

“Vegas Can Be”
Jonny Niesche

19 March – 3 May, 2014
Opening: 22 March, 4-7 PM

“A list of not so isolated thoughts for “Vegas Can Be”:
a solo exhibition by Jonny Niesche”

When are you coming?

It matters because in the front gallery the yellow-green of “Let’s fuck (desert meadow)” breathes slants of light in changing refractions throughout the day. The transparent colour field of green and yellow on voile (a fabric named after the French word for veil) subtly signifies the historic landscape from which this show of dancing light departs. It was in the 19th Century, along the valley areas of North American Mexico, that artesian wells nourished owners of the land on their passage from Texas to the Northwest. The wells supported fresh green and yellow acres and so the town that grew around them was given the Spanish name for meadows – “Vegas”.

In the same room, a figure from the similarly arid climate of California, Captain Beefheart or Don Van Vliet approaches across a plane. The work, titled “Blank Magic Parralactic”, uses waves reminiscent of Niesche’s gestural work to present the figure as half mirage. Voile here is used to veil the image, and through this obscuring more coloured light is revealed, some bouncing back to our retinas, other transferring through the material to adjoining areas of the gallery. The effect causes the eye to wander, and as it does you cannot help but notice flecks of the glittering abstractions (measuring 2 × 2.3 metres at their largest hanging) in the next gallery.

Abstraction

‘I was making sissified glittery kind of Ab-Ex,’ the late great Mike Kelley remarked on some of his early work. Pointedly asserting forms that did not look like art whilst annoying and upsetting the status-quo was part of the artist’s modus operandi that gave him a reputation for rebelliously absorbing many things at once. I hope it is not too much of a stretch to put Kelley in the company of Karl Marx or hostile corporate takeovers. “Creative destruction” originating with Marx and Engels in 1848[1] is the development of ‘the new’ arising out of the destruction of a previous order. An abstract concept that has been purchased from the 1950s onward to theorise and enact the cutting up and fragmenting of companies, usually creating casualties in job numbers in the name of new profits. Understandably, this is now recognised as a neo-liberal concept but any abstraction transformed, can change states again. Creative destruction is found in the power of the work of Kelley as well as artists such as John M Armleder, Isa Genzken and Mikala Dwyer, where stored caches of art history and culture are thoroughly mixed and sentiments of refusal act out beyond exhaustion or limitation. When I think of Jonny’s 2012 show, ‘Too Many Heroes’ or John M Armleder’s 2007 show ‘Too Much is Not Enough’, there’s a feeling that if there are no more ‘important’ marks to make, then everything can be important. This is also a way for us to lovingly mess with, or “get off” [2] on, that which would otherwise limit. As Nick Faust writes in an essay of the same title:

“Art criticism, like an upset parent, often passes moral judgment on this promiscuity, scolding, judging indiscretions. These are attempts at keeping art pure, delineating what is what, and who is who, and where the boundaries are.” [3]

Friendship

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I shared a studio with Jonny and I hid my work from the glitter that unfailingly wandered. I am now also in an art group with Jonny for which installation-making via intuitive headlessness is part of our process. Ironically, the other members and I banned glitter unanimously before we entered this headless mode in the studio. Jonny's glitter polarizes opinion. I did not think I was the biggest fan but it became clear that perhaps I was paying more attention than I thought. Last year I was traveling and tacitly collecting reference after reference, researching and sending Jonny links for shows: Kim Gordon's minimal 'Glitter Circle', and an excellent essay on glitter, taste and judgment by Jennifer Allen come to mind[4]. If friendship is made of the stuff that is pursued, as the poststructuralists have said, — such as conversations and time — after we realise how much we totally misunderstand and disagree with each other, then I think friendship is also about how what we take from our world changes as a result of the people in it.

Sin City

Vegas the phenomenon as we know it now was in many ways created by Fidel Castro. Cuba had previously been the land of parties and mafia money until Castro closed the hotels. One speculative and insalubrious documentary I watched, alleged singer Frank Sinatra made trips to Cuba for years delivering moneyed briefcases to his bosses until Lucky Luciano, Carlo Gambino and company had to move their operations to the desert. At a new home, "the Sands", it is said that Sinatra would never finish work. He would answer telephone calls to his permanent hotel room at any hour of the evening. The trick being, should any sucker win too much money, Ol' Blue Eyes would put a jacket on, go downstairs and join the table to keep everyone playing until the house won back what was lost. I tend to think playing cards with Sinatra is a fantasy worth any winnings.

Vegas is a physical space we can go to, a location yes, but also like any place, it is just a string of ideas: slots, sex, money, power, lights, rides, Sinatra, old jokes, romantic songs, and perhaps for some, even artesian wells and meadows. Nietzsche's title that signals a location, can also be dissolved. His rebellious play emerges when we phonetically slow it down to 'vague as can be'. This flexibility and continual transformation is key to understanding Nietzsche's art, from a mind in the studio refuting rules of history to spatial innovations that determine experiences of viewing. Like Vegas, Nietzsche's work gives us spaces of excess, romance and of never being bored.

Marian Tubbs

[1] Karl Marx; Engels Fredrich (2002) [1848] The Communist Manifesto, Moore, Samuel (trans. 1888) Harmondsworth, UK

[2] Nick Faust, "Get Off", The New Enquiry, 2013 (<http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/get-off/>, accessed 01/03/2014)

[3] IBID

[4] Jennifer Allen, "Lingering Tastes", Mousse, Issue 39, 2013

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