

1 February – 1 March 2014

## ***Snakes in the Grass***

### ***Buck Ellison, Henrik Olai Kaarstein & Julien Nguyen***

Clarence Mews is pleased to present *Snakes in the Grass* at 10 Northington St., an exhibition of works by Buck Ellison, Henrik Olai Kaarstein and Julien Nguyen. Despite differing formal approaches to their work, each three artists share an interest in using the facade against itself. Technical prowess, polished surfaces, and neat presentations function like a foil; they accommodate expectations, to give the works more space for secret, nefarious activities.

There is a corrupted heart at the core of Buck Ellison's photographs. It beats green blood. It could possibly have emerged from a school building dressed for Davos - a children's Bohemian Grove - where teachers instruct students in a refined system of social and economic violence. *Mens Conscia Recti* "A Mind Aware of What Is Right" - it says, with the confidence of a crusader marching in the presence of The True Cross.

The fish, then, are offerings to this *Great Society* built on the poisoned blood of the faulty organ. Mosaics detailing the orgy, they are rewards for a strenuous life. Their flesh is a debased reminder of the bigger meal already had or the weaker prey already slaughtered in ways much more complicated and thorough. These are specimens sent to *Scientific Charity*, where studies can be made on how to most prolong the pleasure of consumption. (J.N.)

In *Reputation*, Kaarstein paints on pristine white terry cloth towels. He uses materials subversively: paint stains the towel; the towel is forced to absorb something that will render it permanently tainted, unwashable. Painting happened, but only to make something dirty. We see this fascination with messes throughout all of Kaarstein's works; in the soiled towels of *Reputation*, the wasteful dribbles of silicone in *Lunchtime Fantasy*, the forever-spilt drain cleaner in *Labor Boys, Lovers Lie*.

Even a more traditional work on paper like *Drying Silk, Wearing Silk, Washing Silk* still revels in the fact that, in the home, we are the agents of impurity. We wear the silk, we soil it. If domestic products like drain cleaner are designed to regulate our lives, to use their users, then Kaarstein's repurposing of these materials assumes an almost political dimension, a gleeful refusal to obey, to be neat, to be tidy. (B.E.)

Julien Nguyen's work is like a Botfly larvae waiting to spread its wings inside the soft skin of a calf. Slowly tickling its senses, seemingly just an itchy patch of hide until the day it breaks free. If the ecstasy of liberation of the fly or the relief of the calf is greatest doesn't matter. There can exist two separate senses beating in unison. The characters Nguyen creates are something out of a dream, they exist just as themselves in their contained, framed universe. They are walking away from you whilst holding your hand, longing, seeking, and searching for that something-what-else-is-there. They are superheroes without people to save; they proudly perform for themselves. Who wouldn't enjoy being the dictator of both performers and audience? (H.O.K.)

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This exhibition includes six works by Buck Ellison, all of which manifest a simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the same subject. Markers of bourgeois aspiration – a preparatory school, a lavish fish display, an Hermès catalogue – all are reproduced with stunning clarity, but this clarity feels more analytic than celebratory. It follows then that five of the six works recall the Golden Age Dutch still lives: these paintings, produced for the burgeoning merchant class of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Holland, also negotiated a hazy line between celebrating and condemning the luxuries they depicted.

*Only the horse knows how the saddle fits* borrows its title from the slogan of the French luxury house Hermès, a reminder of its modest saddle-making origins. Ellison uses the camera to collage disparate objects together with the company's foundation report, which details how Hermès sponsored sports programs to keep disadvantaged youth out of trouble. Fennel splays out languidly over a piece of newspaper used to protect a dining table from the efforts of a Sunday painter. The backdrop of image was painted to match a tone of robin's egg blue used in George Washington's estate, Mount Vernon. The walls of this home were painted in 120 shades of blue, following the fashion of the wealth landowners in the young colony, who made liberal use of the expensive pigment to showcase their affluence.

In the suite of four fish still lives, Ellison photographed the fishmonger displays at the Berlin department store Kaufhaus des Westens (KaDeWe) on Saturday evening, just an hour before they were discarded for the store's closing. He captures profane waste before it happens, imparting pathos about the lavish display depicted. Each title – *Ethical Culture, Great Society, Scientific Charity, Strenuous Life* – borrows from American progressive movements which, like the Hermès program, sought to use sport, science, and photography to better the lives of the "other half," movements that, like the fish depicted, have long since been scrapped.

*The College Preparatory School, Oakland, California, Est. 1960, Mens Conscia Recti* is a documentary photograph. Its title simply recites available information about the school (location, founding date, motto "a mind aware of what is right"), renown for both its efficacy in matriculating the "future leaders" of American industry and the rivalry among its students. Its bucolic wooded setting belies the subtle violence symptomatic of institutions that promote such unbridled competition. Here, as in all of Ellison's

works, we see a surface that continuously questions itself: what at first appears to support a cause actually contains quiet moments of dissent.

At the core of Henrik Olai Kaarstein's practice is a manipulation of domestic materials, often materials closely associated with the body; textiles as in the towels used in *Reputation 23/24*, paper and faux wood with a range of transformative agents. Embracing chance and unpredictability, his process often begins by the soaking of these chosen materials in a mixture of chemicals that might include paint, glue, or acetone. The objects emerge modified in unforeseen ways -they are stiffened and stained, corroded and calcified.

*Born in the Purple* originates from Julien Nguyen's research into the Byzantine Empire; the decadent medieval remains of the ancient Rome. The title comes from the Byzantine Greek term *Porphyrogenitos*, an honorific bestowed upon the progeny of the reigning Emperor who had the privilege to be born within a quarter of the palace known as the Purple Chamber, built expressly for the purpose of bringing heirs into the world, and covered floor to ceiling in purple Imperial Porphyry.

The panels are adorned with photographs of Chris Hughes, a newly minted millionaire through his early involvement with Facebook, and Sean Eldridge, his husband, who is known to have political ambitions and is beginning a campaign for a seat in upstate New York for the United States House of Representatives. These photos, taken for various press articles on their marriage, most notably in the New York Times, are used here to depict a grand Imperial Procession, of princes assuming the holy duties of Empire. One of the panels is stamped with the Chrysanthemum Seal, a symbol of the Emperor of Japan, conferring his unbroken dynastic legitimacy to these new creatures. The struggle for recognition and acceptance, begun by the Japanese Empire with the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, continues in new guises.

*A Duplicitous Pentagon Watering The Fields of Research* is a depiction of paradise - symbolised here both by a twink-surfer and glowing Arcadian fields--being corrupted by a rapacious organism. The organism is a massive floating Pentagon, anthropomorphised with two mouths, through which it applies the discipline, punishment, and rewards of world-control. As the Pentagon waters these lush fields with a river of blood, the surfer's body begins to change: the grass begins to grow unnaturally green, and blue blades of steel replace his soft tan skin.

*Slow Slicing* was a form of execution practiced during China's last imperial dynasty that consisted of ritual dismemberment of the criminal's body through hundreds or thousands of quick incisions. Prisoners were fed copious amounts of opium during the execution, and the effects of the drugs, combined with extreme pain, were thought to have produced transcendent states in its victims. The sculpture features a blade for a new form of this ancient practice, with a photo of Harry Styles' butterfly tattoo serving as target practice.

Finally, *Dilapidated Corpse* is an anatomical painting detailing both the palliative and degenerative effects of power on the body politic, imagined here as a female figure in a blue cloth gown. A fire begins to burn at the hem of her dress, and inflammatory sores afflict the skin.

Buck Ellison (b. 1987, San Francisco, USA), lives and works in Frankfurt am Main.

Henrik Olai Kaarstein (b. 1989, Oslo, NO), lives and works in Frankfurt am Main.

Julien Nguyen (b. 1990, Washington D.C., USA), lives and works in Frankfurt am Main.