

A Critical Response

Red White and Blue - Pop Punk Politics Place

Chelsea Space
07.11.12 – 08.12.12.



Elvis Lives in Levis, 2010
Steve Thomas

On his website Steve Thomas describes nostalgia as "... just ain't wot it used to be..... this is just a quick wallow through a bunch of old pix."ⁱ It is Thomas in his own words describing the personal process of going through his archived material to curate and present in the online gallery.

There is always a challenge for both the curator and the audience when confronted with any exhibition that largely comprises of older and previously seen material. How is it placed, both physically and with other works so that it says something new and says it successfully?

The intentions of this show were to build bridges between the overused media "sound bites" of the 2012 Jubilee year and the 1977 Jubilee, the culture which surrounded them and to air the political ghosts which, we are told, haunt today as much as they did 34 years ago.

Donald Smith's writings on the show are beautiful and having been privileged to hear him talk about the exhibition, it is impossible to envisage the show without him. He is as much part of the exhibition as the art works. Both are romantic and passionate creatures that take you on a rich journey in which he uses the deeply researched archive to comment on the now. First he takes us from the dark seductive video bunker, then upwards though the ramp and its confrontational political charged walls, then up and out into bright relief and symbolic thoughtfulness of the windowed Chelsea Space.

In listening to Donald we are transported into his world of fandom and networked into all of his processes, reasons and convincing connections between the works. My personal resonance was with the showing of Derek Jarman's 1977 "Jordan's Dance", which I felt was really the eye of exhibition's storm; however there were some inconsistencies and points of criticism with the exhibition which warrant mentioning.

Firstly I was a little confused with the use of several metal genre music references under the heading of Punkⁱⁱ, but that can be forgiven because these works also made other relevant contributions.

Secondly, the show seems to commence from the premise that we all start from the same point of agreement: of distaste for monarchy, political engagement, disapproval of the Olympics, a

nostalgic longing for the 1970's. Metaphors related through the work also became confused. National Identity seems to become blurred with notions of racism, imperialism, war and the image of the Victorian Britannia. These are all separate political issues and although they may at times have points of connection, they are not interchangeable synonymous terms.

However the main analytical criticism of the exhibition is indicated straight from the title, *Red White and Blue*, which does not have modern cultural associations with the Union Jack of Britannia, but rather with the Stars and Stripes of America. Daniel Sturgis *All or Nothing, 2012*, is more identifiable as a reworking of the Star-Spangled Banner than The Union Flag. Further confusion arises throughout the show with the references to Levi's and Elvis which are practically part of the America constitution. The link between Jon Smith's *Target* and the American pop artist Jasper Johns is stated, but more subtle indications such as his use of the classic green plastic American GI toy soldiers as part of the work is important but missedⁱⁱⁱ alongside the use of the 1954 Marine Corps War Memorial in the work by Trio, all of which are key references to American not British culture.

Looking at the show from a researcher's perspective I am lead to better understand the problems which lie between the exhibition of art practice and the exhibition of art research. In listening to Donald's talk on his curatorship of the show, it is evident that there is a distinct split. The exhibition as art practice and art commentary has inherent mystery to it which defies revelation unless it is explicitly given. If you were to approach any research based show without knowledge of the deeper processes behind it, the networks, extensive investigation and all of the connections made between the works, you would never know the research aspect was present. The two appear to be as split and as the defensive mechanism in Melanie Klein's psychoanalytical Object Relations Theory.^{iv}

As a practicing artist-researcher I feel that this is an unnatural split. All of the background work and research is always present in every exhibition and every art work. The problem is that the nature of the artist-researcher differs from the artist in that we wish this process to be transparent to the observer and to represent it as part of the exhibition. The difficulty is how to do this without writing extensive accompanying texts to a show.

How do we represent research and art practice together as one unified form? To enter into a psychoanalytical *depressive position* rather than the split *paranoid-schizoid position*. Is it, like the show, a romantic idea?

ⁱ <http://www.steventhomasdesign.com/html/archive.html>

ⁱⁱ Laibach's Industrial Metal 2006 song, *Anglia*, and the Mark Titchner 2011 video *N(I)B* of Nicholas Bullen, who is the founder of the metal band Naipalm Death.

ⁱⁱⁱ Time Magazine lists *Army Men* as 13 out of 100 of the top all time American Toys.

^{iv} Klein, M (1997) **Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946 – 1963**. Vintage Classics.

The Melanie Klein Trust Online at: <http://www.melanie-klein-trust.org.uk/>