

GOING WHERE THE WEATHER SUITS MY CLOTHES - a fall of light on fabric



IAN BURNS
MARCUS COATES
CARABALLO-FARMAN
DAVID HAINES
NOEL MCKENNA
RICHARD MOSSE
ELIZABETH NEEL
DEBORAH SMITH
LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE

APRIL – MAY



GOING WHERE THE WEATHER SUITS MY CLOTHES...A FALL OF LIGHT ON FABRIC

In the closing scenes of the 1969 film *Midnight Cowboy*, the unlikely pair of naive country boy (turned gigolo) Joe Buck and small-time hustler Rizzo finally leave town, bound on a bus for Miami. Rizzo, feverishly ill and ultimately fated to fall short of his destination, proposes a new start, and a new identity: "I'm Rico all the time, okay? We're gonna tell all these new people my name's Rico, okay?" This presumption of identity as malleable, as something to be picked up or dropped as easily as a change of location, effects the disillusionment of the film's protagonists, as their romanticised expectations of another place, as an 'other' person, are undercut by the reality of their surroundings. As the (first part of this) exhibition's title proposes, the longing to go 'where the weather suits my clothes' – a lyric from the theme to the film, made famous by Harry Nilsson – doesn't necessarily mean this weather won't change.

In fact, the attempt to 'find oneself' might simply mean relentless, never-ending pursuit. In a work by Ian Burns, entitled *Makin' Tracks* (2010), this leads nowhere in particular, as a motorized toy 'Hummer', magnified through a video screen, intermittently spurs into action while a blow-up globe rotates beneath its treads. Destination is irrelevant; rather, it is activation itself that is the point here. One becomes convinced that there is 'somewhere' to be, without ever finding that ideal location; rest as a precursor to perpetual motion. This longing for an unattainable elsewhere also informs caraballo-farman's film *Through the Garden of Earthly Delights* (2008), where the viewer is carried along vistas of Christmas lights, glowing snowmen, ornaments and lawn decorations, sparkling in the otherwise-complete darkness. The steady sweep of the camera (as if from a car window) and the disorienting absence of specific geographical markers imply a detachment from these surroundings, held back from the celebrations by the barrier of a windscreen or camera lens. The view remains fixed from the outside, offering only the briefest glimpse of the suburban spectacle before being driven away to other, more mundane, occupations.

In fact, they could be the subjects of caraballo-farman's other work here, *All That Is Air* (2008), with its footage of Mexican vendors repeatedly inflating balloons marked with American cartoon characters and Hollywood icons. The subversion of Marx's famous declaration in the film's title would lead one to conclude: "...melts into solidity", with the workers imbuing their literal 'essence', their very breath, into the commodity object. Hidden from the festivities, they are the repressed 'other' to capitalism's economic operations, necessary yet unacknowledged. Is there a pride in playing this role? In facilitating a party that would never offer you an invitation? caraballo-farman's work inverts the usual relationship, wherein members of the underclass reside in the shadows of their more prominent, and wealthier, compatriots. Rather, it is exposed as one of mutual dependence, not only in terms of economic supply-and-demand, but in the way in which the allocation of one's identity depends upon the role of the Other. A striking correlation occurs here with Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's painting *Jack-Knife* (2011) in which a young black man, in crisp, white shirt, looks sidelong into the distance. The discordant interjection of blackness in the white cube, and the sight line of the figure, peering off towards adjacent works and objects, confirms its separateness, while the ominous menace of the work's

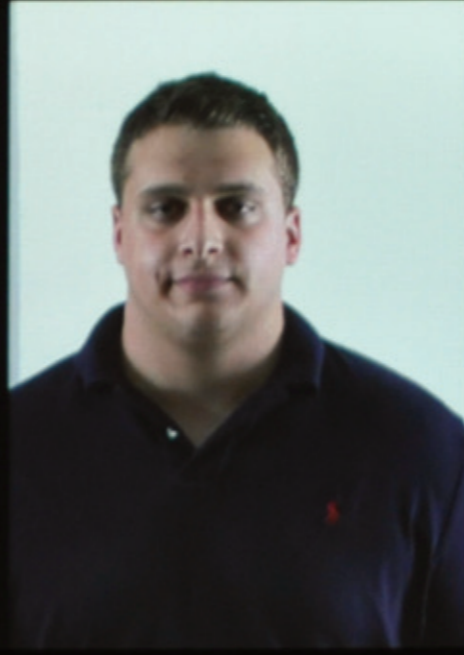
title (and the noose-like tie slung around his neck) impels a moment of unsettled reflection. Her inscrutable subject requires no affirmation in the eyes of the observer, and in refusing to return their gaze, frustrates any attempt to understand one's own subjectivity through the objectifying perspective of the Other.¹ Rather, he stands outside of the dialectic, detached through his historical and political status as a non-equal party. As Frantz Fanon argues, in relation to the black subject "the white man is not only The Other but also the master, whether real or imaginary."² Yiadom-Boakye, who bases her portraits on private fictional stories and manifestoes, follows caraballo-farman in up-ending this relationship, in affirming separateness as a form of power. The imaginary is left to the viewer and their partial, and therefore weakened, reading of the subject.

Perhaps portraiture, by its very nature, exemplifies the unknowable aspects of a chosen subject simply by its inability to move beyond the surface qualities of the image. While able to allude to an internal persona through visual cues or symbols, such representations are nevertheless bound to a specific time and place, a certain point in an individual trajectory of self-definition. The portrait thus resists a more thorough (and temporal) understanding of its subject. In David Haines' *The Reebok Alchemist* (2010) and *Poison Pareidolia* (2011), this resistance becomes the content itself, as an overt threat to the viewer's appreciation of their impeccable draughtsmanship and painterly verisimilitude. The confrontational pose of the eponymous 'alchemist', flicking the Vs at the viewer while nonchalantly pissing into an overflowing tin of lager, proffers a challenge to any admiration of technical aptitude. There is a paradoxical correlation here between the aesthetic qualities of the drawing and the 'front' of the protagonist, warding off the spectator and warning them to remain on the surface whilst, at the same time, betraying no real sign of modesty or propriety. The viewer is the seedy one, the voyeur, and, as in Haines' other work here, to look at the image closely feels a little like walking into the wrong place at the wrong time. This small watercolour, also rendered with a precise attention to detail, depicts an adolescent boy, kneeling as a masked figure holds a black-and-white drawing (of a face, an abstract blur, a Rorschach diagram?) in front of him. Here too, the work is allegorical, addressing the viewer and the experience of viewing within the composition itself, and implicating their pleasure at both the skillful artistry and the compellingly disturbing content of the image. Just as Haines undercuts one's aesthetic pleasure, Noel McKenna relies on a certain coding of the portrait, situating his subjects in a specific and insular subculture whose gestures are simultaneously readable to some and obscure to (most) others. His paintings of men with pipes, crafted with poker work in plywood or shimmering on the surface of ceramic tiles, possess a crudeness evocative of bathroom graffiti, with their apparent naivety belied by the shirtless, mustachioed insouciance of the figures. Is there something slightly untoward happening here, a type of gesture or smoke signal that offers entry into a hitherto unknown milieu?

Not that there's any more likely chance of sidling into the exclusive community of Richard Mosse's film *Fraternity* (2007), a work that carries its own (albeit surely unintended!) homoerotic subtext. The artist offered a free keg of beer to any member of Yale University's Delta Kappa Epsilon chapter who could out-scream, and outlast, the others, gradually giving way to one winded, wheezing champion (whose ability to yell loudest, longest, no doubt augurs well for his



David Haines *The Reebok Alchemist* Pencil on paper 140 x 105 cm 2010
Marcus Coates *Totem: Water Shrew, Neomys fodiens* Mannequin, Carpet, Steel, Spray Paint, Police Issue Uniform
Shirt, Swan Feathers, Tawny Owl Feathers, Curlew Feathers, Wig, Leathers Soles, Primark Socks, White
Trousers, Red Braces, Identity Card Holder, Paper 214 x 50 x 50 cm 2010





career prospects). The subjects, all likely figures of future political and economic importance, perform an aggressiveness that conforms to fraternal expectations of competitive machismo and red-blooded assertiveness, while the recollection that George W. Bush was once president of this branch, and that he had defended the practice of 'branding' new pledges with heated coat hangers³, lends the exercise a sinister logic. Their willingness to engage in a seemingly harmless game becomes a test of the single-minded intransigence that tends to motivate the occupants of both Wall Street and the Pentagon. Utterly convinced of his aptitude to triumph over his 'brothers' (the participants were filmed and timed separately to ensure their utmost efforts), the eventual winner paradoxically wears himself down, strips away the bravado and bluster of his outer persona, and is left enfeebled, exhausted. The reduction of the extraneous to the essential, and, conversely, the embellishment of the self through appropriated attributes, recalls, in Milan Kundera's novel *Immortality*, the methods of cultivating the self's 'inimitable uniqueness' through subtraction and addition.

"Agnes subtracts from her self everything that is exterior and borrowed, in order to come closer to her sheer essence (even with the risk that zero lurks at the bottom of the subtraction). Laura's method is precisely the opposite: in order to make her self ever more visible, perceivable, seizable, sizable, she keeps adding to it more and more attributes and she attempts to identify herself with them (with the risk that the essence of the self may be buried by the additional substitutes)."⁴

The latter strategy is most visible in Marcus Coates' *Totem: Water Shrew, Neomys fodiens* (2010), where a free-standing figure bears a remarkable litany of accoutrements; carpet, spray paint, swan feathers, wig, Primark socks, red braces; commodity and the ritualistic object, literally shrouds an inner mannequin in exterior trappings, visible only through a tuft of hair at the collar, feathers through sleeves, and an 'identity card', tagged at waist-height, bearing an amorphous black shape. While the significance of the shaman is essentially that of the cypher, the carrier of messages from an invisible and unknowable spirit-world, it is also a means of articulating oneself as privileged, as possessing a heightened understanding of the transcendental. The communicability of this specialised power relies purely on its ambiguity and inaccessibility (to others), as the "shaman's identity [...] is, in part, dependent on a representational confrontation with a non-shaman."⁵ Again, it is the Other that designates its value and its truth, who subscribes to the visions conjured by the medium. Remove that justifying presence and the power of the shaman as a conduit and messenger vanishes in turn.

Of course, the decision to subtract the inessential is just as fraught with the risk of an ultimate 'emptiness', even though it acknowledges and even desires that possibility rather than deferring it through accumulation. If the artwork can be said to 'represent' its maker, then, the ephemeral nature of Deborah Smith's *Watch Light* (2010) represents a veritable disappearance of authorship. Precisely at the point when one's attention is elsewhere, a peripheral flicker of illumination circles across the upper wall of the gallery, like a wandering dust mote or an optical distortion. 'A fall of light' in itself, it exists on the verge of disappearing into the ether or being misread as a trick of one's eyes. Like Elizabeth Neel's *Warning* (2011), an assembly of wing-like smears



of paint on paper, a pair of tin shears, and an image of a hawk's head, the work eschews the fixed coherence of a stable object and, as such, implies intangibility as being in itself a more accurate representation of identity as inherently unstable and uncertain. For Neel, the collation of these interrelated items captures a point of deliberation in her practice, operating between representation, abstraction, autobiography and appropriation. The artistic disinclination to come down in one camp or another, but instead to set the different components in an arrangement of equal partners, sustains a moment of indeterminacy (and, in a way, provides a metaphor for the exhibition itself, where the temporary co-habitation of discrete objects establishes a loose circulation of overlapping and interconnected meanings).

All attempts to 'fix' the self seem to lead nowhere, other than another persona and another attempt. This, of course, is the intractable bind of pursuing a self-determination that prefigures an eventual resolution, as well as the tragedy of Ratzon / Rico; one might occupy a new set of clothes, a different place or position, in order to fulfill the desire of 'becoming' another, more satisfactory version of one's own self-perception. However, the attainment of a perfectly realised self is ultimately a fallacy, a construct determined and dependent upon the validation of the other. It always falls short, and, it is only at this point that one sees, in the far distance, yet another ideal, and another elusive, illusory, self.

Chris Clarke

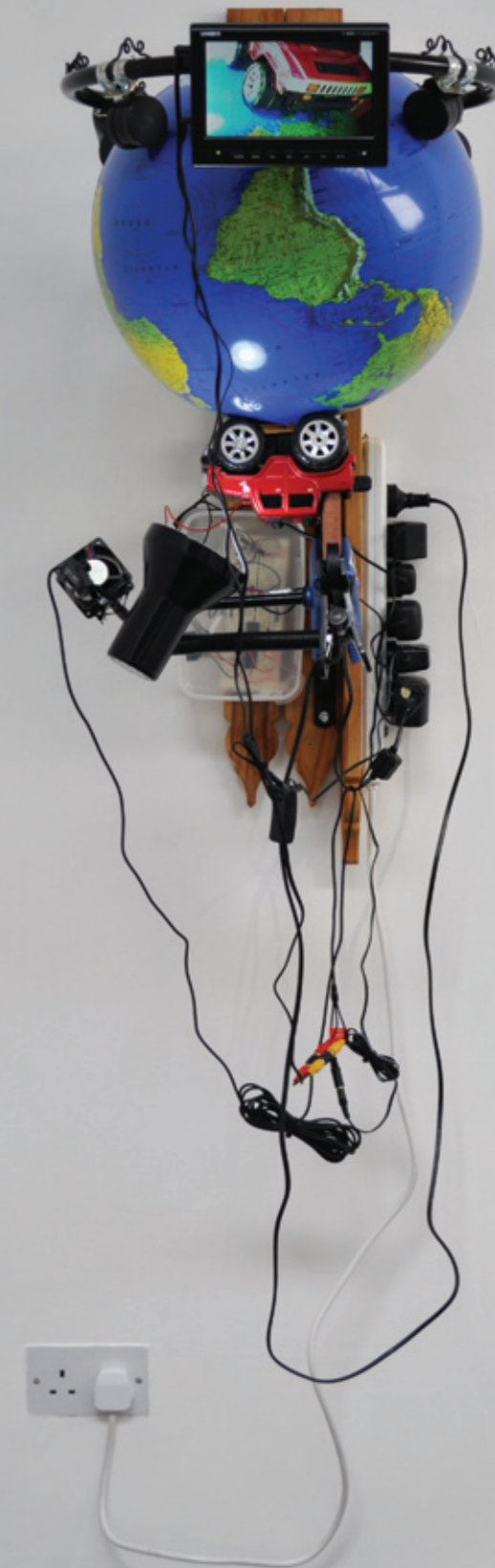
¹ "By the mere appearance of the other, I am put in the position of passing judgement on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1977), p. 222.

² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C.L. Markmann (New York: Grove, 1962), p. 138.

³ Maureen Dowd, 'Liberties; President Frat Boy?', *The New York Times*, April 7, 1999 <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/07/opinion/liberties-president-frat-boy.html>

⁴ Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, trans. Peter Kussi (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1992), p. 111.

⁵ Thomas A. Dowson, "Like People in Prehistory" in *Shamanism: A Reader*, ed. Graham Harvey (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 166.





Noel McKenna *This man is very woofy* Pokerwork on plywood 52 x 54.5 cm 2011
Noel McKenna *Pipe smoker with hat* Ceramic tile 20 x 15 cm 2008
Noel McKenna *Pipe smoker* Ceramic tile 21 x 21 cm 2008