between the Spain of the Black Legend and the reality of the blackened Spain. I also used the US flag, in 2002. I placed a US flag of 20 x 15 metres at the Museo la Tertulia in Cali, Colombia. I knew they would try to burn it, but we had to be attentive to put the fire out in time. One night they burnt it partially. I took the flag with me and exhibited it at MOMA PSI in New York. In addition to this, there are several sound works using national anthems, which are the sound versions of flags. Flags, national anthems and all of that garbage comply with a despicable ideology that defines people in the same way that a red-hot branding iron defines livestock. The black flag is the flag of all of us who don't identify with a flag or don't want to have a flag, something to visually set against the multiple colours of the patriotic cloths.

The nature of nation-state claims to the polar regions is, in part, performative—take Russia's 2007 stunt, for example, when they sent a capsule to drop a titanium Russian flag underwater on the Arctic seabed. This controversial symbolic gesture was a motivating scene of intent, causing us to consider whether politics and art are closer than we think. Could Black Flag also be perceived as propaganda?

Art is a language that appeals more to sensibility than to rationality. That's why Plato threw us out of his Republic. This makes us always look a bit like demagogues and yes, close to propaganda. What would there be of the Pope without St Peter's Cathedral, or armies without their emblems and their marches, or of politicians

without their fictional plots, their chants and colours? Probably nothing. Art is sometimes the Pied Piper of Hamelin. It all depends on whom the flautist works for.

Issues of territory are at the forefront of contemporary political debate: Brexit, the refugee crisis, the rhetoric of the US presidential campaign, all reaffirm our split society through imagery of walls and borders. In works such as Space Closed by Corrugated Metal, presented in an exhibition at Lisson Gallery in London in 2002, and Wall Enclosing a Space at the 2003 Venice Biennale, you construct material borders that, you have commented, act as a symbol of both repression and emancipation. To what extent do you see the gesture of claiming the polar territories within this binary context?

The black flag was a binary symbol from its first appearance in the Paris Commune. It was the flag of freedom, but it was also a flag of mourning for the anarchists fallen in the battlefield. Here we push this to the extreme because it is a clear internationalist gesture. Walls are the architectural totem of our time, they are the most powerful sign of exclusion and division of the world as human cattle. But barricades also exist and are an adored totem of our time as well. Their message is “not a step back, you will not continue from here” (*ni un paso atrás, de aquí ustedes no pasan*).

How closely do your political views align with anarchism?

The anarchists are right.

“Black Flag” will be on display at PAC in Milan until 4 June as part of the major Santiago Sierra retrospective “Mea Culpa”.

“ART IS A LANGUAGE THAT APPEALS MORE TO SENSIBILITY THAN TO RATIONALITY. THAT'S WHY PLATO THREW US OUT OF HIS REPUBLIC”

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THE JOURNAL



NANDO MESSIAS, THE SIBBY'S PROGRESS. PHOTO BY RICHARD EATON

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EDITORIAL



BEAUTIFUL BOYS AND ROTTEN GIRLS

“Boys’ Love” manga are a cultural and commercial phenomenon in Japan. But why do fujoshi (female “rotten girl” readers) find these depictions of gay relationships between men so fascinating—not to mention liberating? Maki Hakui, a writer on Japanese female culture and a “Boys’ Love” enthusiast, explains.

Now that I look back, I realize I already had the potential to be a *fujoshi* when I was still in elementary school. *Fujoshi* means “rotten girls”, and is the self-deprecatingly humorous term used by female readers of “Boys’ Love” manga to describe themselves. Back then, in the eighties, I was living in Bayside,

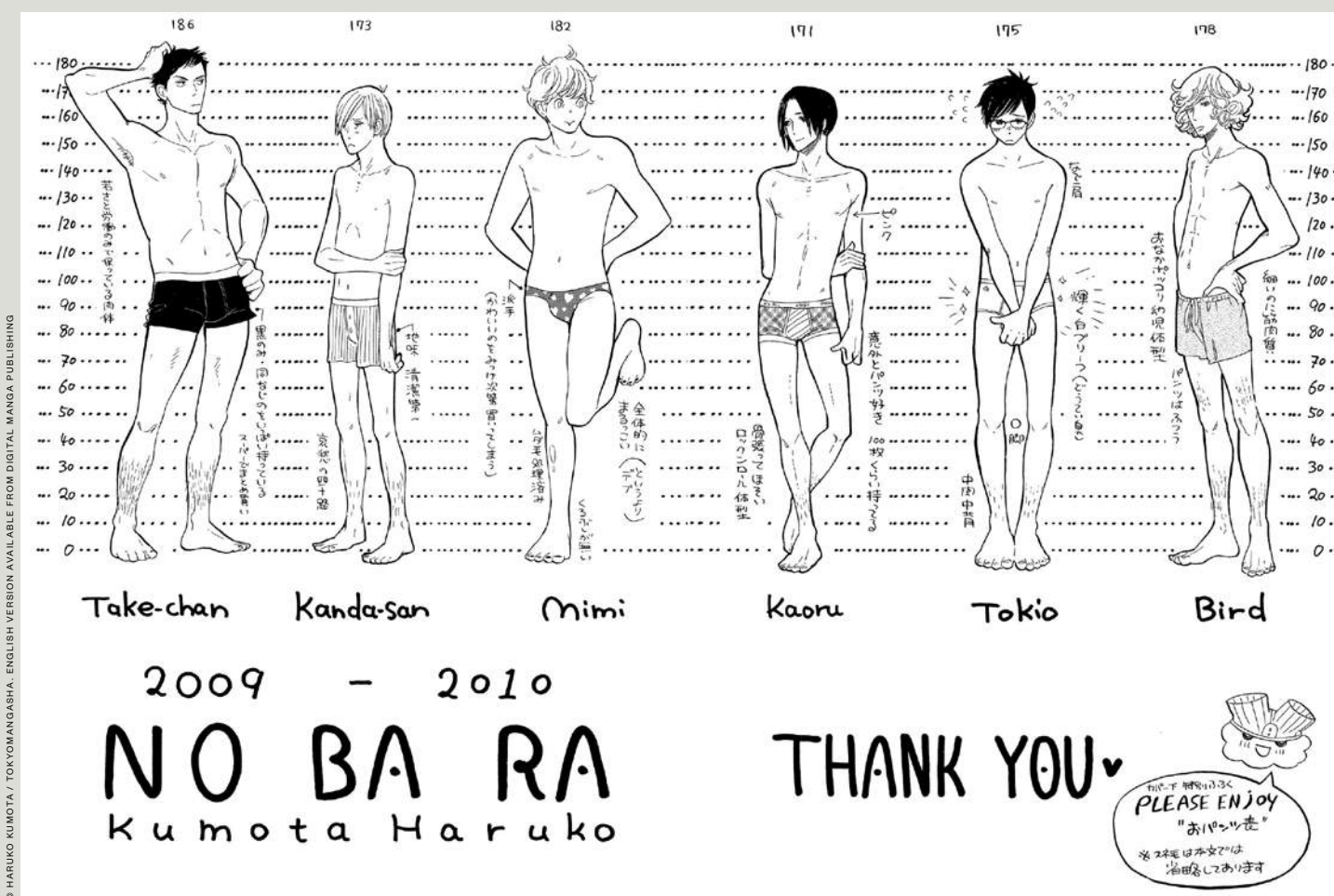
New York, and on Saturdays, after Japanese school in Flushing, we would drop by the Japanese market, Daido, to shop for groceries. While I waited for my parents, I would go into the corner dedicated to books and become absorbed in a world imported from my home country. I can’t imagine how they

miraculously made it into the limited Daido selection, but almost all the volumes from Keiko Takemiya’s *Kaze to Ki no Uta (The Poetry of the Wind and the Trees, 1976)*, Mineo Maya’s *Patalliro (1978)* and Moto Hagio’s *Thomas no Shinzō (Thomas’s Heart, 1974)*—all classics of *shōnen-ai* (“love among beautiful

boys”) manga—were present. And so it was that I would read these works, stocked alongside more mainstream fare such as *Doraemon*, *Dr Slump* and *Candy Candy*, never questioning the same-sex male relationships depicted in them and even experiencing a strange feeling of attraction to the characters.

Fast-forward to when I became a college student in Hyogo, Japan. I used to visit a local second-hand bookstore with my sister to dig up interesting finds, and I came across *Zetsuai (Absolute Love, 1989)* by Minami Ozaki. Set in Japan’s bubble economy of 1986–91, the love affair between the obsessive *seme* (a dominant partner in a homosexual relationship) and the beautiful but traumatized *uke* (a passive partner) fascinated me. It wasn’t long before I then found myself hooked on a story about the relationship between a superstar musician named Koji and a genius soccer player called Takuto. At the time the term “Boys’ Love” (or just BL as it’s now commonly known) didn’t even exist, and soon after I left Japan again and moved on to other reading matter. Little did I know that BL culture was growing rapidly, with derivative works (*dōjinshi* or self-published fanfiction) at the root of this expansion, and that by 1995 more than thirty BL magazines would be in production.

Fast-forward again to spring 2013. Now, almost thirty years after my first encounter with *shōnen-ai*, one of my friends casually hands me a copy of Setona Mizushiro’s *Kyuuso wa Chiizu no Yume o Miru (The Cornered Mouse Dreams of Cheese)*, claiming it to be her favourite manga—and in the process reintroducing me to the richest and most diverse form of popular entertainment in Japan today. It was as if I had been struck by lightning. It had taken me three decades and I had certainly gone the long way round, but somehow I was now able to officially enter the land of BL. That my awakening came so late may also have been my good fortune, since the genre had matured considerably and many high-quality works had been produced in the previous twenty years, leaving me able to choose from the pick of the crop. I felt like I had stumbled upon a goldmine—a rare experience in this day and age,



“BL MANGA ARE BOTH LARGELY CREATED BY AND READ BY WOMEN, AND THE *FUJOSHI* MARKET IS HUGE IN JAPAN”

when everything has already been done, discovered and consumed.

The December 2014 issue of *Bijusu Techo (Pocket Book of Art)*, one of the most prestigious art magazines in Japan, featured BL prominently. More than the fact that this legitimized BL as an art form, what should be noted here is that the issue sold out instantly. BL manga are both largely created by and read by women, and the *fujoshi* market is huge in Japan. But whenever I mentioned BL to people outside Japan, few seemed to be aware of the genre. So here I’d like to explain something about the *fujoshi* mentality, and how BL’s current popularity reflects on the situation in which Japanese women find themselves today.

One of the most attractive

characteristics of BL is that it accepts people for what they are, throwing into question the traditional gender roles that are still so prevalent in Japan today. BL depicts relationships only between men, and the issue of child-bearing is largely invisible. Here, individuals get involved in relationships strictly because they are attracted to each other; producing heirs is not part of the equation. This allows female readers to dream about a free world, where they can create a new type of family, living in a “shared house” and perhaps adopting a child. Here, you don’t need to be a wife or mother to be socially accepted, and you have the freedom to live the way you choose. For women in Japan today, still constrained in gender

roles defined by patriarchy—even though a growing percentage of them will never marry—this kind of acceptance is unusual.

BL not only accepts women for what they are, it gives them control by carrying them into a transcendent and genderless interstice. Because the protagonists in the fictions are men, there is no need for female readers to project themselves into the action. Instead they can stand apart and manoeuvre the characters and their relationships as they please. Well-known BL critic Yukari Fujimoto explains that the development of BL “made it possible for girls to play with sexuality and opened up possibilities for them to shift their own point of view from passive to active engagement”. Gaining

control, *fujoshi* pour their love into their favourite characters to create stories with happy endings.

What differentiates BL from the pre-BL *tambi shōnen-ai* works featured in magazines such as *June* is the endings: the earlier stories often culminate in tragedy, whereas most BL stories have happy resolutions. No matter what complications and difficulties the characters may face along the way, they usually find a way to overcome them. BL land is not a wasteland. And if *fujoshi* feel that the characters are insufficiently happy in the published work, they produce their own derivative works of fanfiction in which they show them more contented. They thus fight to maintain their utopian vision.

Gaining acceptance and control



Above: Rihito Takarai, *Ten Count*, Vol. 2, Count 12 (Shinshokan): Shirovani resists Kurose, saying: "No, it's filthy..." Kurose replies: "Who's filthy, you or me?" **Opposite page:** Kou Yoneda, cover illustration for *Twittering Birds Never Fly*, Vol. 1 (Taiyotoshoh). **Previous pages, right:** Haruko Kumota, inside cover of *Nobara* (Tokyomangasha). New types of families are often proposed in Kumota's works. This graph of characters shows her careful attention to detail, giving originality to each character and making it easier for the readers to seek out their favourite type.

in this way, *fujoshi* turn into philosophers seeking the answers to the big questions: "What is love? What is desire? Who are we?"

BL can certainly be generic but the details within the broader storytelling and character-defining rules are constantly being renewed. And BL is all about the details. Log on to the BL website Chiru Chiru and look at the range of search-engine keywords for the different types of *seme*—*oresama* (bossy), *kichiku* (brutal), *kenage* (lovable), *shuchaku* (obsessive), *hetare* (loser)—and *uke*—*tsundere* (cold but sweet), *inran* (slut), *wanko* (royal like a dog), *futanari* (androgynous), *kimmiku* (muscular), etc. Moreover, the average BL spends twice—or ten times—as many pages describing a key moment in a relationship as a regular manga.

BL contains a lot of explicit depictions of sex, and many people just see it as pornography, but it's the nature of desire that *fujoshi* are interested in. Having two men engage in many different kinds of sex, and depicting those acts in detail, is a highly intellectual philosophical play. What is important in BL is the relationship between the main characters and the nature of the obsessions they show for each other: naked souls crashing into each other. It's this process that *fujoshi* want to see more than the act of sex. "What is important is desire, not sex itself," as Marguerite Duras put it in *La Passion Suspendue* (1989). "I already knew when I was a child that the universe of sexuality was fascinating, a world far beyond what one can imagine. My life has been a process to verify that fact."

Rihito Takarai's *Ten Count* depicts an intense relationship between a secretary with a morbid cleanliness obsession, Shirovani, and a therapist who tries to cure him of his condition, Kurose. The artist uses her delicate skills to portray both the sexual and psychological engagement of the two characters to carry readers into their closed world of "therapy". Shirovani has had a traumatic experience in the past but Kurose's obsession with his patient hints at problems of his own. The mystery of the men's difficulties and their hidden drama causes, not to mention the drama



FUJOSHI TURN INTO PHILOSOPHERS ANSWERING THE BIG QUESTIONS: "WHAT IS LOVE? WHAT IS DESIRE? WHO ARE WE?"

of their relationship—Shirovani's not wanting/wanting to be touched, Kurose's wanting/not being able to touch—provide all the materials necessary for a psychological masterpiece.

Then there's Setona Mizushiro's aforementioned *Kyuuuso wa Chiizu no Yume o Miru* and *Sojou no Koi wa Nido Haneru* (*The Carp on the Chopping Board Jumps Twice*), parts one and two of the same story, which Keiko Takemiya hailed as one of the great works of BL. It's a story about a straight thirty-year-old "salary man", Kyoichi, who is indecisive and can't say no to anyone who shows him affection, and a gay private investigator, Imagase, who has been in love with Kyoichi ever since they were students together. Imagase is

anxious that Kyoichi will go back to being straight, while Kyoichi, on the other hand, fears that because he does not consider himself genuinely gay, he won't be able to make Imagase happy. The pair's paranoia makes for high drama and opens an investigation into the meaning of love and, indeed, of personal identity and authenticity.

Kou Yoneda's *Saezuru Tori wa Habatakanai* (*Twittering Birds Never Fly*), which is currently being raved about by *fujoshi* as a *kami* (godly) work, is a hard-boiled *yakuza* BL about a young *yakuza* head, Yashiro, a perverted but compellingly cool masochist, and his impotent bodyguard, Domeki. Despite the violence of their surroundings, Yoneda's characters are full of pathos and

marked by personal traumas; readers are immediately drawn into the emptiness and sadness of their existences. Yashiro is particularly brilliantly drawn, and his twisted and contradictory nature keeps readers on tenterhooks as to where his relationship with Domeki will go next.

In their hungry search, as Mark McLelland and James Welker explain in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan* (2015), *fujoshi* have "come to view all of culture through their 'rotten filters,' constantly on the lookout for homoerotic interpretations of otherwise everyday situations and events. In their radical reimagining of the potentialities of affection between men, Japan's rotten girls

avant la lettre have opened up new spaces for the exploration of masculinity and femininity for men and women alike." When you discover it, this "rotten filter" can turn your black-and-white world into a high-definition movie.

It's worth noting the success many BL manga creators have also achieved in the cultural mainstream. Works by mangaka such as Haruko Kumota, Fumi Yoshinaga, Setona Mizushiro, Tomoko Yamashita and Est Em are now being enjoyed by the widest possible audiences. Polishing their skills as storytellers in the BL genre, under the severe eyes of *fujoshi*, it was not long before people beyond the BL field began to notice them as creators of works of universal appeal.

LIFE'S A (LIBERATING)

D R A G

“We’re all born naked and the rest is drag” is one of RuPaul’s pet phrases on Drag Race. In the wake of the show’s extraordinary success with mainstream audiences, Gillian Daniels looks at a series of performers using less glamorous forms of drag as a tool to interrogate and disrupt assumptions about gender.

RuPaul Charles made headlines in September 2016 when he picked up a Primetime Emmy for Outstanding Host for his eponymous reality competition programme, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. The show, which Charles also produces, started in 2009 and has now run to nine seasons and multiple spin-off series, such as *Untucked*, *RuPaul’s Drag U* and *RuPaul’s Drag Race: All Stars*.

Produced for Logo TV, the show was aimed initially at the LGBTQ community. But with time, it has bridged the gap with the straight community. Eight years in, *Drag Race* has grown from being late-night fringe TV into a

popular smash hit. Far from simply tolerating the show, mainstream viewers now count among its most dedicated followers. The show’s contestants have also broken boundaries by achieving success outside of queer culture, with chart-topping albums, movie appearances and sponsorship deals.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of *Drag Race* has been its influence on popular culture. As RuPaul commented when speaking to the *Guardian*: “It [used to] take about 10 years for something in gay culture to actually migrate to the mainstream. But because of our show, gay pop culture is [now] pop

culture in the mainstream.”

That gay culture is becoming indivisible from mainstream culture can rightfully be thought of as a positive effect: *Drag Race* helps a historically marginalized community become increasingly accepted and understood. The show has had another important cultural effect too. “We’re all born naked and the rest is drag” is one of RuPaul’s pet phrases on the show, and is also the founding idea for the series. Men impersonating women exposes gender for the cultural construct that it is and shows how the art of performance crafts the gendered self into being. To illustrate this, each season features an episode

where the queens makeover guest partners into their drag sisters or drag daughters. Across the seasons, their partners, who have been as diverse as US Marines, soon-to-be-grooms and grandfathers, have been fashioned into fabulous queens through the transformative powers of drag. Contestants are scored on how well they are able to create a feminine look on a heterosexual man with traditionally masculine features.

This cultural benefit of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* chimes with the influential writings of gender theorist Judith Butler. For Butler, it is the acknowledgement and performance of various interpretations



PHOTO BY HOLLY REVELL

“WONG’S PERFORMANCE REVEALS THAT GENDER IS A SIMULACRUM—A COPY WITHOUT AN ORIGINAL”

of the body that produce the effect of a single gender, rather than the body’s own physical constitution. Gender is the enactment of social norms and the avoidance of opposing taboos. Viewing the workings of gender in this way reveals the problematic ways in which heterosexual norms are imposed on individuals, sometimes to violent, discriminatory ends. For Butler, drag is a powerful tool that can disrupt these damaging assumptions through parody. When drag kings and queens assume an exaggerated character of the opposite sex through the help of costumes and make-up, their audience becomes aware of how

they too perform their own genders every day.

Drag’s history has always been tied to entertainment and theatre. Since the time of Shakespeare and the origins of Kabuki, men have often played female roles in world theatre. But since the LGBTQ civil-rights movements of the 1960s, which culminated in the 1969 uprisings at the Stonewall Inn in New York’s Greenwich Village, drag has been closely linked to political action. While these days he might be better known for his “glamazon” alter ego, the young RuPaul started out as a counterculture artist on the Atlanta gay bar circuit doing genderfuck drag, an irreverent genre of

drag inspired by punk rock.

Arguably, the most visible form of drag is no longer live performance found in underground venues but on *Drag Race*. The show’s popularity has resulted in its becoming the dominant form of representation for drag culture at large. This has potentially negative consequences for drag, as the show espouses a specific form that can be seen to reinforce a set of gender expectations. *Drag Race* has embraced queens of different styles of drag, from comedy queens like Bianca Del Rio, to spooky queens like Sharon Needles, to pageant queens like Alyssa Edwards. But regardless of drag style, queens are

still expected by RuPaul and the other judges to embody a form of polish and sophistication in their looks and delivery personified by RuPaul. Recently, fans were shocked when hot favourite Adore Delano exited the second series of *All Stars* after being harshly critiqued by judge Michelle Visage for her look. Delano’s defence was that she had built her brand on her grungy, unfinished aesthetic, but Visage griped about the fact that her dress looked cheap and fitted poorly. A clique formed on season three by queens calling themselves the Heathers popularized the term “booger drag” when they used it to describe fellow contestants who



PHOTO BY FIELD & MOGLYNN

Above: Milk Presents, *Joan*
Previous pages: Nando Messias, *Shoot the Sissy*

were unpolished and lazy in their drag style. One of the Heathers, Manila Luzon, also described booger drag as “crunchy”.

While saying someone does booger drag has become pejorative, a group of contemporary artists today are deliberately embracing crunchy drag as a critical means to interrogate gender performance. In many of his video works, the chameleonic Singaporean artist Ming Wong impersonates the heroes and heroines of the world-cinema canon. Wong’s work is characterized by his trademark brand of hilarity and provocation, born out of a sense of disconnect that arises from what the artist terms “impostoring”. Wong performs roles that often do not correspond to his designation as an Asian man, embracing and exaggerating the misalignments in gender, language and ethnicity.

In *Bülent Wongsoy: Biji Diva!*, Wong explores the life and career of Bülent Ersoy, the popular Turkish transsexual singer, who embodies the notion of unstable gender identity. Wong draws attention to the performativity of gender as he dons gaudy costumes, portraying Ersoy through the various stages of her life as both a man and a trans woman. The imperfect illusion of femininity created by his over-the-top impersonation further disintegrates to become another layer of illusion—what viewers expect to be Wong’s figuring of femaleness gives way to another grey area when they fail to establish if the body they are encountering is male or female. Through this, Wong’s performance reveals that gender is a simulacrum—a copy without an original.

The Brazilian artist Nando Messias explores ideas of visibility and violence from the standpoint of the effeminate man through his alter ego Sissy. Late one night in 2005, Messias was walking home. Dressed in black, wearing high heels and with his hair up in his signature bun, he was ambushed by a group of young men who pushed him to the ground and shouted abuse at him. They only stopped when neighbours called the police.

Ten years later, Messias returned to the site of the attack for *The Sissy’s Progress*, clad in a red ballgown, with matching

stilettoes and lipstick, and a bunch of colourful balloons in one hand. As he walked the streets of East London, a four-piece brass band followed him. After the incident, Messias wanted to explore what it was about himself that had spurred the young men on to attack him. He wanted to efface the effeminate parts of himself to stand out less, and began by removing his make-up and swapping out his high heels. However, eventually he came to the conclusion that the answer was not to dial down this side of himself, but rather to make it “hyper-visible”. The loud music and colourful balloons are an invitation to passers-by to really look and thereby witness the aggression that the queer community experience on a daily basis. Via *Sissy*, Messias explores the idea of “misalignment”. The term “effeminate” is applied to male behaviour that approximates to the feminine, implying a failure of both masculinity and femininity. However, for Messias, this point of breakdown is both a political site and a productive force: “Effeminacy allows me space to exist in a body that refuses systemic correction.”

Messias reprised the role of Sissy in *Shoot the Sissy*, this time staging a carnivalesque performance, stepping into the firing line and inviting his audience to throw food and other objects at him. *Shoot the Sissy* recalls the early works of Marina Abramović, in particular *Rhythm 0*, where Abramović laid out seventy-two objects on a table and invited her audience

“DRAG ALLOWS THEM TO EXPLORE WHAT IT MEANS TO PERFORM MASCULINITY”

to use them to do whatever they wanted to her. With *Shoot the Sissy*, Messias similarly puts his body in a position of complete vulnerability. The resulting piece powerfully exposes the violence that the effeminate body has traditionally been subjected to as a result of its perceived difference.

Performance artist Dickie Beau works with what he calls “playback performance”, inspired by the drag tradition of lip-synching. Beau’s *modus operandi* involves a process of “dissecting and re-membering” found audio footage, the latter term meaning literally to put back together and embody. Beau describes himself as a “drag clown”, situating his work at the intersection of female impersonation and clowning—he appears particularly inspired by Pierrot, the sad clown with a melancholic expression in white-face make-up and loose clothing. The character has come to express qualities of solitude, sorrow and sensitivity, while playfully and boldly embodying qualities of gender fluidity.

Blackouts: Twilight of the Idols was inspired by the *Judy Garland Speaks* tapes. In tapes Garland recorded as notes for a never-written autobiography, “America’s Sweetheart” spoke of her troubled life as she was going through a messy divorce. The tapes grabbed Beau as he identified with Garland’s dysfunction. In the first instalment of the work, Beau lip-synched to Garland’s tapes in a stringy plaited red wig and Pierrot make-up, loosely evoking

Judy Garland’s Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* while expressing her desolation in the tapes. He began to search for other iconic women who had the same qualities as Garland, and arrived at the audio recordings from Marilyn Monroe’s final interview with the journalist Richard Meryman, which he obtained from Meryman himself. Wearing a blond Monroe-inspired wig, a cheap nude bodysuit and his trademark make-up, Beau lip-synchs to this footage while also interweaving segments from his own recording of his meeting with Meryman. The resulting work, featuring Beau’s shape-shifting interpretations of both Garland and Monroe, is a haunting study of iconic Hollywood leading ladies in the final stages of decline and exile. The found audio and Beau’s deliberate lip-synching draw attention to the dissonance in his performances of tropic femininity in distress.

Ruby Glaskin, Adam Robertson and Lucy J. Skilbeck, who make up Milk Presents, describe themselves as makers of “gender theatre”. Milk Presents’ brand of performance is a form of protest that interrogates the notion of gender as a binary concept. Much of their work features drag kings, who have traditionally received less visibility than drag queens, something that has been much amplified by *Drag Race*.

Their production *Joan* stars drag king LoUis CYfer performing the role of Joan of Arc dragging up as the men she defied in her lifetime.

Joan of Arc made history because she was eventually burnt at the stake on the pretext that she had worn men’s clothing. For Milk Presents, drag is a critical tool that is a funny and bold way to unpick the workings of masculinity. While drag does not directly condemn or criticize masculinity, it is nonetheless a hard-hitting way of exposing how binary thinking about gender has historically had damaging, even violent ends.

Extending this, Milk Presents also work with LoUis CYfer to run *Build Your Own Drag King* workshops. Amateurs are invited to explore their own masculinity, whether they are men or women, and drag up as their masculine alter egos. Participants hail from different demographics. Drag allows them to explore what it means to perform masculinity and in doing so come to understand how this cultural construct impacts their lives. In one workshop, an elderly lady performed a piece dressed up as a man who got all the opportunities she never had when she was young, set to James Brown’s “This Is a Man’s World”.

With the phenomenal success of *Drag Race*, detractors worry that drag is losing its critical currency as it increasingly gets swept up into popular culture and reinscribed into mainstream norms and expectations. However, in the work of these artists, drag returns to and refreshes its bold roots in parody, exaggeration and mimicry, inviting audiences to probe our assumptions about gender.

UNDOCUMENTA'D

ATHENS

With Documenta taking up residence in the city for its fourteenth edition, the eyes of the art world are currently trained on Athens. But what is the creative life of the “birthplace of democracy”—and Western art’s ideal of beauty—like when the international circus isn’t in town? Andrew Spyrou takes to the streets to find out.



PHOTO AURELIEN MOLE. COURTESY THE BREEDER, ATHENS

GRAFFITI AS ACTUALIZATION OF THE SPATIAL ORDER OF ATHENS

“It’s really a test of your own patience. If it’s already covered in tags, the windows are broken and the walls are collapsing, of course I’m going to paint it.” We’re standing in an unlit building on Akadimias Street in central Athens, one that the architect Ernst Ziller designed as his final residence in 1880 and in which he lived until his death. It has never been open to the public, and has been closed to everyone since the 1970s. Holding up a lighter in the dark to view the intricate mosaics that decorate the walls, ATHI281 is a graffiti artist with a conscience who draws the line at tagging historic buildings. Up to a point. Here, he pins up three large charcoal drawings to a bare wall, in the knowledge that these might not be seen for another decade, when another enterprising urb-ex enthusiast finds his way in. “Of course I don’t mind if people don’t see my work. Some of my favourite pieces are in locations where no one will ever think to look. I have more time to paint in those spots. Less pressure.”

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the sociologist Michel de Certeau writes of the “network of anti-discipline”, describing how urbanites “actualize” the spatial order of the city to suit their own needs, resisting and refusing the rules imposed by the authorities. Although graffiti might be an obvious example of one such anti-disciplinary process, Certeau in fact included all everyday practices in his category of “tactics” that make a city’s possibilities emerge. In talking to a number of artists, I have become convinced that, among all contemporary cities today, because of its history, architecture, location and contemporary sociopolitical situation, Athens has a creative energy and freedom that make it uniquely conducive to art making today.

Like Athens’s very own portrait artist, ATHI281 has ensured his ever-expanding family of large-nosed caricatures populate all

districts of the city. His signature “throw-up”, which can be executed in a matter of seconds, is a figure seated in a cross-armed huff, portraying Athenians’ “transformation from the reluctant positivity experienced while growing up, to the state of confused frustration abundant today”, as he puts it. His style seems effortless, evoking the iconic imagery of acclaimed Greek painter Alekos Fassianos as well as the humour of the comics of Arkas which are found on every Greek child’s bedside table. But his pieces also cut deep into the Athenian subconscious: a crazed monster surrounded by downward-pointing graph arrows and the caption “Man, the spreadsheets ain’t lookin’ good yo”; a cheerful two-tone character with a long arm evoking the traditional Greek puppet Karagiozi shouting in all caps “THE PROBLEM IS YOU”; a seated office worker alongside a stack of paper labelled “A pile of fuckit”.

What the hopeless smirk on the faces of these works and countless others by ATHI281 misses, though, is the optimism and dynamism present in the city today. Not only is it “the birthplace of democracy”, a truism the media has reminded us of countless times in recent years as Athens has undergone economic and political turmoil, but the region is also the progenitor of Western art as we know it. The architecture of the city doesn’t let us forget this: the Acropolis, with the Parthenon atop, stands strong and beams energy across the city towards its four mountain guards, Penteli, Parnitha, Egaleo and Immitos, on three sides, and to the sea and its fuming port of Piraeus on the fourth.

AN ANCIENT BEACON

Perennially situated historically, culturally and geographically somewhere between the Near East and the West, Greece straddles languages, cuisines, conflicts and creations. British artist Navine G. Khan-Dossos came to the city for an exhibition and stayed. Her



Above: ATHI281, *Untitled (Syntagma)*, 2015
Opposite: Stelios Faitakis, *The Elegy of May, Part 1*, 2016

PHOTO AURELIEN MOLE. COURTESY THE BREEDER, ATHENS. ALL OTHER IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST

training in Islamic art means a keen enthusiasm for historical depth, and her work explores the tangents such sprawling histories encourage—and in particular the imagery that such complexities produce. A perfect fit for Athens, then, as it undergoes a further historical transformation, this time documented by the international media.

Khan-Dossos tells me that she remained in Athens precisely because of Greece’s unique positioning: “It is the tension between what is left behind of the four-hundred-year Turkish occupation of Greece and the rebuilding of modern Greece in a much more Northern European mode that fascinates me—which buildings have been repurposed or erased, which ones have been made in the classical style, which ones are thrown up without too much aesthetic concern.”

Like ATHI281, Khan-Dossos consciously considers the

permanence and impermanence of artworks, accepting commissions in locations that she hopes will allow for a long-term commitment to the artwork. *Time Is a Tentacle*, a permanent work outside Khan-Dossos’s former studio in the Kerameikos district, and one of my favourite outdoor pieces on display in Athens today, consciously uses the ochre colourings associated with the pottery shards still being unearthed in the archaeological excavations just yards away. For this piece Khan-Dossos directs her passion for patterns at the “meander”, perhaps the best-known of the Hellenic border designs, and which took its name from the twisting River Maeander that Homer refers to in *The Iliad*. Here Khan-Dossos takes further inspiration from ancient Cretan maritime designs, which are also said to have originally informed the shape of the pattern, and which occasionally depicted octopuses clinging on to the outside of pots.

Much like the city itself—a contemporary metropolis that for one reason or another has shunned the computerization of bureaucracy, is surviving very well thank you very much without LCD screens on the backs of taxi headrests, and whose youth prefer to spend their evenings with each other rather than their mobiles—Khan-Dossos’s work explores a basic fascination with the analogue, often in direct opposition to the digital. She utilizes imagery we have become familiar with through modern technology, but embeds them within organic forms and timeless motifs. Though at first glance organic and naturalistic, even *Imagine a Palm Tree*, a floor-to-ceiling mural at the café of the Benaki Museum of Islamic Art, features structural elements referencing wifi symbols and GSM signal indicators—inescapable elements of contemporary society which we are led to believe form essential pillars without which our lives would collapse.

**DEPICTING CONTEMPORARY
REVOLUTIONARY PROMISE**

Another artist shrewdly investigating the world’s multiplicitous histories is Stelios Faitakis. Featured prominently in the brilliant 2006 exhibition *Anathema* at the DESTE Foundation and showcasing its founder Dakis Joannou’s collection of work by young Greek graphic artists, Faitakis is probably one of the best-known artists to have broken out of the faded street-art scene. Despite not aligning himself with any political stance, let alone the social mores of the art world, Faitakis’s painstakingly dense murals clearly represent the complexity of the state the world has found itself in, a state currently visible throughout Athens, where Faitakis was born and still works.

Pitting authoritarian figures against hordes of balaclava’d youths, and showing virginal waifs draped in lacy lingerie clinging on to bearded patriarchs and archaic deities struggling alongside the working poor, Faitakis insists he is simply “presenting images of the universe and the human condition” for others’ consideration. His works might be a visual representation of Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life*, in which everyday life is defined as the junction of “illusion and truth, power and helplessness; the intersection of the sector man controls and the sector he does not control”. Lefebvre argued that twentieth-century capitalism transformed the everyday into a space of pure consumption. Faitakis’s work, appearing to depict a resistance of some sort, seems to illustrate a promise of revolution, the same one that Lefebvre hoped would be achieved by a critique of everyday life.

Most obviously drawing on his interest in religious icon painting, Faitakis’s work also pulls from his past as a graffiti writer (first writing STYL, then BIZARE), imbued with a calligraphic cypsis first noted in the wild-style lettering of his favourite bands and hip-hop groups whose logos he would

scratch into his school desk. He later went on to design covers of now-sought-after LPs by Nineties Greek rap group Terror X Crew. He tells me that he has often complicated the lettering in his work to the point of not being able to remember it himself, an apt analogy for the information overload and bureaucratic opacity we are currently faced with. I am fascinated by the idea of future archaeologists striving to decipher his work.

An admirer of Hieronymus Bosch, Faitakis conducts extensive library-based research before embarking on any piece. His works absorb their surroundings and reinterpret their cultural location, with every minuscule detail of the painting serving a purpose, from “ascribing incredible symbolic depth” to “simply balancing the composition”. As we sit in his new fourth-floor studio in Ano Petralona, he tells me that he plans to bring geometry more and more to the fore in his future works, and points to the squared paper of a miniature notebook on his desk. I am astonished that this is the paper on which he plans his grand eight-metre-high works, such as his most recent large-scale commission, a permanent mural entitled *The Elegy of May, Parts 1 & 2* at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

CURIOSITY IN THE CITY

Although sociopolitical discussions about Athens have plenty of other platforms, a discussion with Nadia Gerazouni, director of the Breeder gallery, probably the most internationally visible of the Greek commercial spaces, inevitably turns to the subject. She tells me that although many artists probably choose not to respond to the situation in Greece consciously, nonetheless “it’s hard to ignore”. Gerazouni’s take on the influx of foreign artists confirms what I have heard from others—that the city is such a flexible and welcoming place that “once people decide to mix, doors open”. A complete and healthy



Above: Navine G. Khan-Dossos, *Time Is a Tentacle*, 2016
Opposite: Giorgos Gerontides, *Pieces of a Clash*, 2016

state of collaboration can only exist once both local and expatriate artists are comfortable with each other’s presence, seeing past any obvious differences and any prejudices perpetuated by the art establishment.

I press Gerazouni to try and put a finger on what ties The Breeder’s artists together in the current climate, and her response of “an ever-shifting concept and umbrella under which various projects take place” seems to me a good metaphor for the city itself. The art produced in the city, while not stamped with any heavy-handed nationalism, remains distinctly Greek. This is a consequence of the long-embedded ancient history of the city and the inevitable curiosity that the surrounding (if sometimes crumbling) beauty brings with it.

While the three artists discussed above articulate their relationship with the city in a very public manner, Giorgos Gerontides does something similar in a much more private fashion, archiving his curiosities and fabricating others.

All his works take “collecting” as their central mechanism, a process he calls “a necessity present in every human being”, with his pieces made up of minute objects, arranged to create a cohesive whole. Featured in the recent *Equilibrists* exhibition at the Benaki Museum, an attempt at a “survey” of artists working in Greece today, Gerontides presented a collector’s workshop. The collections ranged from a haunting vitrine of pieces of shattered taxi windows, sinister baggies filled with hair-ties and SIM cards, and dismantled and reconstructed room fans endowed with a melancholy anthropomorphic quality. The “collector” who inspired the work *Who Is the Man in Red?* *AT(r)opical Collection* was an unknown gentleman dressed in regal red, an image of whom Gerontides found in a box of cassette tapes left on the street. A little research uncovered that the original Tudor portrait had recently been restored at the

Royal Collection in London, with its subject remaining unidentified.

A practitioner of “Neo-Assemblage”, or perhaps “Neo-Archaeology”, Gerontides’s work is particularly poignant. Not to put too melodramatic a point on it, the red man represents today’s Athenian—someone who has experienced better times, who may on occasion feel an unjustified shame at his position, but who still proudly holds his head high. He takes care of his possessions, few of which have any monetary value, but all of which he treasures. Or the man in red could be an example of the unfortunately displaced rural poor, navigating the accumulations of pavement potholes so much more adeptly than the so-called urban elite. At the exhibition one can almost smell the nose-crinkling sweetness of the whiff of an unwashed jacket, which is high on the list of olfactory stimulations that the city provides.

SOFT RUINS

Documenta has pledged to utilize a great swathe of the city, from parts of the Benaki Museum complex to the contemporary art museum EMST, and from a variety of the city’s archaeological sites to less-visited archives. However, despite a great number of eyes being on the city at the moment, it is the energy and curiosity displayed by artists such as those profiled here that are characteristic of contemporary Athens. Documenta inaugurated itself with a *Parliament of Bodies* in the former headquarters of the military police during the junta (1967–74); a number of discussions taking place on Andreas Angelidakis’s sixty-eight shiftable trompe-l’oeil concrete blocks, “soft ruins” that bring to light an allegory of the city. Thoughts of ancient Greek democracy being situated within a modernist frame conjure yet another analogy for art making: Athens locates the formality of antiquity within an everyday practice of creation, an immovable foundation atop which rests a great deal of promise.



**“ATHENS IS SURVIVING VERY WELL
THANK YOU VERY MUCH WITHOUT LCD SCREENS
ON THE BACKS OF TAXI HEADRESTS”**

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“ONE OF THE REASONS I LIKE USING BLACK AND WHITE SO MUCH IS THAT, FOR ME, IT CUTS DOWN THE OPTIONS... IT GETS RID OF A LOT OF THE FUSS”

Artist Clare Strand works with photography—as well as machinery and chance—to create works of beguiling oddness that provoke and perplex as much as they explain. “That’s how I might define my practice, as well as how I like to experience imagery,” she tells Duncan Wooldridge. “A ‘huh’ rather than an ‘ahh’ of appreciation or admiration.”

How does collecting play a role in what you do?

In my formative years, when I was about twelve or thirteen, I used to collect images and cut out bits from newspapers or magazines or paperback books—just things I found interesting. In retrospect I can see that as a start of identifying with imagery. My first attraction to the image was never the wondrous or the beautiful or the epic or the sublime. It was always about very rough imagery

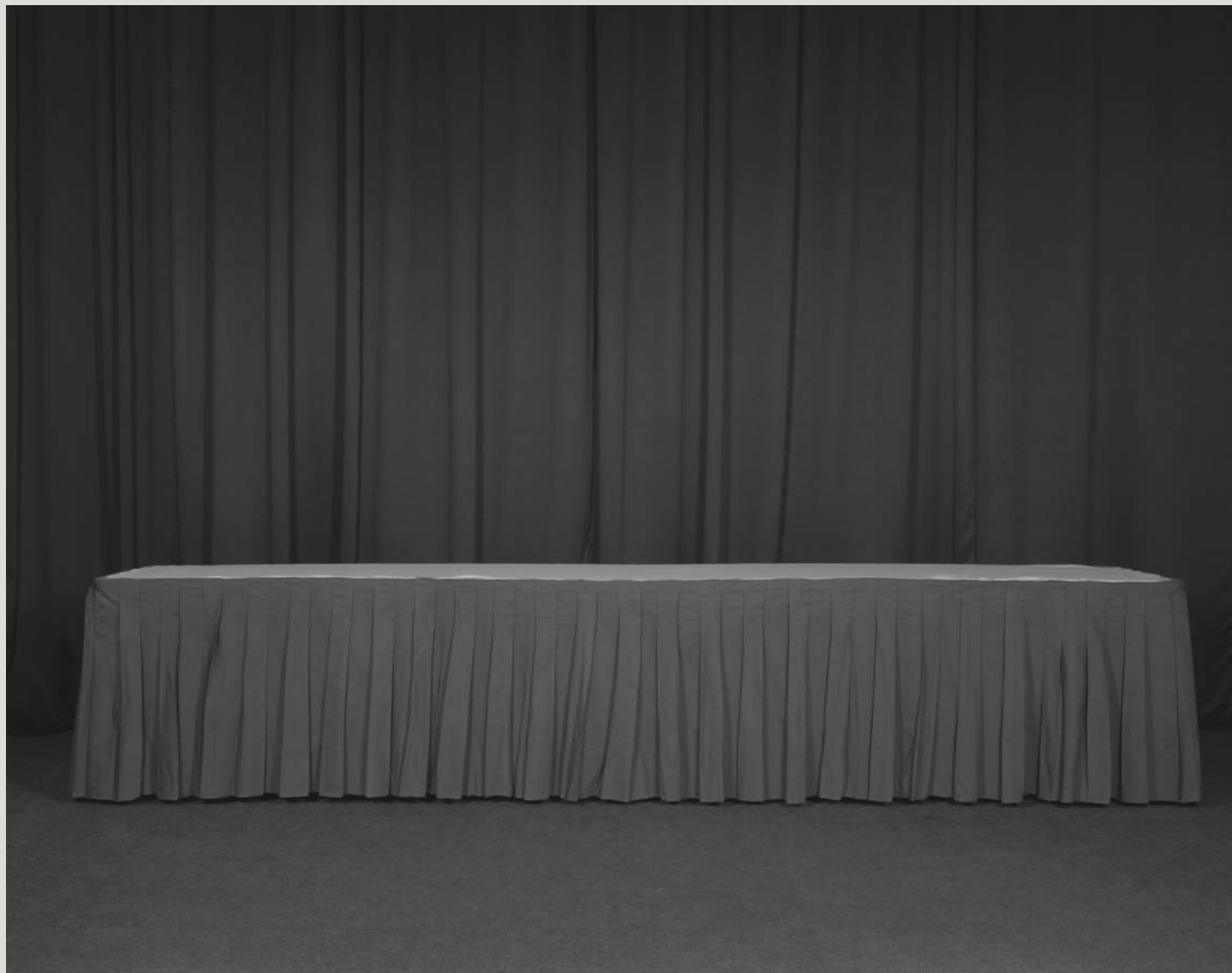
that you could just about call an image. Where I used to live, on the outskirts of Croydon, I often visited the local library, and they had a very small collection of books on the paranormal, and I would go to hang out and read those. It was next to the crime section. I can still feel how it felt to be there—comfortable and sinister at the same time. Essentially I’ve always responded to utilitarian photography rather than something on a gallery wall.

Is there a point when your interest in photography tipped from being a “what is that?” to a kind of “what sort of image is this?” I think there are moments when you are seeing the photograph, as well as what it shows you.

I do remember the images I enjoyed were the ones I felt confused by. This is the imagery that I still enjoy, that still grabs me, that leaves me a little unsettled. I think, for me, it’s always a visceral and physical response to something.

My book *Girl Plays with Snake* is a collection of images of women and snakes, pictures I’ve collected over the years. Essentially I can’t bear snakes: so the pull and the push of collecting something you have a severe dislike for is quite perverse, but it suits me, because it is something I’m trying to understand.

On one hand you might think “I can start to look at this”, but on the other hand, “this image is something else”...



Previous page and these pages: Images taken from the series *Skirts*, 2011

Yes, I've found looking at them is a hard process, which is a ridiculous situation to be in. But they slowly have become a collection and have taken on a different purpose—it's not about the individual image, it's about the larger idea. In some ways the images are a means to an end—to discuss something bigger.

It has a logical contradiction too—"I really don't like this, but I'm fascinated by it."
It's like doing this, really [*she places*

her hands to cover her eyes, but with her fingers open, so she can just about see through]: for me it's an experiment. It's dealing with something that I don't know the outcome of, or if it will be at all satisfying. Everything I do is an experiment, and I'm not altogether sure where things will go. But it's important to set up the circumstances to allow something to happen.

Thinking about these images makes me think that, on the one hand,

there's a rejection of the beautiful—these images are not there to be adored as photographs—but neither are they necessarily meant to be totally abject either.
Yes.

You end up in a space somewhat more complicated, that Duchamp would often call indifference.
Yes! Absolutely!

And Ed Ruscha has a nice way of putting it in that he wanted his

viewers' response to be a kind of "Huh?" That moment of not being clearly situated, not really knowing where you are, is quite productive. That's how I might define my practice, as well as how I like to experience imagery. A "huh" rather than an "ahh" of appreciation or admiration.

In relation to what you said about this collection being a kind of experiment, I wonder if this might be a place to talk about chance and accident. An

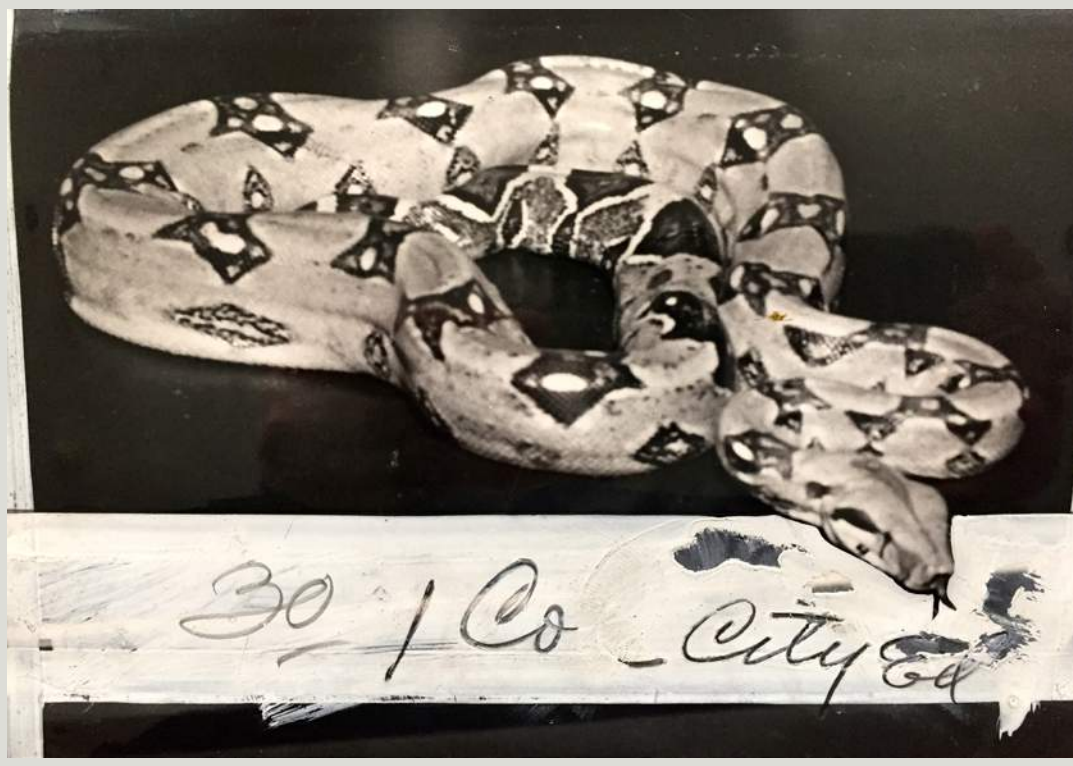
experiment automatically allows for failure, and it allows for accident and accidental discovery, which can be really positive. It can also be inconclusive as well.

As my work has progressed, chance has become more and more a part of what I do. I see that as being open to letting things materialize, to try to be as open to the world as possible. I think that's where I operate at my best. But also I like walking into a shop and having limited choice—it suits me. It just

seems quite logical, for me, that you can base life around certain rules, like a flip of a coin or the first T-shirt you find. It seems quite reasonable. So if I enter a shop—I do "man" shopping, I think they call it—I pick something quickly. I'm quite happy to go with those impulses. It is a system in itself, and I think some people believe that it isn't. I think people consider that it's not formed. But there is a system to it. It's not ephemeral. One hones it.

That structure is still an open structure. What you're talking about is allowing yourself to have instinct and also being able to respond to the limits of a constraint as well. That seems to be about openness coming out of limit, rather than saying "there is structure, and there is chance", as if those things were opposed. They actually are in some kind of harmony with each other. That structure allows for moments when chance enters in, and suddenly improvisation can happen. In terms of limiting choices

and constraints, are there strategies or things that you use when you consciously limit the options?
One of the reasons I like using black and white so much is that, for me, it cuts down the options. It's very binary, it's very *black and white*. It gets rid of a lot of the fuss. It delivers information in a succinct and straightforward way. When I read fiction, I get very frustrated, because I feel like I don't need the descriptive prose. I just could do with the method. So, in a sense,



“I LOVE THE IDEA OF CHALLENGING TASTE AND GETTING WHAT YOU GET”

that’s what black and white does for me—it strips everything down and delivers in a very immediate way.

Vilém Flusser describes the black-and-white image as being a theoretical image and colour as trying to mimic reality too much, which I always found very interesting, because you end up having this particular relationship with black and white: partly it’s about resisting this notion that the photograph is a copy of reality, and seeing photography as a means of play.

I agree with that, and I agree that there is this link with black and white and the theoretical image. I take this on board and at times I have poked fun at this assumed

relationship. With the work *Skirts*, there’s a smile behind the work. They are a typology. They look “right”, but they are made with a bit of a wink at how certain “kinds” of photography can work in particular “kinds” of ways.

Recently I’ve been turning up to events on the wrong day. [Laughs.] When I was teaching, I turned up on the wrong day, a week early. When I went to a talk, I turned up in the wrong month. And this is happening more and more. But every time I do it, it leads to a situation that I could never have imagined would happen, and it is in some ways a model for my working methods, where you turn up to do something that doesn’t happen, but

then you take advantage of what does. It happens to everyone, but it’s an analogy for taking what comes your way. I think it’s just about, as I say, being open. If you don’t want to acknowledge that stuff, you don’t operate in this way. I’ve worked it through and would far rather open myself to chance, as uncomfortable as it can be.

When you suddenly find yourself in the wrong place at the wrong time, you could just decide to retreat, and go back to where you were; or you can embrace that. The work *10 Least Most Wanted* is an example of this. I picked ten images from my old scrapbooks, made a cohesive series and then, with a

random flick of the wrist, looked at what’s on the other side of the paper. I chose to exhibit these unwanted images and fragments instead. This work for me is really important because it encapsulates my working process. I love the idea of challenging taste and getting what you get.

I was thinking about the work that you showed in your exhibition in May 2015, where you had cut-out images in a fan-activated machine. The fan runs for thirty seconds or so, and pushes one or two images up to the glass. You never have a chance to see everything—all the images assembled in front of you—you get what you get in that moment. Yes, that’s why it’s called *The Happenstance Generator*. Because some of the time, the work that I’ve made has tried to describe the process of making. *The Happenstance Generator* is a description of what it is to create chance. Like an analogue description of what it is to collect. All the images in there were from my scrapbooks. What I like is that an image comes onto the side of the glass, and then goes straight back down again, and I like the idea of something meaning something and at the same time meaning nothing. An experience can be useful or not, illuminating or not.

I feel like I collude with the world rather than just experience it. Chance is intrinsic to photography in general. I enjoyed reading Robin Kelsey’s recent book, *Photography and the Art of Chance*—chance has always been relevant to photographic practice. We’re all working with chance, just in very different ways.

It seems like you occupy a space in between the conventional poles of photography as either staged or reported—it’s not like “here I am, staging my own version of the world”, neither is it “the world is just in front of me: that’s my version of it”. I like this expression of colluding with the world. You can’t fully determine it nor can you write yourself out of it. I need collusion, I need collaboration. And as things are progressing, I need it more and more: finding different ways to collaborate. With *Getting Better and Worse at the Same Time*, it’s collaboration with the work itself. Is this machine going to work? You know, you have to *talk with it* in a



These pages: Images taken from the book *Girl Plays with Snake*, published by MACK Books, 2016



way. The machines were telling me what the work was going to be.

An openness allows someone to bring some ideas to the table. You can either say “I hand this over to you to do with as you will”, which you might do if you’re some kind of superstar. On the other hand, there’s that version where you might take total control of it and not let anyone in. You miss that interesting opportunity in between. With the *Girl Plays with Snake* book—I’m not a publisher, and I’m not an editor. I accept that someone else will have some new information for me. I think if I have a bugbear about information technology, it’s that the internet has allowed us to do so much for ourselves—if you

want to start a shop, you can set up a shop on eBay; if you want to fix your boiler, you can look it up on YouTube and fix your own boiler. All of this is great, but there is still a need for specialism and I think it’s something that’s held less in regard. In some creative organizations, it’s become less about the creative and the specialist and more about the general and the populist.

There’s a nice book by Sherry Turkle called Alone Together, which talks about our interactions with technologies which I think explains that quite nicely. We oblige ourselves to do every single thing. Technology presents itself to us as something that will make us free, but we become

responsible for absolutely everything! I love the fact that I look up on YouTube to see how to plait my daughters’ hair, but it doesn’t mean I’m a good hairdresser. You can’t throw the baby out with the bathwater. I’m completely open to people’s input, to collaborate with people or “things” that know more than me on related and unrelated subjects. There’s so much to be gained by not thinking you know or can do everything.

Perhaps we could finish by talking about your collaboration with your husband, Gordon MacDonald (of GOST books), as MacDonaldStrand. It allows you to make projects that are slightly different again.

Our work anyway is collaborative; my work is collaborative with Gordon, and his work is collaborative with me; it would be impossible not to be. A lot of things come out of discussion while we are making our daughters’ dinners or doing the dishes. MacdonaldStrand things are distinctly “MacdonaldStrand”. There’s a particular message within the work. The MacDonaldStrand logo is “Sustaining the Unsupportable, Supporting the Unsustainable”, which sums it up pretty well.

“Girl Plays with Snake” is published by MACK Books. A show of work from the book runs at Belfast Exposed until 17 June.

POSITION

NON-MISSIONARY



UNIDENTIFIED MAKER, "BARBIE" FIGURES, C. 1950-80, CERAMIC, COURTESY OF THE MARVILL COLLECTION

“Consumable sex in mainstream culture is often associated with the steamy headlines on the covers of women’s magazines and with the plastic models presented to men. This stagnant repetition of sex and gender stereotypes does not fit [our] mission.” Lissa Rivera, associate curator at the Museum of Sex in Manhattan, tells Charlotte Jansen about *Known/Unknown*, an exhibition of rare works revealing the hidden desires of self-taught artists, from pornographic patterns made by chronic schizophrenic Ike Morgan, to Eugene von Bruenchenhein’s erotic pictures of his wife.

What did you do before you joined the Museum of Sex?

I moved to New York City to get my MFA. Although my primary medium is photography, my thesis was an immersive installation of a fictional early twentieth-century sex-researcher’s office. This project explored the connection between historical relationships to technology and sexuality as linked to our current culture. The phenomenal artist Mark Dion was my project advisor. His practice really turned me onto the study of collections and museums at the same time. Working in museums really feeds the intellectual side of my art, and maintaining my role as a creator has informed the way I think about my work with cultural institutions.

After grad school I began a position as creative director at the Burns Archive, which has one of the most extensive collections of early medical photography in the world. The Burns Archive also deals with darker topics such as war and crime—various forms of social mayhem. I was Dr Stanley Burns’s liaison with publishers and museum curators. Together we produced exhibitions, books and lectures. I loved it, Dr Burns was a great teacher. After working there for several years I joined the collections department at the Museum of the City of New York, where I also developed photography classes for the education team. By the end of my tenure there I had collaborated with almost every department at some point. I like to wear many hats. My great love of vernacular art and

material culture was completely indulged there.

Do you have any favourite items among the twenty thousand held in the Museum of Sex’s collection?

I have a lot of favourite objects, but a few I was surprised to warm up to are the moulds of porn-star genitalia. These are silicone moulds made directly from the bodies of adult actors and actresses and sold as sex toys, known as masturbators. Once you get past the disturbing aspect of seeing these disembodied fake body parts, they are actually quite fascinating. The process of creating the moulds is surprisingly intensive and the level of detail preserved is impressive. You can see every vein, pore and even the cellulite of the original model. It reminds me of the tradition of nineteenth-century life and death masks and anatomical mouldages.

The Known/Unknown exhibition has received a lot of attention. Why do you think it struck a chord with audiences?

For me, thinking about ideas for exhibitions starts with the search for a topic that is both universal and specific. Of course, it helps that sexuality is already universal. I look for a greater theme that everyone encounters, then I try to uncover a surprise element that no one expected. When proposing a show about Outsider Art, I was looking to explore the psyche of artists who had unusual sexual fantasies that led them to create a world through art. Even if you are straight vanilla in your sex life, I think everyone can relate to questioning their fantasies

“WHAT WE RESEARCH DAILY TO DO OUR JOB PROPERLY WOULD GET US FIRED FROM MOST OTHER INSTITUTIONS!”

and feeling a sense of apprehension about whether or not their desires and bodies are “normal” or will be desirable in society.

The works in *Known/Unknown* give the impression that it was more urgent to be expressive than to conform to larger cultural stereotypes about sexuality. Most of the pieces are very private, which makes them seem almost sacred. The specific, individual stories behind the works are incredible and surprising. Many of the artists made their work against all odds. It was my hope to create a sensitive conversation around the artworks that would create empathy with our audience, and that could be applied to anyone’s personal life as well as how they treat others. What made the exhibition truly come together was the help of curator Frank Maresca of Ricco/Maresca Gallery.

Is being scholarly about sex sexy? How do you present sex without either making it staid or too gimmicky?

Being scholarly is sexy, though being scholarly about sex is no hotter than any other topic. Delving into any subject matter can be extremely satisfying. With sex, you have to be objective and look beyond your own personal tastes. The Museum of Sex looks at a broad cross section of sexual expression, from biological, historical, sociological and artistic perspectives. One unusual aspect of the job is that every day we deal with material that is NSFW. What we research daily to do our job properly would get us fired from most other institutions!

Consumable sex in mainstream culture is often associated with the steamy headlines on the covers of women’s magazines and with the plastic models presented to men. This stagnant repetition of sex and gender stereotypes does not fit the mission of the museum. Our exhibitions are the product of rich relationships with collaborators who are at the top in their field. When we reach out to advisors, they usually jump at the chance to explore sexuality in such an uninhibited format. We always bridge each topic by relating it to history as well as contemporary culture. The museum is not afraid to have a bit of fun with sex, though. This actually makes the experience more engaging to many visitors.

What is sexuality for you?

For me, sexuality is intertwined with many other things, like social and cultural norms and biological functions that affect the body and cognition in relationship to the erotic drive. There is no fixed, universal definition. Although gender orientation is not sexual orientation, the experience of gender and gender variance is also an important element of sexuality that interests me.

Is there anything the museum wouldn’t show—or couldn’t show?

Sexuality can be very sensitive and personal, and we keep the feelings of our audience in mind. We strive to investigate everything with objectivity and sensitivity. What can and cannot be seen has a lot to do with the social constructs of the culture and time. We definitely look

back to eras where it is surprising that one thing was censored while another, more surprising behaviour was totally permissible. Many great artists, scholars and anthropologists have explored controversial subjects, and you can see that work in the most elite institutions. But at the Museum of Sex the context is quite direct and can’t be so easily written around. We hope to create a discourse around controversial material that is intelligent and inclusive. If and when the time comes to display more difficult works we will do our best to present them in a thoughtful way.

How concerned are you about censorship, or the re-emergence of some kind of culture war, in the US, with the latest wave of conservatism?

One of the major driving forces for the founding of the museum by director Daniel Gluck was to create a safe haven for free speech. When the museum opened in 2002 the Board of Regents rejected the application for not-for-profit status, stating that the word sex would create a “mockery” of the word museum. We operate in a space that is more counterculture than tied to the restrictions that bind the mainstream. When I posited this question to Mr Gluck he replied: “We can only hope our first amendment rights do not slip away and will always do our best to help defend an open forum of discussion.”

“Known/Unknown: Private Obsession and Hidden Desire in Outsider Art” runs until 16 September.

N O T E S ON MASCULINITY

**“TO BE NATURAL IS SUCH
A DIFFICULT POSE TO KEEP UP”
OSCAR WILDE**

The figure of the hipster has dominated the last decade. In that time this carefully groomed and self-consciously retrograde figure has achieved many things: he brought facial hair back to life, revitalized coffee culture and rediscovered a myriad of forgotten crafts—preferably things that men, handsome, manly (and bearded) men, got up to in attractive ateliers in evocative locations.

But this nostalgic and unquestioning celebration of masculinity, of the old manly ways of

barber shops, fedora hats and trouser braces, failed to address that key question, namely: “What is it like to be a man today?” Our culture has been actively redefining what it is to be a woman—only to then place a Ken doll next to her. As women’s roles kept changing, evolving, the image of their male counterpart, on other hand, has fossilized itself into that sedate bermuda shorts-wearing Viking.

Hipster style is a most unnatural (posed, contrived) cult of the natural. The hipster is a conventional, graceless dandy, a dandy without originality, without surprise, without mystery, without *camp*. Susan Sontag described camp taste as a kind of love that “relishes rather than judges”. Hipster culture does the opposite. It discriminates; it fails to embrace. A hipster is a Beat devoid of dreams, or breadth. Moleskine notebook filled with lists, this wannabe drifter never goes out without Roaming and GPS. Hipsters even managed

to turn flea markets (that surrealist paradise) into predictable, contrived spectacles.

It is this idea, this philosophy, or lack thereof, that the artists in this issue are challenging.

Fascism is masculinity gone wrong. Unquestioning masculinity. From Mussolini and Gaddafi* to Trump, Putin, Erdoğan, Lukashenko, Mugabe, Sisi... We are sliding towards darkly reactionary times; more than ever, our culture needs more energetic rebellion and taboo breaking.

Leigh Bowery was the perfect antidote to Margaret Thatcher’s Britain: a seven-foot alien pageant contestant landing in London’s galleries and clubs as proof that there was more colour in the world than anything in the BBC’s or the Iron Lady’s wildest dreams... Lucian Freud’s portraits of the artist looked beyond his two-legged moveable feast, to dig deeper into the essence of his masculinity, his being as a man. What was it like to inhabit a shell made out of ageing flesh, with its ill-defined proportions and shape-shifting sex, its roaming and roaring appetites?

Following in their footsteps, Juergen Teller’s work asks similar questions. How does one deal with one’s desires and self-image? Even if he was often shooting fashion ads, Teller’s man is not just a model, a mannequin with a beard, six-pack and handmade brogues. Belly sagging, Teller’s man (more often than not Teller himself) looks as pure as he looks sleazy. With the candour of a boy and the hairy body of a grown man, he seems continuously to long for both tenderness and sex. He is ridiculously and disturbingly alive. In his accomplice, Vivienne Westwood, we find a woman who rejects the idea of perfect shapes swaying on heels. She lies down on a sofa like an ageing Venus, potbelly amidst cushions, tits ostensibly unoperated. She flares out of art history and fashion cannons, a fiery and imperfect goddess, wonderful in her imbalance.

Neither Warhol nor Bowie had much interest in exploring homosexuality, or heterosexuality, or any kind of sexuality for that matter. What they were interested in was *gender*. Gender is how we define ourselves in a polarized world. Whenever a culture needs shaking up, one can rely on the demon (and the dynamite) of sexual identity. Bowie, Bowery, Bond... Queen drag is the avenging angel come to slay all hipsters, ridicule them to extinction.

The gender politics of my generation were highly divisive, being predominantly based on notions of “queer”. A new generation has started to adopt a more inclusive point of view, based not on one’s sexuality, one’s objects of desire, but on one’s constantly changing sense of identity. Gender is not something one is born with. Gender is something we construct, or deconstruct, day by day, picture by picture. Gender is a potential, a latent talent, which we then realize in our own inimitable way.

* One could write a long dissertation on the Nazis and gender, but we won’t go there just yet.

MICHAŁ BUDNY

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Grünnergasse 1, 1010 Vienna, Austria, galerie@schwarzwaelder.at
www.schwarzwaelder.at

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