

NICE TO MEET YOU

PERVERTING NARRATIVE MODELS

Oscar Enberg's work feeds on distraction and instability. His sculptures grow like erratic narratives remixing reality, and through the use of a hybrid vocabulary, a minor language that becomes material dialect.

Oscar Enberg (b. 1988) lives and works in Auckland. His installations typically weave together multiple (often prototypical) characters and storylines from film, television, literature, and social histories, which he then exploits as both generators of sculptural forms and construction logic for larger installations. In his recent work, Enberg has explored the role that chance plays in economic systems to reveal fundamental instabilities in those systems. In December 2015 he will present the solo exhibition "The prophet, the wise, the technician, and the Pharisee" at Artspace, Auckland, about a decisive moment in that city's commercial history; it is a socio-economic real estate fable synthesized in the structure of the nativity story. Enberg's recent solo exhibitions include "Jean, Jean et l'enfant sauvage", Thomas Duncan Gallery, Los Angeles (2015), "Sire So-and-So or Richard Pâgen", Johan Berggren, Malmö, Sweden (2014), and "The Pynchons, S01E02: Slouching Towards Dignity", Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, New Zealand (2014). Earlier this year, Enberg participated in "Les Règles du Jeu /The Rules of the Game at Centre Pompidou", Paris.

Oscar Enberg

CHRIS SHARP You make weird, multimedia, highly evocative sculpture/installation that doesn't seem to fit in with any current trends in contemporary art. Perhaps the exception to this is your use of literary and pop-cultural narrative, which is maybe the best place to start. How does it function in your process?

OSCAR ENBERG

For me, narrative operates as a sculptural generator—existing stories that deal with similar material or have a shared history all feed into a sort of content trough. Most often I build a new project around the city or site where the work will first be presented. I think it's helpful when working to understand the core values of a community, and how they overlap—stories function like cultural barometers, reflecting the politics of the time and place they are produced. In the past I have adopted specific narrative models as a way of shaping exhibitions, too; the formal qualities of poetry, parables and short fiction, as well as the episodic structure of sitcoms, have all been employed as organizational devices. **CS**

Your description is reminiscent of a cultural anthropologist. But the formalizations of these investigations hardly function as straightforward, critical glosses on the stories themselves; they seem to travel if not great, then anfractuous distances before they end up in one of your shows. How does this happen? Also, could you say a few words about your material vocabulary? With all the oak, wicker, hand-crafts, blown glass and other markedly domestic materials, it strikes me as decidedly middle-class. **OE**

You're right, the way I digest and process content isn't straightforward. It's usually a very uncomfortable transmission of information into objects and exhibitions: an awkward alchemy perhaps. Last year I made a project in Basel entitled *The Good Father and The Rich Uncle* that was framed as a kind of warped parable; it was an attempt to encourage a conversation on morality, or family values at least, around the work. The project had several threads: I looked to the trajectory of Monopoly and the original Monopoly Man, Rich Uncle Pennybags; the final season of the US sitcom *Roseanne* (in which Roseanne dreams the family wins the lottery); the pear brandy Bon Père William; and Hans Arp's automatic drawings. I used the structure of the family unit, a readymade cast of prototypical characters that have prescribed roles, a dynamic that's readily understood, universal. As the content threads are manipulated into form, the narratives sort of swell and retract—certain details or forms gain currency, recur, take on qualities of, or piggy-back on, these characters. So I can use them to reanimate, to play parts within a sculptural pantomime... At the moment I am particularly drawn to stories about luck, chance and risk, where speculation is involved, tales of how fortunes are won or lost. If the work feels middle-class, it's because those are the values in high circulation.

In making sculpture, I choose to communicate through materials and modes of production that inherently deal with the politics of my content. These materials include carved swamp Kauri, hand-woven willow, blown and stained glass and tapestry—I like crafts that feel

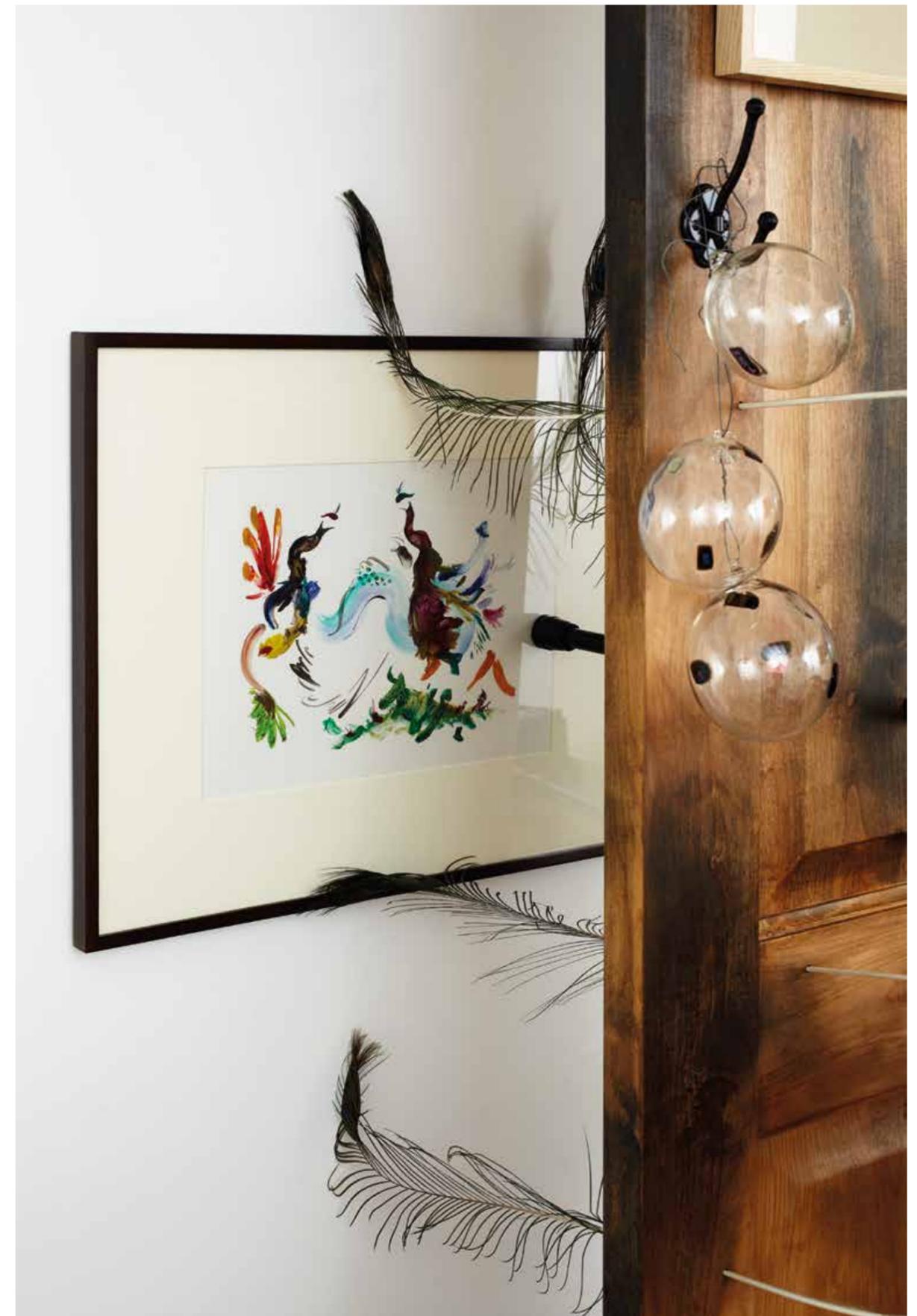
almost anachronistic. The artisans I employ are themselves operating in a state of economic precarity and I see them as part of my ensemble cast, as potential protagonists. Then there are elements that contradict this slow labor—recently they might be lottery tickets or throwaway good luck charms, tokens from a more volatile, fast-moving economy.

It's crucial that the work follow its own singular logic, a logic that often feels familiar but unlikely. In that sense, I like to think of myself as operating in the Surrealist tradition—I suppose this links back to your thought on the artist as an anthropologist. James Clifford wrote something about every ethnographer being "something of a Surrealist, a re-inventor and re-shuffler of realities," and this, albeit pretty outmoded, is kind of what I do. **CS**

I appreciate what you say about singular logic, which can also be characterized as internal logic or even better, idiosyncratic. Such a method presupposes and embraces transformation as an integral part of the art making process. But then again, I would argue that without transformation there is no real art. So in this case, your work becomes if not self-reflexive, then something of an unlikely allegory of art itself. Hence your "awkward alchemy," which I also see as of the order of the crucible.

All that said, there is an element of world-making in what you do, in the sense of Szeemann's notion of what he called "Individual Mythology," with the practices of artists like Beuys, Paul Thek, James Lee Byars, etc. This in the sense that objects or images are never autonomous but always contingent upon larger, self-generated constellations. However, vis-à-vis these predominantly heroic and shamanic figures, your practice seems much more fragmented, not to mention radically secular, even geeky. Perhaps the origin of this fragmentation can be located in the difference between, say, the grand narrative and the hyperlink. Still another parallel that seems to connect your work with these figures is the cultivation of a specific material vocabulary, which tends to transcend the heterogeneity of each individual and narratively complex project, while remaining relatively consistent. **OE**

I'm pleased you read the practice as somewhat fragmented in relation to the logic of its construction. My relationship to content, and the way I transmit it, is severely distracted, and my inability to follow the arc of a single narrative means that my approach to storytelling is fractured, or fractal. As a result I've become increasingly drawn to the chance meetings, moments of happenstance, where histories intersect, and luck becomes generative. I recently became aware of an extended period of correspondence between Samuel Beckett and the American cartoonist Ernie Bushmiller. During the 1950s, while Beckett was living in Paris, the two traded ideas for Bushmiller's comic strip *Nancy*... there are these great sketches made in response to Beckett's ideas for these distinctly absurd situations and characters—basically early storyboards for *Endgame* and *Happy Days*. This is exciting to me, to see Beckett's highly articulated intellectual intention sketched in populist form; I like it when you can see



Door for Genie (detail), 2015.

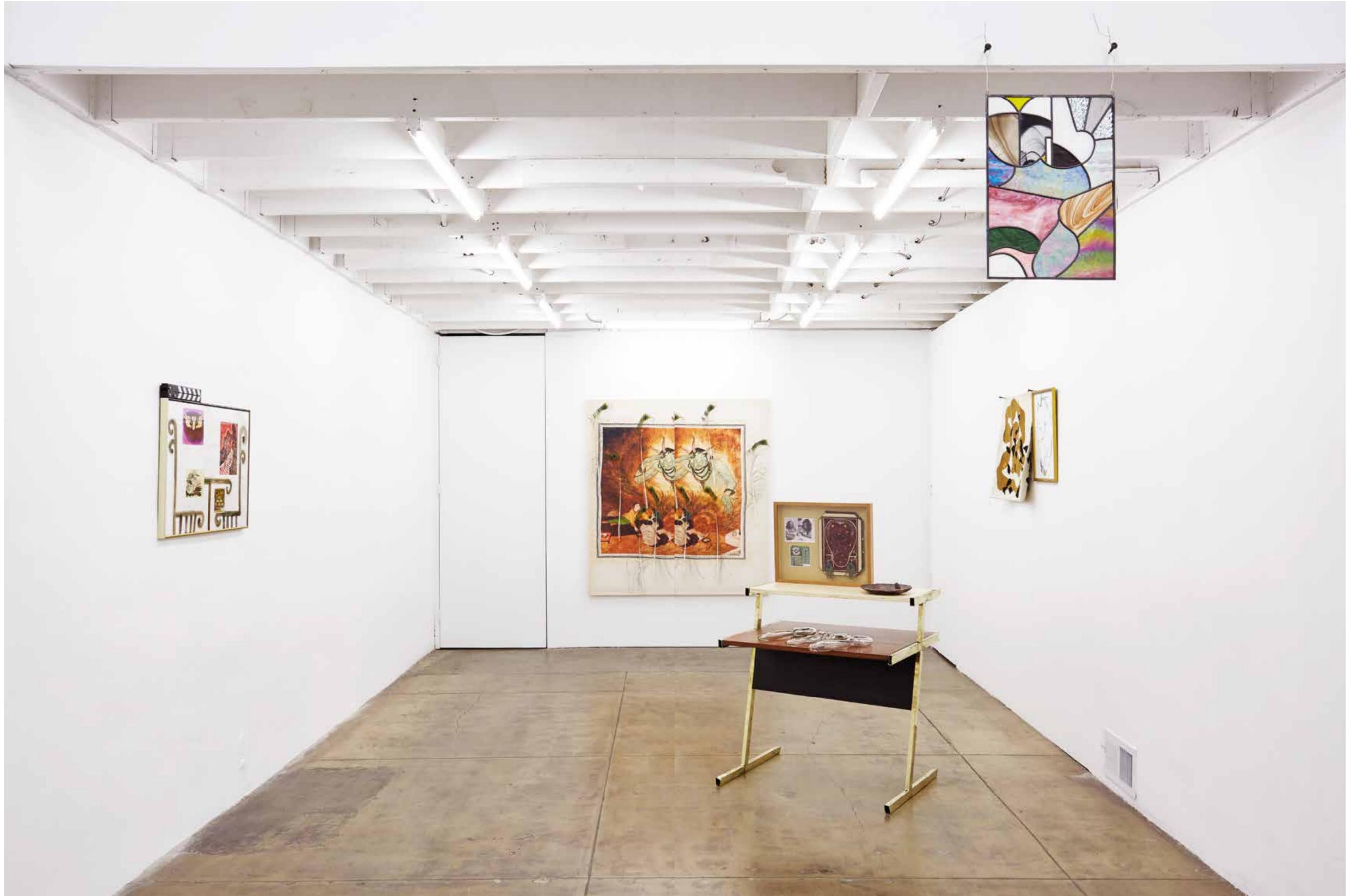
Courtesy: the artist; Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland; Thomas Duncan Gallery, Los Angeles



Silk Road Community Chest, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist and Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Photo: Alex North



Top - *The Rich Uncle Rides the Julbock*, 2014
Bottom - *Community Chest for Richard Pagen*, 2014
"Sire So-and-So or Richard Pagen" installation views at Johan Berggren Gallery, Malmö, 2014.
Courtesy: the artist and Johan Berggren Gallery, Malmö. Photo: Terje Östling



"Jean, Jean et l'enfant sauvage" installation view at Thomas Duncan Gallery, Los Angeles, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist; Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland; Thomas Duncan Gallery, Los Angeles

content on the move, popping up in different guises. It's often in the overlaps that I find my forms—they are mined from the same pit. I guess that is why I have developed a very definite sculptural language—materials stabilize these precarious narrative chains, even if only momentarily. It comes back to that notion of the impossibility of an autonomous image or object, I think. Maybe what I'm doing is building a specific vocabulary by bastardizing existing ones: creating a minor language, a material patois.

I'm always looking for images and objects that might articulate my general methodology in a more economical way—a recent example would be the Ball & Claw form. For me, it is a material phrase that has been consistently perverted throughout its history; a traditional Chinese motif, borrowed by 18th-century European Orientalists for its formal qualities, resulting in a strange history of translation, or maybe more accurately mis-translation... I see it as a colonized image. Most recently I used the form in a work titled *Silk Road Community Chest*, as the handle of a custom, hand-carved ebony and antique ivory corkscrew (itself a form I have repeatedly returned to, as a symbol of physical compression and for its relationship to drinking, as a cartoon of the downward spiral). The work—comprised of the corkscrew and a receipt for a donation I made to the Hong Kong Community Chest—was part of a larger material allegory of the Grand Lisboa Casino in Macau. I see the piece as a sort of dramatic reenactment of a very specific event, the annual donation made to the state-run charity by the proprietor of the casino, Stanley Ho, and more generally as a sort rebus for the ivory trade. I suppose it also illustrates another tendency in the practice: a consistent attempt to synthesize a kind of didacticism with something more poetic.

CS

Are you then saying that your approach to storytelling is a byproduct of your (limited or even handicapped) attention span? As an indirect consequence, it would seem that your work is not so much about diagnosing the current moment as that of the age of the non sequitur, but rather it seeks to function as an attempt to symbolically negotiate the innumerable non sequiturs of which our moment is fantastically composed, to suture them together and thus invest them with some measure of unlikely coherence—or if not coherence, then a kind of material or Platonic legibility.

Also, what do you mean by “a kind of didacticism”? This could potentially imply a number of things, the most obvious being an overt political impetus. **OE**

You'd be right to suggest that I'm not interested in diagnostics; I'm not so worried about the health of the “contemporary condition.” The distraction, handicap, volatility, is what fuels the work. My content is always average; it's not hyper-current or on trend, nor is it completely irrelevant. I think of it as lukewarm; a good temperature for breeding.

And I'm not interested in didacticism so much in the political sense, but rather its outmoded definition, as a classical form of allegory. It's another narrative model to pervert; a story hidden in form that instructs as it entertains. I know the term implies an ulterior motive, a political agenda, but each project (each sculpture) is an amalgam of multiple stories, all of which come with their own specific moral strands. There isn't one discernible lesson, other than instability. If the types of stories I return to tell me anything, it's that we don't learn anyway.

by Chris Sharp

SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

The devil lurks in the details, which might even be the jarring anthropomorphic suggestions of a plucked chicken. For Calvin Marcus, the devil is simply a device of introspection, a distortion of perspective, or a disturbance needed to get off the beaten track.

Calvin Marcus (b. 1988 in San Francisco) is a young artist living and working in Los Angeles. For his first New York exhibition, at Clearing in early 2015, he presented a series of nine paintings that took an ironic look at the self-reflective, often narcissistic nature of art-making. These identical green monochromatic paintings, all titled *Green Calvin*, presented at the center of their surface a number of ceramic chickens with humanoid features—eyes, nose and a mouth. The works could be thought of as a series of cynical self-portraits. Calvin's recent solo shows include “43° 42' 46.4148" N, 79° 20' 30.5988" W” at Public Fiction, Los Angeles and “So Cal” at Chin's Push, Los Angeles. Group exhibitions in 2015: “Le Musée Imaginaire”, Lefebvre & Fils, Paris; “Works on Paper”, Greene Naftali, New York.

Calvin Marcus

MICHAEL DARLING One of the things that strikes me about your work is that I think from an outsider perspective people might see a certain kind of schizophrenic quality to it. One body of work on the surface seems quite different from the next body of work. Could you talk a little about that as a strategy and if there were other artists who have helped you arrive at that way of working? **CALVIN MARCUS**

I think the ways that I formally approach certain ideas tend to include a different material problem or situation every time I develop a body of work. I worked for Laura Owens for a few years and was really excited about her ability to not stay still. It made me realize the power in not feeling like you have to do anything every single time or cultivate an audience for something that people are expecting you to do. **MD**

Is that a kind of rebelliousness or an unwillingness to be pinned down, or do you actually see it as a longer term approach to keeping your practice alive and keeping things interesting and evolving for you? **CM**

The latter, absolutely. I think it's a way of keeping myself invigorated. Every single time I

have to learn how to do something. I don't want to become a master of anything. **MD**

There is a certain project-based approach that you have that reminds me of the way your UCLA teachers, Charles Ray or James Welling, work. They'll have a new problem at hand and they'll go to extensive lengths to accomplish that task. Does that hold any kind of water for you, learning from artists like that? **CM**

Those two examples are really good because both of those artists are interested in things that take an immense amount of time and research to do, even when there's some other way that you could get to a finished artwork much more quickly. It's about the journey to carry something out. **MD**

In a recent body of paintings that you showed me, you described the lengths you went to in order to have oil stick paints specially fabricated to match the viscosity and color of Crayola crayons. I was fascinated by the single-mindedness of that. How much of that is important to a viewer looking at the work? **CM**

I think it's exciting to talk about

