

Humanity branded at RA Schools Show?

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Still from 16mm film *True Mirror*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist, Sam Austen

“Ensure your brand represents humanity”. This slogan for wannabe artists appeared in Richie Moments’ coruscating video in his degree show at the RA Schools exhibition last week. It neatly summarises the dilemma: to get noticed by the artworld you need a USP but if you aspire to art’s more noble aspirations you need to reflect something profound about the human condition. I speculated whether this year’s crop of graduates had succeeded in meeting both of these demands. Compared to 2016, noticeably more moving image works featured in this year’s exhibition, often deployed by the artist to enhance their work in other media.

Sam Austen’s visceral three channel installation, *True Mirror* (2017), accompanied by an original *musique concrete* soundtrack with factory and railroad clatterings in lockstep with the visual edit was the standout work. Not many young artists have the patience to work within the constraints of celluloid but it confers a ghost-like immediacy and glamour to the images that digital cannot achieve. Through painstaking editing and superimposition Austen has made a chilling work that transfixes the viewer with an eerie sense of mortality. The key motif is a series of disembodied plaster heads that evoke the Mexican Day of the Dead or classical death masks whirling through space like frenetic commuters or riders on a manic fairground roundabout. There are frequent changes in tempo and when they come to rest their staring eyes invite us to posit an interior life. Often paired, the heads have reflections that are chasing or shadowing the original. In the final sequence two heads circle each other like wary combatants. Exhilarating and unsettling representation of the human condition: tick. A USP melding of “old school” media (casting and celluloid) with contemporary technology (sound track): tick. With these criteria met, this is the definition of a totally successful moving image artwork.



Dmitri Galitzine and Thomas Bolwell. Still from dual screen HD video, *Cowboys*, 2015-2017. Courtesy of the artists.

Over two years of filming, Dmitri Galitzine and Thomas Bolwell immersed themselves in the fantasy world of a Wild West cowboy re-enactment community. Their construction of a complete frontier settlement in Kent is the ideal narrative for exploring the contradictions of myth and reality: hi-vis jackets among the stetsons, mechanical diggers among the horses. The dual-screen presentation juxtaposes Hollywood Western scenes with very similar ones from their own footage. The contrast of the English mud with the Arizonan sand highlights the perceptual skew required to preserve a mythical world. They also slyly hint at the more worrying side of historical warfare obsessions by inserting a clip of a Third Reich memorabilia stand. We are reminded that America's adulation of its gun slinging heritage underlies the appeal of Trump's shoot-from-the-hip mind-set. But this is not a hatchet job on the role players. Their attachment to the cultural heritage is represented by a grizzled re-enactment member singing a heartfelt rendition of a cowboy folk song accompanied by the mellow strumming of an autoharp.

Jesse Jetpack and Richie Moment have chosen monikers that declare their brand as a cutting edge artists. Both foreground themselves, Jetpacks as an angsty singer song-writer/ performance artist/computer animator and Moment playing the motley fool as a wild-eyed satirist of the art world.

In Jetpack's *Day of the Challenger* I was beginning to weary of an extended sequence of her dancing over a clunky digital riverside landscape with portentous lyrics of survival amongst "the crashing of waves of blood" when a stunningly original visual metaphor unfolded. The next sequence dramatised the choreography of bilateral relationships by starting with two digitally animated pendulums whose weights are the heads of the artist and her significant other. As they swing they leave a trace of intersections. It gets more complicated as the pendulums are transformed into jointed armatures sketching a delicate enmeshed Spirograph type pattern. Twenty four minutes was on the long side but you had to admire both her emotional honesty and her versatility. The shorter videos on her website show a keen sense of humour.

As noted in an earlier blogpost on last year's Bloomberg New Contemporaries, Moment's manic portrayal of an artist's attempts to become a bankable art world prospect is spot on. In *Level Headed, Next level Video 001 (Gallery Version)*, 2017 he appears to be showcasing a minimalist work of a telephone mounted in the centre of a white gallery wall. After several minutes it rings to be answered by Moment who responds ecstatically to the news that he has now moved to the "next level" which leads into a rush of slogans on art career strategy. This is mischievous and brutally perceptive fun that stands comparison to Hennessy Youngman's and Louis Judkins' cutting satirical videos.

Political commentary takes a back seat to aesthetic considerations in much of the RA School graduates work but this is certainly not the case at Goldsmiths MFA Show which I am off to see this evening to unearth some more talented video artists.