

MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

ALEX CARVER

selected texts & press

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Working in both painting and film, Alex Carver constructs intricate discursive systems that fuse diagrammatic planning, historical artifacts, natural detritus, and appropriated text, all contained within the picture plane to produce skeins of critical inquiry. Through his layering of machine and hand stenciled screens, frottage, and brush work, and the combining of scientific precision with the fantastical, Carver's paintings develop an elusive world of imagery in which dense layers are splintered with negative images, like a vectorized labyrinth, set against a sweeping gesso ground that gathers and binds together the painting's diverse materials. The worlds that emerge through Carver's work suggest an uncanny reflection of our own, as though peering through frictional, over-engineered realities that distort rather than cohere. In his paintings, densely textured overlays of different forms of image production seem to oscillate, phase, and emerge at the direction of the eye, generating the sensation of one realm of information becoming visible only by way of another.

Taken as raw material for artmaking, the artist's chosen motifs—such as surgical instruments, the Brazen Bull, or the Catherine Wheel—become engines for the collapse and reconstitution of painting itself. Orienting us to the figural rather than the figurative, toward the space of forms that mediate human interaction with the world rather than representations of that world, Carver guides us into new aesthetic experiences of an increasingly fraught human becoming. Figurative aspects that are receding, dissolving, combusting, and breaking apart enmesh within a process prefiguring uncertain futures. As such, the new image at work in the artist's paintings generates itself as a conceptual body which is only skin, our techno-cultural cognate, or bodiless prosthesis.

As the artist states, “painting as a primitive form of cultural technology is abundant with all too-exploited analogies for the body and its viscera. Often, invoking such a metaphor, contemporary painting is described through anthropomorphic terms such as zombie or cadaver. These may be adequate terms for the suspension of the medium, analogically speaking, between autopsy and undead animism.”

Alex Carver (b. 1984, Boise, Idaho) lives and works in Boise. He earned an MFA from Columbia University and a BFA from the Cooper Union. Recent solo exhibitions dedicated to his work have been held at Miguel Abreu Gallery (2026, 2022, 2019), White Cube, Seoul (2025), and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin (2024, 2021, 2018), among others. In 2023, A Desired Mesh was held at the Museum der Kulturen Basel, as part of Art Basel Parours. His work has been featured in group shows including Ugly Painting, Nahmad Contemporary, curated by Dean Kissick and Eleanor Cayre (2023), Our Other Us, the 4th Art Encounters Biennial in Timisoara, Romania, curated by Mihnea Mircan and Kasia Redzisz (2021), and a collaborative two-part painting show, Bubble Revision, Miguel Abreu Gallery, and Call Out Tools, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, with Avery Singer and Pieter Schoolwerth (2018). Carver's collaborative feature film with Daniel Schmidt, The Unity of All Things, was presented at the 2013 Locarno International Film Festival, Switzerland. Other film works have been shown in international venues and festivals such as Tate Modern (London, 2014), Berlinale (2015), and the Vancouver International Film Festival (2013), among others.

Carver's work is held in the collections of the Stavanger Art Museum, Norway; the Pinault Collection, Paris; the Ringier Collection, Zurich; the Kistefos Museum, Norway; the Langen Foundation, Neuss, Germany; and the GOME Art Foundation, Hong Kong, among others.

BROOKLYN RAIL

ARTSEEN | MAY 2026

Alex Carver: *The Knot*

By Andrew Paul Woolbright



Alex Carver, *The Return of the Repressed (after Wound Man)*, 2026. Oil on linen, 78 × 64 1/4 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

In their 2013 essay, “Notes on the Margins of Metadata; Concerning the Undecidability of the Digital Image,” writers Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis discuss how metadata is a way of locating and connecting the networked image, those that currently are so circulated and distributed that they lose any sense of position or meaning. While metadata has mostly been utilized as a forensic tool and to further search engine optimization (SEO), the essay sees its ability to solidify the flood of images produced by online culture and as a way of providing a sense of place to the infinity of the virtual world. What if painting could act similarly, as a kind of metadata

The Knot
Miguel Abreu
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of its own history, a recursive protocol that establishes the networked image with a kind of presence? *The Knot*, Alex Carver's exhibition at Miguel Abreu, might just provide an example of this impulse. By building paintings into a series of nested images that collectively train our eye to a closed set of images, he nurtures meditation on their shifting presence.



Alex Carver, *The Optical Knot*, 2026. Oil on linen, 32 × 70 ½ inches. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

Carver's paintings use detail to generate delirium as he reworks the canon and turns the studio into another form of software by cutting, splicing, burnishing, cloning, and compressing images into new files. Much like a limited data set or language model, a controlled number of signifiers—a falling mountain climber entangled in ropes, a tree with no growth, coins, tree branches, entrails, spears, and bodies—converge to shift a given work back and forth between landscape, still life, and portrait. The compositions crest like waves or accrete like a series of sedimentary layers that rotate and fold forward and backward. The smooth surface of the canvas receives the paint like emulsion, emitting glare and oily spills of radiant and dark color. The soft edges and synthesis between different concepts of each painting elicit comparisons to early generative AI models (like Google's DeepDream) and their attempts to soften the transition between opposing images. These trained images effectively evoke the sensation of both the clone stamp tool, the AI generative fill, and the oneiric limbo space of art history's collective imaginary.

His network is defined by his spare image choice, in contrast with the large AI models and the infinite and downward pull of the image stream to which we are quickly becoming accustomed. He provokes irony by thinking algorithmically about only a finite number of options and limited choice. Medical imagery—depictions of surgery, anatomy, and the opened and operated-upon body—is a threshold. The medieval Wound Man, which was the pictorial symbol of the German *Wundarznei*, a fifteenth-century pedagogical book of healing, is a recurring image that he began using a number of years ago. In past exhibitions Wound Man was barely visible, but in *The Return of the Repressed (After Wound Man)* (2026) the body has taken on a more distinct and obvious presence. So then, with this interest in the wounded body, what is it that the artist is attempting to heal?



Installation view: Alex Carver: *The Knot*, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 2026. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery.

The works seem to react to the density and dissolution of the image in virtual space. A predominant issue of AI is scale and training a language model on the entirety of the internet produces slop and cosmic latte, a slurry of generalization that alienates even those most excited by its possibilities. A Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) provides a kind of resistance, a system model that is trained potentially on a small data set of images that are paired and configured into binary relationships to produce new dialectical images. In many ways, this is what Carver has done to produce all of the work in the show. Within the dearth of sclerotic images, Carver's style of manual GAN painting produces a new and haunted sensuous, evidenced in *The Ladder* (2026), *The Rainbow* (2026), and *The Sternum* (2026), three paintings from the same set that share the same closed loop of images. Even though there are twelve paintings in the show, they feel like they are all a single painting that has been deconstructed and

reassembled in different variations. The paintings are forking paths, small feedback loops where variables generate new relationships and challenge the notion of unique and individual work. Instead, each painting is configured as a node within a network.

Carver's frottage technique, discernible in previous work, carries into the current show. For this exhibition, the artist has used an air purifier from a hospital surgery unit to generate rubbed textures onto the surface of the canvas, and to reveal an important cipher. The painter may be at work diagnosing and surgically operating on the body of painting's history while the purifier does an invisible thing, sterilizing the room and clarifying the space, an invisible reset. But the paintings are dark, with iconography kept just at the edge of light. Maybe these works also operate as mnemonic symbols and depict the trauma of images and painting that address and confront every painter before they begin. Carver develops a painterly language of soft gradation, a haunted threnody of swarm that engages with the apparitions of images and their flow within art history and the visual field. The machine's desire to address disjunction, its repulsion towards difference and its manic desire to create soft transitions and unity makes for a language of haunted voids and slick fields that are neither figural or spatial. The past is always at war with the present, and their wrestling invents the future, or its void.

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Installation view of Alex Carver: *The Knot*. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery

April 25, 2026 | Terra Keck

When the body dies, a spring-loaded list of processes will snap into action. Like a series of intelligence protocols ignited by an activation code, agents of mortality walk, calmly but with purpose, to their assigned tasks; unknitting the brow, producing strange liquids, dimming the lights in the brain stem. It is a grim laundry list for the custodians of our post-mortem body, though neatly, nearly lovingly organized.

When I arrived at Miguel Abreu Gallery on Eldridge Street (an echoing white cavern of a space) to see Alex Carver's solo exhibition *The Knot*, I knew of the artist's ongoing infatuation with the body, medieval depictions of death, agony, and medical diagrams. His 2025 *White Cube solo, Effigy*, literally depicted images of Hell. I had read the press release and prepared myself for images of *The Wound Man*, a Medieval European surgical diagram depicting various sharp and blunt instruments stuck to the body of a figure, his gaze oddly impatient. I was prepared for the artist's latest fascination with a CT scan of a fallen climber, whose only identifying feature seems to be the climbing boots still laced to their feet. I was, however, not prepared for how it made me feel: dizzy with color, and psychically soluble.



Alex Carver, *Fallen Climber*, 2026. Oil on linen. 32 x 70 1/2 inches (81.3 x 179.1 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery

Miguel Abreu Gallery offers a lot of physical space to view Carver's work, which is visually satisfying at any distance, and some pieces you will want distance from. I'm surprised that the four humors (the Hippocratic version of the four agreements) are not mentioned in the gallery press release, though I suppose no one wants to write "bile" or "urine" in an email to a collector. However, the transmutation of corpse alchemy is present in the work. Each piece is the prismatic yellow-pink-green grave of a decaying homunculus sinking into an indigo abyss. They are disturbing yet hypnotically revealing in my desire to see my own body within his compositions. My hiking boots, my pain body, my limbs heavy like a fallen tree (an echoed motif from Carver's previous affair with landscape). Without his usual medieval figure aesthetic, I couldn't form a mental separation between my body and this body, a visual lever that flung me deep into the paintings.

Carver wants us to be simultaneously "inside and outside the body," but we are also beyond it and before it. His layered super-compositions play among afterimages of The Wound Man burned into our retina, a surgical shroud of Turin knotted to the painting with tangled images of a fleshy rope. Where is the end of it, the rope and this painting? Where do I clip in? Where do I stand? "Is the artist a climber?" I asked someone at the front desk. "I don't think so," she replied. Taking in the work, I imagine it's not so much the ascent but the fall, the

earth violently catching you, your humors seeping into the dirt, our planet, your blunt instrument. One that is decidedly not featured in the diagrams sent to prepare me. A lot of things aren't on that list.



Alex Carver, *Cluster II (Animal, Plant or Mineral)*, 2026. Oil on linen. 36 1/2 x 66 inches (92.7 x 167.6 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery



Installation view of Alex Carver: *The Knot*. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery

In specific sects of Buddhism, there was the lightly mythologized practice of “cemetery contemplation” where monks were said to sit with the decomposing corpses of the deceased as part of their spiritual training, watching the theater of “dust to dust,” but much wetter. It is not enough to

see the body bloat or take in the smell of decay. It's an act of witnessing until the very last note, the final microbial breath of self after which the "body" arrives at infinity, drawn in by the soil and its many actors. In front of Carver's paintings, one is made audience to that place of infinite renewal. The seeping parts of us that soak, collect, and pool. Me. You. The Climber. Dissolving into wet mixings on his linen canvas.



Alex Carver, *The Optical Knot*, 2026. Oil on linen. 32 x 70 1/2 inches (81.3 x 179.1 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery

It was kind of a lot. I feel weak for admitting it. In a spring gallery season featuring many elegant flower shows, Alex Carver dug up bulbs from the garden to show us what the compost is made of. It is an eternal loop of wet mummified remains that curl and knot. They are beautiful, nourishing, almost biblically so, yet they petrify me. Perhaps because the edges of those boots are a sturdy foothold reminding me that this color cacophony is based in our reality. Yet, despite the presence of wounds and spilling sinewy knots, I don't sense this body of work surrounding death has much to do with suffering. The figures you will find at Miguel Abreu feel electrically quiet, at rest, accepting. Even *The Wound Man* stares at us with eyes relaxed, mouth closed, his ancient severed arms offered limply for our witnessing.

Alex Carver: *The Knot* is on view at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, from March 12 to May 9, 2026.



The Wound Man from Hans von Gersdorff's *Feldtbuch der Wundartzney* (Strasburg, 1519)

Terra Keck

Terra Keck is an image-maker, performer, and writer based in Brooklyn, New York. She received her MFA from the University of Hawaii at Manoa and her BFA from Ball State University. She co-hosts the comedy-educational podcast *Witch Yes!*, and is a curatorial partner at Field Projects Gallery. You will find her artwork in publications such as *Hyperallergic*, *The Art Newspaper*, and *Oxford American Arts* and in permanent institutional collections in Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Hawaii, and California. Her work has been exhibited in New York at Spring/Break Art Show, Future Fair, All St Gallery, and internationally this year with MAIA Contemporary in Mexico City, and Sun Contemporary in Bali. She is a regular contributor to *Art Spiel* and *Artefuse*.

BAZAAR^{Harper's}

ART

NEW

가장 오래된 아트페어, 세계 최대 미술장터인
아트 바젤에서도 새로움을 향한 물결은 계속된다.

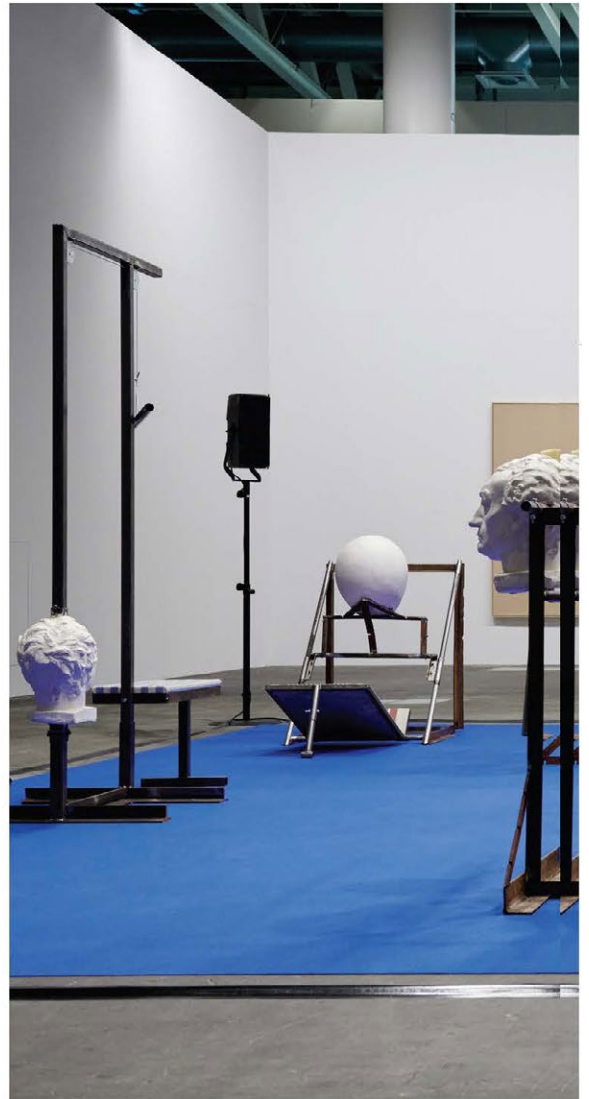
1970년, 에른스트 바이엘러는 예술이냐 했을까? 자신이 만든 미술 장터가 그로부터 수십 년 동안 스위스의 소도시 접제를 먹이 살리는 일 년 농사가 된다는 걸. 해마다 6월이면 수만 명의 미술애호가와 관계자가 바젤을 찾는다. “전 세계의 부자들이 전세기를 타고 방문하는 곳이잖아요. 옷차림부터 예사롭지 않은 게 느껴지지 않나요?” 갤러리스트 A가 턱짓으로 가리킨 쪽에 백금발의 중년 여성이 다이아몬드가 박힌 에르메스 바킨 뱀을 들고 있었다. 이곳에선 흔한 광경이다. “특급 고객이 불리는 만큼 페어의 수준도 높죠. 갤러리들도 아트 바젤에 가장 힘을 쓸 수밖에 없어요.” 어느 하나 거를 타선이 없다. 그도 그럴 것이 일단 일성하는 것부터 하늘의 별 따기다. ‘아트 바젤 인 바젤 2023’에는 36개국 2만84개 갤러리가 참여했다. 한국에선 단 두 곳, 국제갤러리와 갤러리현대만 깃발을 꽂았다.

글로벌 경제 위기와 금리 인상, 러시아 우크라이나 전쟁 등의 악재로 판매 부진을 우려하는 목소리도 있었지만 막상 장이 열리자 기우에 불과했음이 밝혀졌다. VIP 프리뷰 첫날 하우저앤위스는 루이즈 부르주아의 <거미 IV>를 2천2백50만 달러에 팔았고 화이트 큐브는 마크 브레드포드의 <The Less Common Royalties>를 4백50만 달러에, 페이스갤러리는 알렉산더 칼더의 소형 조각 대부분을 35만 달러에서 2만80만 달러에 대부분 솔드아웃시켰다. 첫날만 반짝, 소위 ‘오피텔’도 아니다. 갤러리스트 B가 귀띔했다. “아트 바젤의 특징이라고도 할 수 있는 게, 페어가 끝나는 날까지 판매가 계속돼요. 작품이 워낙 고가잖아요. 컨디션도 두 번, 세 번 돌리려고 심사숙고 끝에 사는 거죠.”

그럼에도 불구하고 셀러브리티나 북미의 갤러리가 대거 불참한 것도 주목할 만하다. “바젤은 건너뛰고 10월에 파리로 오겠다네요.” 갤러리스트 C가 어깨를 으쓱하며 말했다. “이해는 가요, 이 작은 도시에 수십 번이나 와봤다고 생각해보세요. 더 이상 뭘 할 수 있겠어요.” 그래서일까. 지난해 아트 바젤은 프랑스 파리에서 새로운 아트페어 ‘파리 폴리스 파 아트 바젤’을 개설했다. 임시 거처인 몽파르나스 에피메르에 아기자기하게 모인 1만56개의 부스와 알짜배기 부대 행사가 워낙 호황이었다. 벌써부터 파리가 바젤을 앞지를 것이라는 예측이 심상치 않게 들려온다. 더 이상 이 도시의 살인적인 물가, 불평한 경우 항공, 부족한 숙박 시설을 전일 필요가 없어지는 걸까? 과연 바젤은 언제까지 아트 캠퍼달로서의 권위를 유지할 수 있을까?

한편, 그해 아트 바젤의 경향은 ‘갤러리즈’보다는 실험적인 작품들로 구성된 아트 바젤의 비엔날레적인 ‘엔리미티드’에서 확인할 수 있다. 올해 엔리미티드의 특징은 한마디로 다양성이다. “몇 년 전만 해도 흑인 혹은 여성주의 작가들이 강세를 보였어요. 환경이나 생태 문제가 트렌드인 적도 있었죠. 올해 엔리미티드는 뚜렷한 주제를 발견하기 어렵고 오히려 다채롭다는 게 특징이라면 특징인 것 같아요. 무엇보다 거장과 신진작가의 조화가 돋보이네요.” 이듬해엔 이번 엔리미티드에서 게르하르트 리히터의 신작 <Strip-Tower>나 바바라 크루저의 <Untitled(Our Leader)>만큼 주목받은 건 1990년생 아우구스타 세라파나스의 <Curlionis Gym>이었다. 그는 참여형 설치 조각을 통해 사람과 장소에 대한 기억을 소환한다. 전시장 한복판에 펼쳐진 간이 체육관은 미술학도이던 작가 자신의 경험에서 출발했다. 자연을 모방하여 그릴 그리기, 고대 그리스의 조각품을 본뜬 조각하기 같은 미술 교육을 반복적인 훈련에 기반을 둔 체육관 운동에 비유하며 복사-붙여넣기식의 예술 교육에 의문을 제기하는 것이다.

눈빛을 반짝이며 엔리미티드 색인을 둘러보던 큐레이터 A가 덧붙였다. “아트 바젤에서 주목받은 신인이 몇 년 뒤 미술계에 떠오르는 경우가 흔해요. 그러므로 페어 기간 동안 열리는 다양한 부대행사와 기관 전시도 주목해야 하죠.” ‘글래머러스한’ 전시는 없을 지라도, 바젤 시내 곳곳을 전시장으로 활용하여 장소 특장적 작품을 선보이는 ‘파쿠르’ 섹션과 콘스트루지엄, 콘스트합레, 바이엘러 미술관 등의 기관에서 발휘하는 수준 높은 큐레이션이 바젤의 저력을 실감했다. <바지>가 아트 바젤에서 재킷한 새로운 일곱들을 주목해야 하는 이유도 바로 여기에 있다.



FACES



Installation view, Augustas Serapinas, «Girionis Gym», 2023
Presented by Galerie Tschudi, Courtesy of Art Basel

ALEXANDER CARVER

바젤민족박물관에 전시된 알렉산더 카버의 《A Desired Mesh》는 15세기 후반 기 마르상이 인쇄한 프랑스 연감에서 발견된 삽화에서 출발했다. 식탁 위에서 희생자를 절단하는 악마, 사람들이 산 채로 살아지는 커다란 냄비 같은 중세시대의 잔혹한 삽화에서 출발했다. 그는 중세시대의 고문이라는 행위를 현대의학의 수술과 연결한다. 결국, 폭력의 이미지로부터 끄집어낸 것은 '치유의 역사'다.

하퍼스 바자 《A Desired Mesh》는 식탁 위에서 희생자를 절단하는 악마, 사람들이 산 채로 살아지는 커다란 냄비 같은 중세시대의 잔혹한 삽화에서 출발했다.

알렉산더 카버 나는 요즘 고문을 현대의학과 시각적으로 연결시키는 시도에 흥미를 느끼고 있다. 중세시대에 만들어진 고문의 이미지는 그 묘사가 극단적이고 환상적이라서 매력에 있다. 이번 작품의 정확한 이미지 출처는 1493년의 'Calendrier des bergers (France) Guy Marchant'과 1499년의 'Compost et Kalendrier des Bergeres (France) Guy Marchant'인데, 모두 '죽음의 무도^[3]'에 속하는 이미지들로 고통 속에 놓여있는 인간의 신체를 묘사했다. 이번 작업의 경우 현대의학, 그 중에서도 피부 이식을 염두에 두고 작업했다. 실제 피부 이식 절차에 관한 텍스트를 패러디하여 각각의 캔버스 뒷면에 인장으로 박기도 했다. 어찌 보면 참고 자료들이 내 작품의 '피부'가 된 셈이다. 앞으로 현대의학 체계를 예술작업에 접목시키고자 한다.

하퍼스 바자 고문과 현대의학을 시각적으로 연결하는 시도는 어떤 연구로 설득력을 갖나?

알렉산더 카버 수술은 칼로 살을 베고 열여섯하는 과정이며 본질적으로 야만적인 구석이 있다. 때로 질병을 치료하기 위해 건강한 세포와 암세포를 모두 죽이기도 한다. 말하자면 현대의학은 필연적으로 우리에게 불안감을 부여하는 것이다. 일부 학자들에 의하면, 외과수술은 처형을 당한 사람들을 치료하기 위한 목적으로 발전되었다고 한다. 말하자면 고문의 역사는 의학의 역사와 연결되며 이는 치유의 과정이기도 하다.

하퍼스 바자 당신에게 폭력은 어떤 의미인가?

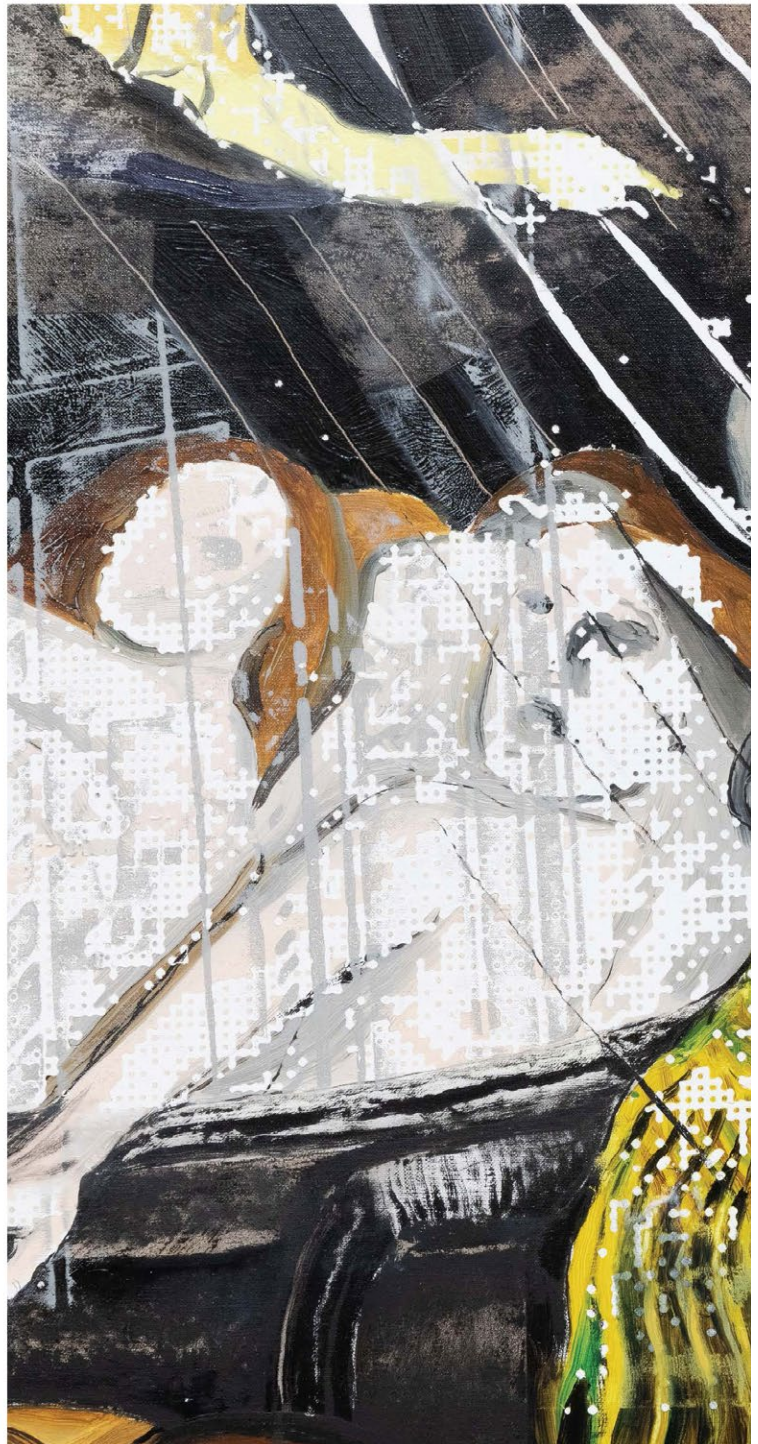
알렉산더 카버 예술에서의 폭력은 폭력이 아니다. 내가 그림에서 폭력을 묘사하는 이유는 두 가지 모순된 것들을 전달하기 위함이다. 하나는 실제 폭력과 그것이 만들어내는 감각에 대해 생각하게 하는 것. 두 번째는, 그림 자체를 마치 상처 입은 몸처럼 다듬으로써 상징적으로 '폭력'이 드러나기를 바라는 것.

하퍼스 바자 요즘 당신을 사로잡은 화두는?

알렉산더 카버 여전히 이식이라는 행위. 이는 단지 물리적인 '박', '피부'를 의미할 뿐만 아니라 개념적인 범주에서도 회화와 깊은 관련이 있다.

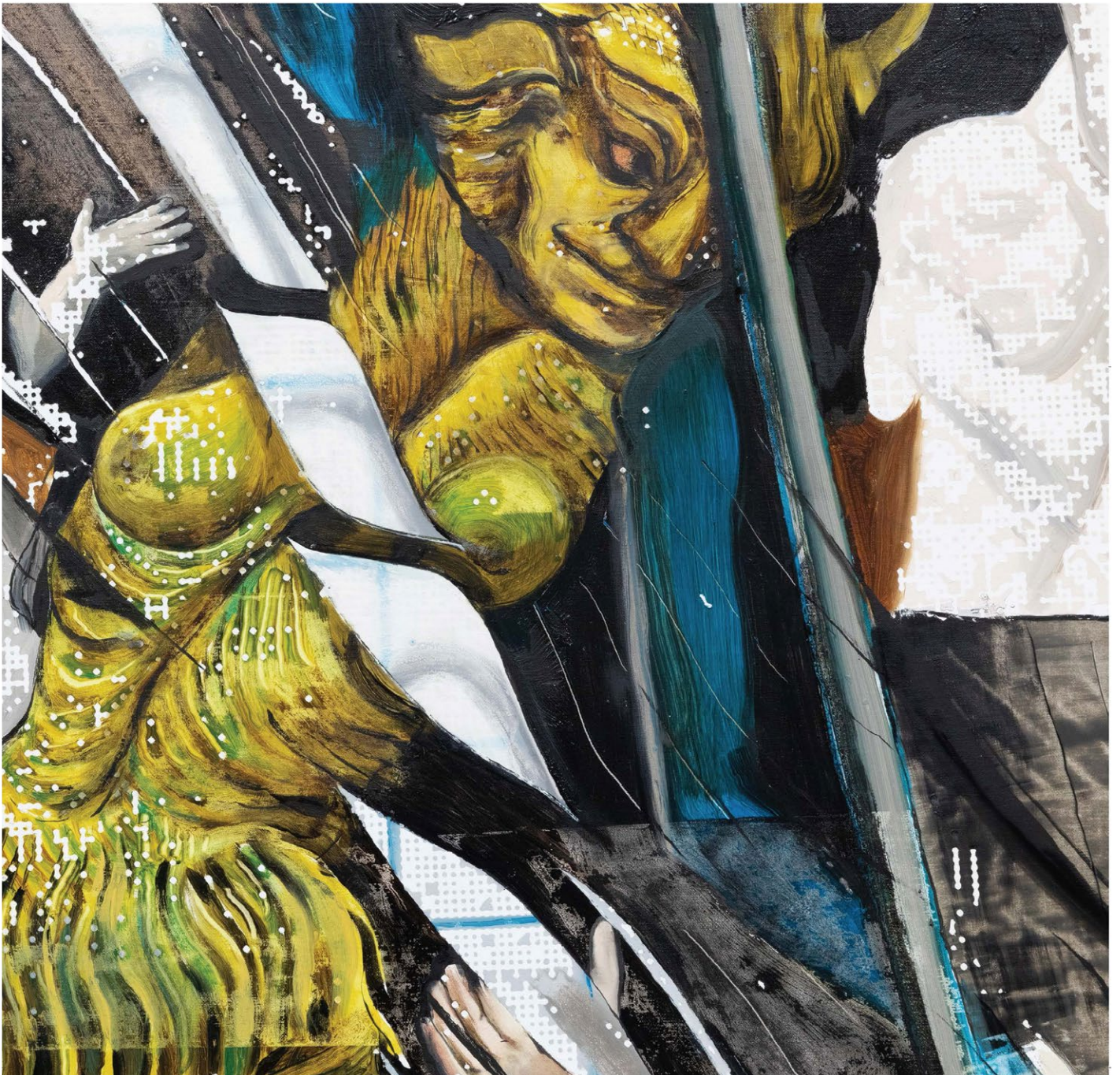
하퍼스 바자 당신은 전도유망한 젊은 예술가다. 어떤 성공을 꿈꾸는가?

알렉산더 카버 남은 인생 동안 가능한 한 정직하고 솔직하게 작업하는 것. 그 끝에 무엇이 있을지는 결코 상상할 수 없다. 그 알 수 없음이 나의 예술적 동기를 자극한다. **B 에디터/손연나**



[3] 중세 말기에 유행한, 죽음의 보편성에 대한 알레고리를 묘사하는 미술 장르

Installation view, Alexander Carver, «A Desired Mesh», 2023, Museum der Kulturen, Art Basel Parcours.
Courtesy of the artist, Art Basel, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.



ARTFORUM

OPENINGS: ALEX CARVER

Dean Kissick on Alex Carver



Alex Carver, *The Recipients (wound site)*, 2023, oil on linen, 79 × 79". From the series "A Desired Mesh," 2023.

Oh, wretched ephemeral race . . . Why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is—to die soon.

—Silenus, the satyr, to King Midas, who had finally caught him, as retold by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)

ALEX CARVER'S RECENT BODY OF WORK, made over the past few years, fixates on the torture of human bodies. His painted figures are always suffering or else inflicting suffering on others, and he appears to revel in these depictions of violence, making them luscious,

dreamlike, and seductive by rendering them in lurid Technicolor and by performing acts of violence himself: abstracting the image, obscuring it with distortion and noise, dissolving it in many-layered allover compositions. Historical scenes appropriated from arcane sources are warped, distorted, pulled apart, receding and dissolving into the paint, hard to make out.

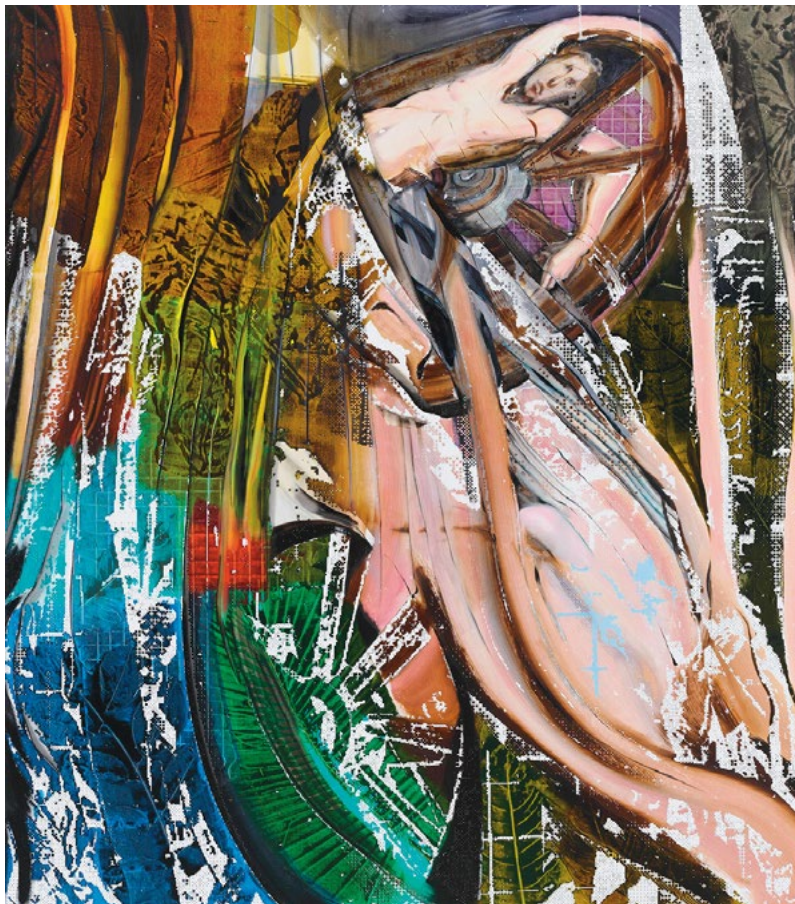
Carver's exhibition "Engineer Sacrifice," at New York's Miguel Abreu Gallery, in 2022, comprised larger paintings of men burned alive inside an ancient Greek brazen bull and strung up to die on medieval Catherine wheels, and smaller monochromes of people and animals mummified in peat bogs. The artist reprised the wheel in *The Spinning Wheel (Ribbioned Flesh)*, 2023, for a group show at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler in Berlin this past spring. For Art Basel's Parcours this June, he'll exhibit a suite of six paintings at the Museum der Kulturen Basel. Titled "A Desired Mesh," 2023, they are based on three grisly illustrations found in a late-fifteenth-century French almanac printed by Guy Marchant, collectively displaying a landscape of Catherine wheels, demons dismembering their victims on tables, and large pots of people being boiled alive. Though Carver's sources are usually obscure, one recent piece, *The Painting Flays Itself*, 2023, which debuted at Frieze Los Angeles, remakes a very famous painting: Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas*, ca. 1570s, a rendering of the satyr Marsyas, having lost to Apollo in a competition over who could play music most beautifully, hung upside down as Apollo skins him alive, brutally torturing the man-goat for his lack of artistic brilliance. Carver had this image in mind as he made his "Engineer Sacrifice" show, and after that exhibition ended, he decided to attempt his own version. Both Carver and Titian use the flaying of the body as a metaphor for painting. Kneeling down and bending over, Apollo holds a knife that resembles a brush to the satyr's chest, as if creating the image in which he appears, and spills blood on the ground that is reminiscent of pigment. In Titian's original, King Midas—often thought to be a self-portrait—watches closely from the right-hand side of the canvas. (In Carver's version, he does not resemble the artist.) In both, the illusory space of the composition is shallow and flattened, the interlocking arrangement of limbs suggesting a many-armed cyborg dismembering the painting from within.

The artist is cast as a torturer, mutilating his subjects but also mutilating the medium of the painting. While Titian's Marsyas gazes out at us with an eerily calm expression of resignation, in Carver's version his eyes are closed and he appears quite blissful, ecstatic even, as if lost in a masochistic reverie at his own disassembly. Carver takes pleasure in tearing apart the conventions of figuration, an act of mimesis, and contrasting it with what he calls "the figural," the expression of concepts and experiences through forms that are not wholly abstract.



View of "Alex Carver: Engineer Sacrifice," 2022, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. From left: *Breaking Wheel Attenuations*, 2022; *Brazen Bull with Medusa (LIDAR)*, 2022; *Brazen Bull*, 2022.

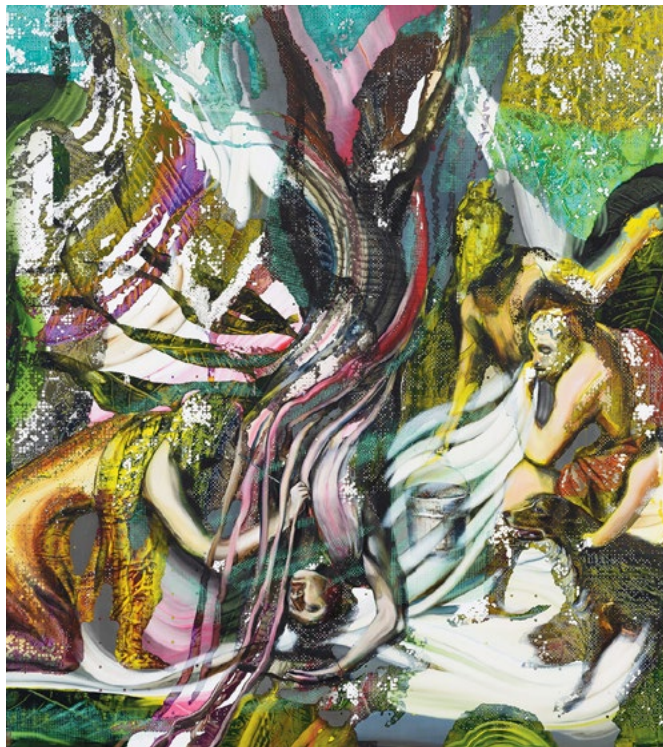
Carver's recent paintings suggest biological matter sublimated into the virtual, figures opened up into ideas, and the confluence of the historical with the sci-fi present.



Alex Carver, *The Spinning Wheel (Ribbioned Flesh)*, 2023, oil on linen, 88 1/4 × 78".

IF FOR CARVER, figuration and the figural form an opposition, these terms resolve to form a third: *membrane*. “Painting’s sensitivity (its ability to catch and restructure experience),” the artist has written, “is analogous to our largest and most outwardly facing organ, the skin.” Examples of membranes include *The Flaying of Marsyas* and Caravaggio’s two versions of *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1601 and 1602, respectively), in which the apostle Thomas pokes his finger through Christ’s flesh and also, it appears, the surface of the canvas. Today, Carver is finding new ways of composing membranes of his own.

When an object is scanned in three dimensions, it is translated into a “point cloud” (a set of data points in virtual space). This is another way of skinning a body and reconfiguring it as an engineered representation. Carver frequently begins his works by converting his appropriated two-dimensional imagery into a pixelated outline that resembles a point cloud, then converting that into a vector file and printing it as a stencil on a vinyl plotter. Using these stencils is how he adds the mark of the machine into his paintings. For the recent “Desired Mesh” series, he breaks down his source material further: After printing it out, he cuts and expands it into a honeycombed paper mesh before photographing the picture and using that photograph to generate his flattened point cloud. Carver’s interventions give a rhythmically structured accordion effect whereby bodies appear to be unraveling and the canvas unweaving itself. The act of cutting the image into a grid to stretch it out, similar to the way that plastic surgeons perform meshed skin grafts (or schoolchildren make paper chains of angels at Christmas), becomes the compositional structure and the conceptual strategy for making the images into a malleable skin.



Alex Carver, *The Painting Flays Itself*, 2023, oil on linen, 86 1/2 × 79".

Carver also uses the more traditional technique of frottage, which he sees as a primitive form of scanning technology. Working on unstretched canvases hung on a wall, he places objects behind the canvas—such as large leaves, burlap, vinyl-cut patent diagrams for medical equipment, or his own hand-sculpted foamcore reliefs of bog bodies—and takes rubbings with plaster knife and paint. Next, he paints details in by hand, giving features to his figures. Mixing and combining these strategies of mark-making, grafting them onto one another, and in so doing tearing apart his representations before stitching them back together, Carver breaks down the figurative into the figural and reconstitutes both as a membrane. Only after he's finished is the canvas stretched over its frame and made into a completed object, the skin pulled finally over the skeleton.

The point-cloud aesthetic that is the foundation of Carver's recent paintings suggests biological matter sublimated into the virtual, figures opened up into ideas, and the confluence of the historical with the sci-fi present. The way it feels to be alive has changed a great deal over the past decade: The ways we represent ourselves and communicate, and the places our identities reside, are increasingly located in images in digital space. "The figurative painter," Carver writes, "must reckon with the material body as something that was once central to identity but may soon only function as a form of frailty and finitude that is eclipsed by a post-human, post-body form of being in the world." Bodies are becoming dematerialized, and this is the perfect time to find new ways of representing the human (and inhuman) figure.



Titian, *The Flaying of Marsyas*, ca. 1570s, oil on canvas, 86 5/8 × 80 5/8".

Much of Carver's fascination with Marsyas, and with ways of tormenting painted bodies, is a response to the proliferation of figurative painting in recent art and to the failure of such work, often executed as a pastiche of modernist styles, to express how our experiences of inhabiting our bodies, and our notions of selfhood, have changed and are continuing to change. (He has said before that he sees the frottaged mummies in his work as emblems of "zombie figuration.") Somewhat daringly, he challenges this tendency with historical appropriations of his own, but rather than draw from modernist sources, he appropriates images that are centuries old. Carver takes on his peers by looking farther into the past, by exploding and expanding the appropriative act to weird and psychedelic extremes, and, perhaps, by invoking a time when the body was understood to be more porous, fluid, and fungible. He suggests that the twenty-first-century posthuman body, which can be transformed in so many ways, has a greater affinity with the medieval Christian and ancient mythological body than it does with a post-Enlightenment or modern one.



Alex Carver, *The Skin Bridges (donor site)*, 2023, oil on linen, 79 × 79". From the series "A Desired Mesh," 2023.

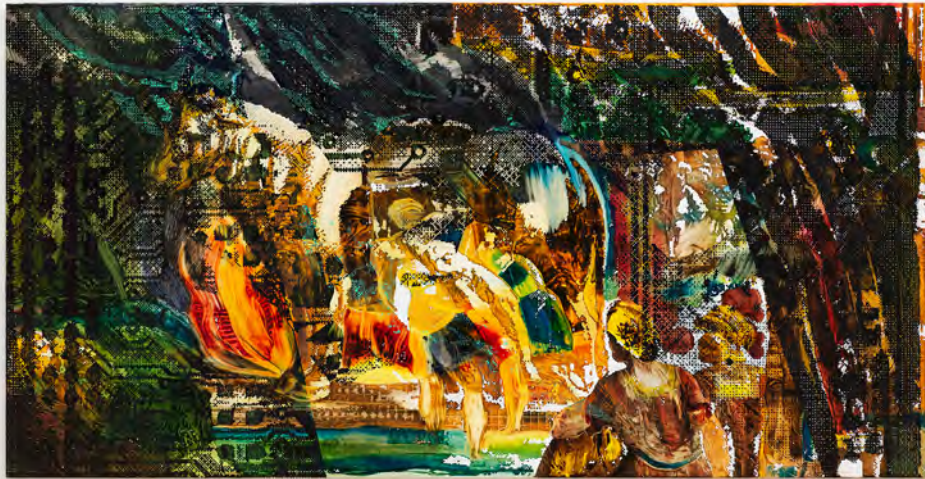
Marsyas, let's not forget, was skinned alive for his hubris, for thinking he could outplay the god of music and dance on his double-reed *aulos*. He lost his life but was also flayed into a painting and a membrane, and in his last moments, with his last breaths, as he joined biological reality with the world of pure concepts, he would have felt both flowing together through the bloody lacerations of his body, his eyes either wide open or closed.

Dean Kissick is a writer, a contributing editor at *Spike Art Magazine*, and the host of the monthly "Seaport Talks" series in New York.

BOMB

Painting's Small Infinity: Alex Carver Interviewed by Blake Oetting

Mining the painterly allegories of medieval torture devices.



Alex Carver, *Brazen Bull*, 2022, oil on linen, 80 x 156 inches. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery. © Alex Carver.

In Alex Carver's practice, the painterly apparatus—its tools, techniques, and history—is self-reflexively matrixed through the lens of extra-aesthetic discourses related to the breakdown and reconstitution of the body. In addition to the creation of paintings that index their own conditions of possibility, his work lends a distinct approach to the question of "figuration," framing it as an allegorical process in which the body of the art object undergoes critical interrogation. While an earlier series took surgery, specifically grafting, as its thematic center, in Carver's current exhibition at Miguel Abreu, *Engineer Sacrifice*, he plumbs the painterly subcurrents of medieval torture devices in which immolation and dismemberment double as aesthetic strategies.

—Blake Oetting

Blake Oetting

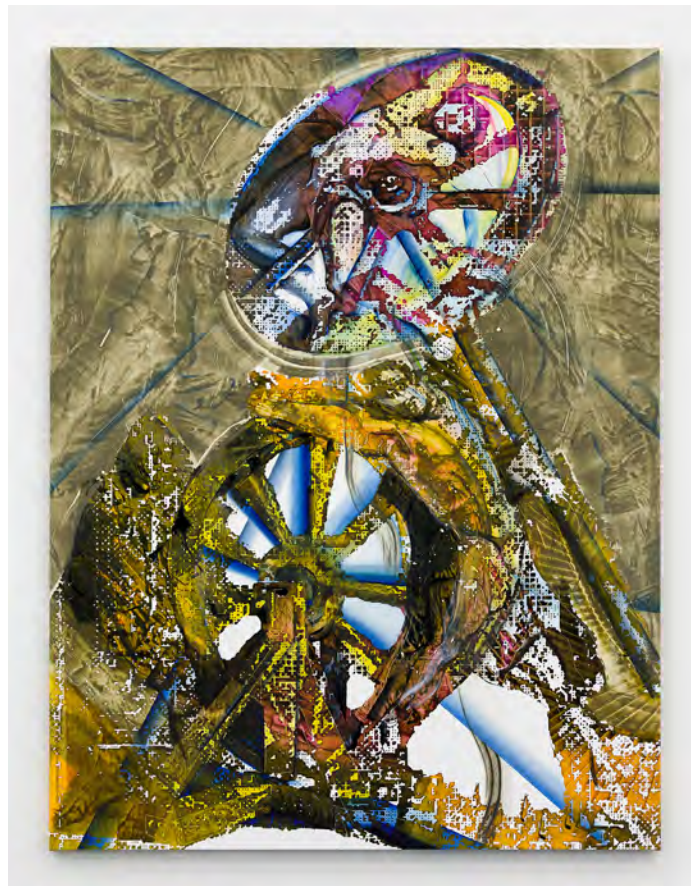
Medicine and medical instruments have long been integrated into your painting practice both allegorically and as imagery. Before Covid, in 2019 when I first saw your work, these motifs were already present. When and why did you begin gravitating toward that material?

Alex Carver

Yes, the surgical motif really came to the forefront of the work with my dad, who had an aortic aneurysm. Encountering the image-making and surgical technology involved in his treatment—scanning, grafting, splitting, re-stitching—is where that first show with Miguel Abreu, *External Fixations*, came from. For that show, I was interested in modeling a cycle of breaking the body down—the human body as well as the body of the painting—and putting it back together, moving from dismemberment to chimerical recombination.

BO

That cycle has such a strong art historical resonance. It makes me think of those Dada heads, for instance, or the broader cyborgian motif we see throughout Weimar aesthetics. It also brings up the very old tradition of painting on vellum—an epidermal, grafted surface. And then there is the painterly subtext to so much of the medical practice you're interested in. Stenciling and grafting have both artistic and surgical functions. In *External Fixations* you play with that overlap.



Alex Carver, *Two Wheels*, 2022, oil on linen, 79 x 60 inches. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery. © Alex Carver.

AC

At that time, I was struggling with the problem of composition in painting. I was working very diagrammatically. I was using texts from patents, so there was a givenness to the question of composition. I had a moment when I didn't know what kind of images I was trying to make, so this idea of "external fixation" was useful for me in asking myself, "What is going to lend me compositional support?" The procedure of making the painting—in a classic postmodern strategy—also showed up in the work. I started painting trompe l'oeil images of the vinyl and the tape that I use to make the paintings. In addition to the fear of my father's aortic aneurysm, the show was about very basic painting problems: What kind of marks am I making? What is a composition? Does composition matter?

BO

Those paintings featured snippets of actual bodies as well, in addition to their robotic analogs.

AC

The images of the body were taken with a Mars scanner. It uses different types of particle beams and a sophisticated detector to see soft tissue versus hard tissue and recomposite the body into a three-dimensional image. You end up with a picture that looks like a gelatinized version of the body.

I remember I showed some progress shots to my friend Walter Benjamin Smith, and he was making fun of me. He said, "Oh, you're making paintings from the year 3,000 now." There was something very posthuman about the show, but with nothing to fall back on, like animals or the wonder of nature. It was pretty brutal. I was as confused about the work as anyone.

BO

If *External Fixation* relied upon relatively contemporary technology, you look back to medieval, extremely brutal mechanisms of bodily dismemberment in your new work.

AC

Yes, I have these two apparatuses to make images with. Both are mechanisms of human torture. One form of torture, demonstrated through a device called the Brazen Bull, is immolation. People were placed inside of a sculpted bull, the door was closed, and a fire was lit underneath. They were incinerated, turned into smoke that came out of the bull's nostrils. That is a really horrifying idea, but, for me, it's incredibly beautiful to think of the body's atomization. In my mind, the Brazen Bull relates to high-resolution scanning technology—point cloud, MRI, sonar—which is a way of converting the body into digital smoke. The transubstantiation of the body is coupled by the other apparatus in the show, the Catherine Wheel, which is more about dismemberment.

These are the dual engines of image production in the work, the results of which are less about showing the body as a stable identity than they are about turning the entire apparatus of image production into a body. When

I paint the figure, what I mean is that the whole painting is a figure or a body that I take apart and put back together.



Alex Carver, *The Work of Wheels*, 2022, oil on linen, 78 × 132.5 inches. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery. © Alex Carver.

BO

These engines—again, mechanisms of torture—seem to demonstrate a certain disdain for or anxiety about the medium, no?

AC

I don't mean to imply that painting is a torturous process—that isn't the allegory at work. Rather, I want to architect a kind of sacrifice that breaks down the painting into its constituent parts. I am interested in that destruction as a form of image production. How can we frame a moment of expression as annihilation?

I'm interested in painting because it's what I call a small infinity. Sculpture is a large infinity. What constitutes sculptural practice is big, but part of what makes painting interesting to me—and might make it boring to others, understandably—is that it is so hermeneutic: painting is often about painting and instructs the viewer how it produces itself.

BO

Recently you've been approaching painting from without, so to speak, in writing about the contemporary state of the medium.

AC

One way for me to get out of painting's hermeticism is to speak and write about it. I wrote my first public essay for a group show I was included in over the summer entitled *The Painter's New Tools*. Basically, it's about the state of contemporary painting and new possibilities for how to discuss it.

BO

You discuss the Janus-faced dimension of contemporary painting. You argue that painters are reaching back to historical movements to unlock or

decode them, or looking forward to a posthuman consciousness that is dependent upon artificial intelligence rather than a traditional notion of the subject. You deal with the past, specifically a medieval and medicinal history, but your work feels primarily oriented toward the question of what is produced when human subjectivity is no longer viable.

AC

Yes, I think that's exactly where I would locate myself within my own map of painterly discourse. The principal problem for me in painting is what happens in the absence of the human subject. For me, though, it's not exactly a given. I'm standing on a threshold where, compositionally or thematically, I always start with the human subject and then eradicate it. What I hope to find is something productive in this period of erasure that isn't some pastiche of existential dread. How can we take this moment of radical precarity and make it energetic and expansive?



Installation view of Alex Carver: *Engineer Sacrifice*, 2022. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery.

BO

You also want to avoid the rhetoric of expression that is involved in that sort of existential dread, presumably.

AC

Exactly. There is ultimately something lucky about painting that negates that type of expressivity. This is why the debate between skilled and de-skilled painting doesn't interest me. De-skilled painting can obviously produce a transcendental result, just like skilled painting. It becomes rather arbitrary, or alchemical, what lies behind a genuinely dynamic image. Some of my paintings could be seen as skilled or virtuosic, and others as de-skilled or discursive. This is one of the allowances of painting—that you can shift from work to work.

Ultimately, I am anti-brand coherence. I don't think painters should reduce their practice to a single modality. To only produce virtuosic painting is

boring, but refusing to make that type of work is also boring. Artists need to transit.

BO

Partially what you're bringing up is the possibility of bridging the long-held gap between good artwork and "good painting." Is there any space that those two concepts share anymore? In your Brazen Bull work, for instance, you offer a properly postmodern, self-reflexive allegory but also vaporous vignettes of rainbow paint that tap into a tradition of painterly expression.

AC

Yes, this is probably the most painterly show I've done so far. It is interesting to think of the persistence of that expressionist myth. We know it is a propagandistic conceit; but when you look at painting now and see gestural marks, we still equate that with ideas of freedom or, for those with a certain conceptual profile, ironic commentary on the myth of expressive freedom. Whether there are quotation marks around that freedom or not seems totally arbitrary, though, since viewers have no orientation between earnestness and irreverence anymore.

BO

Isabelle Graw writes about this inevitably vitalistic relationship between painting and its maker that we are circling around.

AC

I'm reading *The Love of Painting* right now, actually. I am really interested in her social constructivist view of painting, even if my practice wouldn't excite her that much since the map of my social fabric isn't indexed in the work. In fact, because the conditions of the social are so toxic at the moment, I worry that tying my work to them would end up as an ironic reinforcement, or re-statement, of the forces I want to critique. What I think we need right now instead is people setting themselves up for vulnerability. This is a complicated idea, particularly in the space of art, because earnestness and other affective registers of vulnerability can quickly become superficial tropes that gloss or conceal a lack of intellectual or artistic rigor. To be vulnerable in a meaningful way in the space of art is not to merely present oneself or one's work in earnest terms—after all, ironic distance is an essential part of both the creation and reception of art—but more so as a form of energetic investment.

Alex Carver: Engineer Sacrifice is on view at Miguel Abreu in New York City until December 18.

Blake Oetting is a PhD student at New York University where he studies modern and contemporary art. In addition to BOMB, his writing can be found in Artforum, Texte Zur Kunst, Flash Art, and The Brooklyn Rail.

THE FIGURATIVE AND FIGURAL MEMBRANE

Alex Carver

“And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened.”

– Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII, 513a



Aboriginal cave paintings at Injalak Hill
at Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) in West Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia.

Contemporary painting is a territory; it is a vast expanse of uneven and incoherent terrain, which is continuously transformed by the hands of artists en masse. Like any geography, contemporary painting, taken as a whole, is radically diverse in its features and in a state of constant flux. Features within this notional geography, however, differ from terrestrial geography because they are exclusively formed and unformed by human activity. While the territory of painting is principally a microgeography because of these qualities, it also indexes larger cultural and civilizational forces.

Within the terrain of contemporary painting there are gaping holes of historical amnesia and deep wells of nostalgia in the form of historical pastiche. The voids of historical amnesia are always framed by forms of nostalgia. Ignorance of the past always produces, paradoxically, a blind fetishization of it. So these two features of the landscape of contemporary painting are always found in close relation to one another.

However, not all of the features of this landscape reflect our simultaneous obsession with and ignorance of the past. Some formations are directed more towards futurity, oftentimes as a menacing horizon of civilizational collapse and planetary death or, conversely, as a sublime peak of post-human consciousness. Here, artists' utopian and dystopian fantasies are driven by the bombast of technological revolution.

Of the almost infinite sites one could choose to explore within this territory, I would like to meditate on these two exaggerated zones of activity: on the one hand, forms of historical imagination in relation to amnesia and nostalgia, and on the other, forms of futurity in relation to the apocalyptic and the transcendental. In order to ground this allegory, the exploration of these landscapes will be done through the concept and representation of the figure.

The figure in the landscape of contemporary painting is best and most succinctly understood through the modality of the *figurative* (i.e., through resemblances and reflections; in short, the representation of the human body as we experience it perceptually in the material world). However, the figure can also appear more allusively as the *figural*, shifting away from resemblance and reflection toward the realm of concepts and forms. Form, here, does not refer to the material sense per se but more to the Platonic vein of a higher dimension of pure ideational space.

The figurative painter is likely to paint people and in doing so, to charm us with our own reflection manifest on the surface of the image as a constellation of pigment; a kind of microgeography through which the absorption and transmission of photons reveal us as we are, as we were, or as the artist wants us to be. However, it is almost impossible to know what the figural painter may paint because all of the references to the material world contained in figural works are somehow shifted and partially untethered from their referents—in a word, transfigured. This shift is not metaphysically absolute, like a messiah, but more aspirationally directed toward a new aesthetic experience. The figural painter simultaneously desires to reveal new concepts through new forms and, conversely, new forms from new concepts. Because of these tendencies, figurative painters are often preoccupied with the history of painting and its traditional forms of representation, or lack of representation. In contrast, figural painters are more directed toward futurity through the hysteria of technological development. This is because technology has the ability to reshape the world and, perhaps more significantly, our relationship to it, giving rise to new forms of knowing and being.

At this moment in the territory of contemporary painting, the features of amnesia, nostalgia, the apocalyptic, and the transcendental

**Dust Muhammad, *The Story Of Haftvad And The Worm*,
Folio From The Shahnama Of Shah Tahmasp, ca. 1540. Sadruddin Aga khan Collection.**

are being radically reshaped by a dominant civilizational force: the ascendance of artificial intelligence (AI). While it is often the case that figurative and figural painters are oppositional to one another within the landscape of contemporary painting (towards the past and future, respectively), the emergence of AI poses an existential crisis for both. Because of this, the figurative painter must reckon with the material body as something that was once central to identity but may soon only function as a form of frailty and finitude that is eclipsed by a post-human, post-body form of being in the world. For the figurative artist to succeed in restating the importance of the physical body, they must simultaneously avoid historical amnesia and overcome the lure of nostalgia as a reactionary retreat from an inhospitable present. In contrast, the figural painter's task may be to question whether truly novel and meaningful forms can be produced from the fervor of technological advancement. In doing so, the figural painter must synthesize both the apocalyptic (dystopian) and transcendent (utopian) hyperbolizing of this frontier of civilizational transformation.

Although both the figurative and figural can provoke real and profound questions about larger civilizational upheaval, especially in relationship to AI, they are nevertheless limited by their respective myopias. After all, the utilization of novel technological processes does not, in itself, make a compelling work of art. Nor does the restaging of historically significant painting styles populated with contemporary subjects mean that history has been bridged successfully or succinctly.

Just as the Futurists—whose beautiful and now clearly naive manifesto was published in 1909—spoke poetically about the rise of machines and valorized upheaval and violence, so too will the ubiquity of *cyborgenic* aesthetics in contemporary painting be viewed in retrospect as more fantasy-based than anything else. Similarly, contemporary figurative works that deploy historical pastiche in styles, from Picasso to Ingres, will likely be seen as regressive and willfully ignorant of both the past and present in the coming years.

However, common ground does exist, as much between the features of these respective landscapes as between the figures who inhabit them, be they figurative or figural. Although I would argue that AI is more figural than figurative, because it refers to a whole constellation of ontological and epistemological concepts, it nevertheless casts into sharp relief the importance of the material body. Today's figurative painters will likely be highly relevant to the coming excesses of cybernetic hysteria and deathlessness should they come to pass. Whether *figurative* or *figural*, both forms will perish in an unchecked accelerationist orgasm of global economic abstraction; there will be no concepts and no bodies on a space station orbiting a dead Earth, which is busy mining cryptocurrencies until the Sun engulfs it in a supernova.

While both terms are useful, the need for a third is implicit in this notional dyad of painterly disposition. The third term must synthesize the literal and material qualities of the body with the aspirational and speculative realm of concepts in order to stand against the evacuating power of AI. This term must be malleable, resilient, entirely porous, and totally delimited.

In searching for a synthesis of the figurative and figural, one must recall painting's unique powers as a primitive form of cultural technology that perhaps best expresses our collective intelligence for compression (compression as in collapse and conflation of both the feeling of spaces and, reciprocally, the space of feelings). Any glance at painting, transculturally or transhistorically, reveals this prodigious capacity. Whether it be the methodical and hypnotic paintings of the Aboriginal Dreamtime or the dense geometric space of Persian miniatures, a profound collapse of experience is

condensed and assembled on the surface as both a figurative and figural microgeography. Painting's sensitivity (its ability to catch and restructure experience) is analogous to our largest and most outwardly facing organ, the skin. The third term could then be called *membrane*, because it is biological (figurative) but also conceptual (figural).

In order to explore the third term, membrane, we will need to borrow some of the maniacal powers of AI to appreciate its potential scope. While new algorithmic forms are constantly emerging from the frontiers of computer science as they relate to the mass culling and reconfiguration of information, their current manifestations fall short of profound aesthetic experience. For instance, Google's Deep Dream is a computer vision program that uses a convolutional neural network to find and enhance patterns in images. However, it ultimately produces things that look less interesting than the average psychedelic ephemera we've had laying around since the 1960s. Similarly, DALL-E mini is a meme generator that draws on statistical patterns gathered from thirty million labeled images to extract connections between words and pixels, but the result is essentially collage for those too lazy to draw. That being said, the process of image creation with these soft forms of AI is profoundly interesting, while the result is predictably banal. In an appreciation for the process and scope of machine learning, we would do well to imitate AI in our own limited way when we try to conceptualize complex things, such as the landscape of painting.

In imagining painting as the most skin-like of our civilizational products in its totality, I invite you to conjure a fantastical topology made from every single painting on Earth formed into a massive membrane, which is like a Möbius loop folding back onto itself infinitely. If we were to walk on its surface and gaze down upon it, we'd wonder if it was the most intricate map ever created or an actual territory made manifest by millions of hands pushing trillions of molecules of pigment into hyper-specific geographic formations. Simultaneously, this speculative territory feels us and is felt by us as a sensory organ of incomprehensible scale. This is because the informational matrix of the membrane, like the skin of our bodies, functions as a vast network of exchange and transformation (exchange in the form of sensory data [perception] and transformation in the sense of metabolic activity [conceptualization]). Yet, as skin-like as the painting membrane appears, it is only so in a figural way—as a complex organ through which a tenuous inside and outside is maintained.

Because painting is so vast that we will never fully trace its contours, we will never come to know the shape of its body—and this is to the benefit of the medium and its practitioners. As we make the imperceptible turn on the grand Möbius of painting, we do so continuously without passing from an outside to an inside, and yet, paradoxically, the membrane of painting insists that we do precisely this. All of our terms, like speculative objects in a Möbius world, can spontaneously change their orientedness. A lefthanded glove need only be carried along the surface in order for it to become a righthanded glove. In gleaning this feature of our topology-of-all-paintings, we can observe the spontaneous change in the orientations of our concepts and forms: amnesia becomes nostalgia, the apocalyptic becomes transcendent, and the figurative becomes figural. I would argue that this spontaneous reorientation of terms is only meaningful if it is precisely observed and recorded back into the *material* and *ideo-membrane* of painting both *figuratively* and *figurally*.



Mosaic from a Roman Villa in Sentinum
(present day Italy)
depicting Aion holding a Möbius strip, ca. 200–250 CE.

MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Exhibition: Alex Carver
Engineer Sacrifice

Location: 88 Eldridge Street, New York, NY 10002

Dates: October 27 – December 22, 2022

Reception: Thursday, October 27th, 6–8pm

Miguel Abreu Gallery is pleased to announce the opening, on Thursday, October 27th, of Alex Carver's *Engineer Sacrifice*, his second one-person exhibition at the gallery. The show will be held at our 88 Eldridge Street location.

Across thirteen paintings ranging from the monumental to the intimately self-scaled, Alex Carver's new work warps the world of contemporary painting. Marking an evolution in his practice of indirect image production, *Engineer Sacrifice* is inextricably—even agonizingly—bound up with the futurities of human imagination and our tenuous relation to the past. Proposing a confrontation with painting as both a familiar and dissimilar body, these works reveal themselves as surrogate skins contoured to the material world that gather to themselves the apparitions by which we re-envision, reconfigure, and remake it.

As the show's distorted and fragmented emanations of appropriated image content make apparent, our desires to refashion the world are never merely aspirational nor naively utopian. Continuing his interest in the viscosity of body processing, Carver derives his imagery from two references depicting technologies servicing torture and execution: the quasi-mythical Brazen Bull and the Catherine Wheel, an historical ubiquity throughout Europe from antiquity to early modernity. A phrase like 'drawn and quartered' takes on new resonance in light of Carver's work, tracing the dismemberment of bodies—surgically, punitively, and sacrificially—as a practice that transits from cultural incarnations of authority to graphic indices and icons of the cyclical creation and decreation of human bodies.

Taken as raw material for artmaking, these images become engines for the collapse and reconstitution of painting itself. Orienting us to the *figural* rather than the figurative, toward the space of forms that mediate human interaction with the world rather than representations of that world, Carver guides us into new aesthetic experiences of an increasingly fraught human becoming. Figurative aspects that are receding, dissolving, combusting and breaking apart enmesh within a process prefiguring uncertain futures. As such, the new image at work throughout *Engineer Sacrifice* generates itself as a conceptual body which is only skin, our techno-cultural cognate or bodiless prosthesis.

Stretched as conventional canvasses, these skins exhibit perforations, exposing gessoed ground that appears among the meshes of circuitry akin to voids in a digital point cloud. In scanning technology, point clouds refer to coordinates in space that correlate to the objects being observed, translating them computationally into a three-dimensional map. In Carver's paintings they are notations of the Engineer: matter is sublimated to the virtual; material solidity metamorphoses spontaneously into a rationalized gaseous state. The traces of ground obscure this cartographic radar, casting opacities that refuse the complete technologic capture of bodies in flux. In this way, they are like stigmata in the painting's membrane, a return of the sacral that preserves some semblance of the body from its total appropriation as data. *Engineer Sacrifice* relocates the human haunted by its own advancement, navigating an unsteady figural terrain shaped through the harrowing interplay of eclipse and renewal.

Alex Carver (b. 1984, Boise, Idaho) lives and works in New York and Boise. He earned an MFA from Columbia University, and a BFA from the Cooper Union. In 2021, Carver's work was featured in Potent Stem, his second solo exhibition at Kraupa-

Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, as well as Our Other Us, the 4th Art Encounters Biennial in Timisoara, Romania, curated by Mihnea Mircan and Kasia Redzisz. He had his first solo show, External Fixation, at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, in 2019. In 2018, he participated in the collaborative two-part painting show Bubble Revision, Miguel Abreu Gallery and Call Out Tools, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler with Avery Singer and Pieter Schoolwerth. His debut solo exhibition, Cell, was held at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler in 2018. Carver's collaborative feature film with Daniel Schmidt, The Unity of All Things, was presented at the 2013 Locarno International Film Festival, Switzerland. Other film works have been shown in international venues and festivals such as Tate Modern (London, 2014), Berlinale (2015), and the Vancouver International Film Festival (2013), among others.

Engineer Sacrifice, his second solo exhibition with Miguel Abreu Gallery, is now on view at 88 Eldridge Street.

For more information or for visuals, please contact the gallery.

Miguel Abreu Gallery
88 Eldridge Street
New York, NY 10002

Telephone: 212.995.1774
Email: post@miguelabreugallery.com

New hours: Wednesday – Sunday, 10AM to 6PM or by appointment
Subway: F to East Broadway; B, D to Grand Street; J, M, Z to Delancey / Essex Street

Interviews on a New Spatial Paradigm in the Digital Age

Zoe Stillpass

Media theorist Lev Manovich has written, "The computer era introduces a different paradigm. This paradigm is concerned not with time but with space."¹ Indeed, departing from prior emphases on medium specificity and flatness, artists and theorists have developed novel approaches to thinking about space in visual imagery. Through the remediation of established media, software offers artists previously unthought-of ways to configure space. These spatial reconstructions correspond to a recent reconsideration of the relationship between the human and technology. While the digital regime provides new democratic means of producing and distributing artworks, concomitantly, it establishes forms of control administered through a global network and through the free flow of international capital. Whether for good or for bad, the digital has proliferated and permeated all of social space, leaving us in a situation where there appears to be no inside or outside.² In the following series of interviews, I asked several artists about the role of digitalization in spatially composing an image. All of the interviewees are preeminent American contemporary artists who have shown extensively around the world. While these are not the only innovators who are transforming visual representation, I chose these particular artists for several reasons. First, although they have all received international recognition in the contemporary art world, they are lesser known by European art historians and academics. Secondly, they each work in different media and employ disparate techniques. Finally, they each approach spatial composition and the digital from their own unique angle.

1 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge (MA), 2001, p. 145.

2 According to media theorist McKenzie Wark, our social reality is manufactured by the "military entertainment complex," creating an all-encompassing "gamespace" with no inside or outside. See, for example, McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory*, Cambridge (MA), 2007.

ALEXANDER CARVER

Alexander Carver (b. 1984) lives and works in New York City. Carver is a graduate of Cooper Union, New York, and received his MFA from Columbia University, New York. Carver's work has been exhibited and screened in international venues and in festivals including Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York; Tate Modern, London; Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin; Lincoln Center, New York; Berlinale, Berlin; Biennale of the Moving Image, Geneva; the Melbourne International Film Festival, Melbourne; the Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York; the Locarno International Film Festival, Locarno; and the Vancouver International Film Festival, Vancouver. Carver's works are held in the collections of the Ringier Collection, Zurich; the Langen Foundation, Neuss; and the GOME Art Foundation, Hong Kong.

What digital tools have you used in your paintings? In these works, you have made specific references to the software program AutoCAD. Have you used this and other digital programs? And if so, what spatial effects have resulted that would not have been possible through traditional means?

In the past, I have worked for architects and as a contractor. I think this is the principal reason for my interest in the built environment and the attendant computer-based design aids used by architects. Because paintings hang on the interior building envelope, they are always framed by and contextualized within architectural space. Historically, there are many interesting ways in which paintings, either as discrete objects or murals, refer to their built-environment context. Altarpieces, for instance, would sometimes invoke a trompe l'oeil effect that not only mirrored some of the architectural elements surrounding it but also imitated the lighting conditions and shadows that illuminated the cathedral itself. This would produce the effect of a 'virtual' extension of the 'actual' space. In this regard, painting prefigured virtual reality.



3 Alexander Carver, *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*, oil on linen, 73 11/16 x 109 x 1 2/16 inches, 2020, photo: Holger Niehaus

In my current painting practice (fig. 3), I often think through diagrammatic and spatial concepts using Sketchup, Photoshop, and Illustrator. I am partly interested in these programs for the interface logic that they impose upon one's thinking. The layering and compression of digital tools make possible certain kinds of compositional density and visual disorientation. I then interpolate this computer-based exploration into an analog process achieved with paint. One of my favorite ways to do this is by cutting elaborate stencils out of vinyl from vector files I generate myself using Photoshop and Illustrator. In addition to interpolating digital space into painted space, I also enjoy exploring analog painting processes that invoke or imitate digital effects. I often achieve this with frottage: I place objects behind the canvas and make an impression of them with oil paint. This creates an uncanny effect that appears hyper-dimensional and highly rendered but is also entirely flat and devoid of any conventional strategies used in painting to achieve 'realism.' This indexical mark-making leaves a painterly ghost of an actual object on the membrane of the canvas. This process is analogous to the indexical data-points in 3D scanning technology that create a digital facsimile of an actual object.

As you mentioned, you have mixed digital processes with analog means of silkscreen printing, creating frottage with oil paint, and hand-cutting stencils. At the same time, your paintings incorporate dismembered bodies, appropriated legal texts, computer screens, patents, and architectural diagrams. Could you speak about how, through these various techniques and this imagery, your paintings present a space that mixes together the three modes of place distinguished by Henri Lefebvre, that is, the mentally conceived, the subjectively perceived, and the socially lived?

I was introduced to Lefebvre in a graduate school. Lefebvre's book *The Production of Space*¹⁵ was hugely revelatory to me at the time, especially as I was considering pursuing more of an urbanist line of artistic practice. After graduate school, I took a hiatus from the studio and engaged in a couple of collaborative film projects with a very close friend, Daniel Schmidt. My excitement for critical geography ended up influencing the film projects I coauthored with Daniel in their embrace of disorientating narratives about globalism and transculturation. I am attracted to filmmaking for many of the same reasons I am to painting. Both mediums have an immense, though different, capacity of compressing space, that is, all three modes of place differentiated by Lefebvre. In part, I invoke these different spatial-conceptual frameworks to challenge the medium of painting itself, to ask what is possible materially and conceptually from this primitive cultural technology. In framing painting as a cultural technology, I like to think of it as an interface that mediates between different spatial realities, between certain civilizations, bodies, or information and their representation. Painting has a membrane quality; it is a kind of skin or immunological organ that regulates what is rejected and absorbed by the body, what things are captured and what

15 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith (trans.), Oxford, 1991.

things are repelled. Moreover, the multiple layers of my compositions evoke surgical grafting. For me, there is something stupid, or wrong-headed, about eroticizing legal text or architectural diagrams, especially through painting. I attempt to integrate material processes (frottage, stenciling) and content (legal text, architectural diagrams, medieval woodcuts) that are not particularly well suited to the medium of painting, at least by conventional standards. In this way, I hope to find novel forms.

One image, in particular, stood out to me years ago; it was one of the main reasons I returned to painting after making films. The image is an unattributed woodblock from the fifteenth century, likely Germanic in origin. It depicts a brutal execution by saw, whereby a person is cut in two while suspended from a wooden frame. This scene appealed to my fascination with bodies as raw material for the state as well as for art. I imagined this split body, both alive and dead, contained within a discrete frame as an icon to exploit via the medium of painting. For me, the split body suggested the slippery relationship between the virtual and the actual as well as the mental and social spaces through which we conceive our bodies. After all, bodies are entirely material and entirely conceptual and, in both cases, wholly pluralistic in their culturally subjective terms. When it comes to spatiality and the body, I tend towards a constructivist viewpoint largely influenced by Lefebvre. Thus, it makes sense for me to invoke artifacts and abstractions such as legal texts, which are tied to a particular civilization. For me, there exists an imaginary viewer who stands on the other side of my paintings at some unknowable future moment, and the presence of these artifacts and abstractions becomes a banal marker of time, not time in the sense of physics but time in the sense of culturally subjective spatiality.

In the exhibits *Call Out Tools* and *Bubble Revision*, along with Pieter Schoolwerth and Avery Singer you presented a series of works that picture a futuristic park that the press release describes as “a radically new kind of public space that reimagines the demands of heterogeneous use.”¹⁶ Could you explain how your paintings counter the digital aspects of the bureaucratic planning and architecture and the extensive surveillance that sustain our contemporary “society of control”?¹⁷

Pieter Schoolwerth had the idea that we should all work from the same digital model for our group exhibition as a way to disrupt the banality of simply exhibiting our works alongside one another. As the three of us had all used digital tools in different capacities before in our work, it made sense to pursue a common digital space from which we could each generate paintings.

I had just finished my first solo gallery exhibition, which I designed around a satirical diagram of a hypothetical prison complex powered passively by green

16 Carver, Schoolwerth, and Singer, *Call Out Tools*, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, 29 September–24 November 2018. *Bubble Revision* was a sequel collaborative exhibition, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 4 November–23 December 2018. The quote is from the press release of *Call Out Tools*, written by Mike Cavuto, URL: https://www.k-t-z.com/exhibitions/15-call-out-tools-alexander-carver-pieter-schoolwerth-avery-singer/press_release_text (accessed 14 December 2020).

17 Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” in *October* 59, 1992, pp. 3–7.

energy.¹⁸ For these paintings, I grafted different ideological systems and design patents into a single elegant material flow. The result was a modular prison powered by naturally occurring bioelectricity harnessed from a large monocultural banana plantation, which itself was entirely sustained by the water and nutrients contained within the prisoners' sewage. In essence, the show revolved around the node of the prison toilet.

I wanted to continue this exploration by taking the public toilet as a theme for our group show. However, this turned out to be a bit limiting for both Pieter and Avery, so we evolved the virtual space into more of a public park in keeping with the kinds of overly designed large-scale developments that have already significantly reshaped the landscape of New York City, like Hudson Yards, the High Line, and Diller Park (currently under construction). I spent around a hundred hours designing a virtual development that consisted of large water-collecting cisterns, public baths, and conspicuously transparent public toilets. We were essentially celebrating the very dysfunctions we were attempting to satirize.

My paintings for this show became an extension of the design process. For me, what is interesting about the works I made for these shows is not so much how they counter the problems of bureaucratic planning or the perversity of large-scale urban development lensed through computer-aided design, but more so how they seem to embody these very problems. The works are subversive insofar as they represent the problem without presenting any kind of visible critique.

In recent years, you have depicted modern robotic techniques of surgery as an allegory of new digital means of representation. These images are interlaced with woodcuts rendered in reversed ground depicting medieval surgical procedures. How would you describe the very strange spatial effects that result from this strategy?

For my first solo exhibition in New York, I made a series of paintings that were inspired by biomedical technology and imaging.¹⁹ This pivot from earlier subject matter was a way for me to refocus on the body and narrow the architectural frame surrounding it from something quite sprawling like a prison complex or urban development to the more intimate and tightly controlled space of the surgical theatre. During this time, I began thinking about surgery, particularly modern surgical techniques and how I found them somewhat analogous to my idiosyncratic painting processes. While many artists now build their practices directly around the epistemological and perhaps ontological shift caused by the internet and the proliferation of virtual space, I would like to explore a more ambiguous zone where the material body is still very much the center of my work. While I do consider myself a figurative painter, I would like to believe that I am pursuing a painting that is less dependent on previous historically known styles of representation.

18 Carver, *Cell*, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, 10 March–14 April 2018.

19 Carver, *External Fixation*, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 3 November–22 December 2019.

Perversely, I have been referencing medieval woodblocks as an extension of or amendment to the sawed figure that I discussed above. While, at first, I wanted to cut the body apart, I am now exploring some of the contradictions of that act through the analogy of surgery. In the works you are referring to, I pursued a found-image painting, whereby I superimposed and interweaved two ready-made images to produce a third, destabilized space. I achieved this through a procedure of painting in layers by which a complex photographic space is rendered down into thick black lines of oil paint laid over a reverse ground medieval woodblock. In effect, this process is a graft of two readymade images in a wholly unoriginal mode of postmodern stylistic juxtaposition. Bizarrely, the resulting image completely transcends this part/whole problem and produces a genuinely novel spatial condition. They are at once textile-like tapestries in their proto-painting, proto-digital effect as much as they are entirely emblematic of a new kind of screen space or holography that we associate with advanced biomedical scans.

Press Release
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ALEXANDER CARVER
Potent Stem
19.06.2021-21.08.2021

Potent Stem is Alexander Carver's second solo exhibition at the gallery.

The works presented in the exhibition expand upon Carver's accumulating ecology of images, including patent documents, medieval wood cuts, depictions of bodily injury, as well as advanced bio-medical research. Utilized as raw material, these references are compressed into a painterly pictorial space through techniques of frottage and stenciling achieved by machine, hand and brush. In *Potent Stem*, Carver introduces processes of cross-species hybridization through cellular transplantation. A procedure called decellularization employs spinach and parsley leaves as scaffolding for human stem cells, so that they may ultimately become a piece of your damaged heart someday.

Two separate and contrasting spaces within the exhibition demarcate distinct modes of painting. In a conventionally white space, a lush and decorative botanical theme persists, threaded with references to semio-capitalist reproduction in the form of bio-medical patents for advanced grafting procedures and tools, and diagrammatic marginalia that refer to the implicit architectural possibilities of such research when scaled. Conversely, a black room contains paintings consumed with references to corporal punishment and bizarre medieval experiments born out of the necessity of medical intervention due to the systematization of amputation and disfigurement under pre-modern legal systems.

Alexander Carver (b. 1984) lives and works in New York. Carver is a graduate of Cooper Union, New York and received his Masters of Fine Arts from Columbia University, New York. Alexander Carver's work has been exhibited and screened in international venues and in festivals including the 4th Art Encounters Biennial, Timisoara (upcoming, 2021); Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin (2021); Helena Anrather, New York (2021); Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York (2019); Tate Modern (2018); Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin (2018); Lincoln Center, New York (2016); Berlinale, Berlin (2015); Biennale of Moving Image, Geneva (2014); Melbourne International Film Festival, Melbourne (2014); BAM, New York (2014); Locarno International Film Festival, Locarno (2013); Vancouver International Film Festival, Vancouver (2013).

Alexander Carver's work is in the collections of Ringier Collection, Zurich; Langen Foundation, Neuss; GOME Art Foundation, Hong Kong.



STIFTUNG KUNSTFONDS

MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Exhibition: Alexander Carver
External Fixation

Location: 88 Eldridge Street, New York, NY 10002

Dates: November 3 – December 22, 2019

Reception: Sunday, November 3, 6-8 pm

Miguel Abreu Gallery is pleased to announce the opening, on Sunday, November 3rd, of *External Fixation*, Alexander Carver's first solo exhibition at the gallery. The show will be on view at our 88 Eldridge Street location.

Surgery is barbaric. The intensity of surgery is often measured by the relative openness of the body cavity during the procedure. "Open" procedures, as they are called, are inherently more traumatic on the body. By contrast, through the use of hyper-articulate micro-instrumentation (laparoscopic, endoscopic, and robotic), minimally invasive surgery deploys a variety of methodologies that circumvent the previous necessity to incise the body. In the case of certain extreme injuries, such as shattered bones, the setting of a fractured limb may be aided by a metal structure – known as external fixation – in order to properly heal. Penetrating through the body's soft tissue and affixing bone fragments by a threaded end, surgical rods hold the shards in the correct composition.

Painting as a primitive form of cultural technology is abundant with all too-exploited analogies for the body and its viscera. Often, invoking such a metaphor, contemporary painting is described through anthropomorphic terms such as zombie or cadaver. These may be adequate terms for the suspension of the medium, analogically speaking, between autopsy and undead animism. If the pseudo-problems of painting were anthropomorphized would they be symptoms of an ailment?

The indirect address of the canvas in these works is meant to parallel the contradictions of bodily intervention in modern surgery. Through frottage with oil, an indexical but allusive glimpse of creased membranes and woven fabric is rendered in paint on the surface. The woven support of the canvas appears throughout the work as painterly viscera in the form of floating screens and fetid, bile-colored forms that defy classification. Lines cut by hand and machine both create space, anchor form to the picture plane compositionally, and also cancel themselves as painterly gestures. Near *trompe l'oeil* marks of paint masquerade informally both as pieces of acid-green tape and neon-blue vinyl stencils (a material used in the production of the paintings). Conversely, images of bone and fat produced by the most advanced x-ray imaging technology are translated to canvas by a gelatinous transfer process alongside robotic surgical instruments whose patents have recently expired.

—Alexander Carver

Alexander Carver (b. Boise, Idaho, 1984) lives and works in New York. He is a graduate of Cooper Union, and earned an MFA from Columbia University. His work has been recently exhibited in the collaborative two-part painting show Bubble Revision, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York (2018) and Call Out Tools, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin (2018), with Pieter Schoolwerth and Avery Singer. His debut solo exhibition, Cell, was held at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler. His collaborative feature film with Daniel Schmidt, The Unity of All Things, was presented at the Locarno International Film Festival in Switzerland. Other film works have been shown in international venues and festivals such as Tate Modern, London (2014), Berlinale (2015), and the Vancouver International Film Festival (2013).

Waving the Flag of Naughtiness: “Friends with Benefits” at Film Society of Lincoln Center

BY CRAIG HUBERT | FEBRUARY 05, 2016



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A still from Benjamin Crotty's "Fort Buchanan."
(Courtesy Film Society of Lincoln Center)

Benjamin Crotty, Gabriel Abrantes, Daniel Schmidt, and Alexander Carver — the filmmakers whose work is the focus of the new series “Friends with Benefits,” at the Film Society of Lincoln Center — don’t actually make films, at least not in the traditional sense: Their creations straddle a line, appealing to both a movie and an art audience, suited equally to a black box and a white cube. And although the four share formal and narrative concerns and techniques, occupying a middle ground between Andy Warhol avant-garde and television movies of the week, and collaborate in different combinations, they are reluctant to define themselves as a movement, or a school, or even a group.

“There’s a strong community,” Abrantes admits after prodding. “[But] I don’t think we have the presumption to call ourselves anything that we would brand with a word like ‘mumblecore.’ It’s just a few friends, and I think we have crossed paths long enough.”

The four filmmakers emphasize that those paths are part of a larger creative network within which they situate themselves while also standing somewhat apart. “I think being in conversation with fellow artists and filmmakers [like Ben Rivers, Ben Russell, and Mati Diop], as well as other thinkers, has been, every year, more and more of a substantial and nurturing and inspiring thing,” Schmidt says. “But I feel like the work that we make is pretty different from what Russell or what Rivers does, to a certain extent. But from an alien point of view, it’s similar.”

Abrantes, Crotty, and Carver all started as painters but found the insularity stifling. “I was initially kind of seduced by the solitary, hermetic aspect of painting,” says Crotty, who studied painting at Yale. “And then with time you start to see all the downsides and drawbacks to it.” The collaborative nature of moviemaking was a welcome contrast.

“You’re in the studio alone, and it lost any of the significance that art has for me, which is as a community thing,” says Abrantes. “Film was that.”

While still an undergraduate at Cooper Union, in New York, where he and Carver met while studying art, Abrantes codirected “Olympia I & II” (2006) with Kate Widloski. The nine-minute film sets the tone that imbues much of his later work. It consists of two sections representing two different takes on Manet’s famous painting, with first Widloski and then Abrantes playing the reclining nude, complete with provocative stare. All the dialogue, on screen and off, is dubbed, giving it an extra layer of distance. Both sections subvert the original’s narrative and assumptions about sexual and racial dynamics, engaging in a playful artistic code switching that Carver identifies as a theme running through all four filmmakers’ work.

Abrantes’s next collaborations were with Crotty, with whom he became friends at Le Fresnoy, the National Studio for Contemporary Arts in France. In “Visionary Iraq” (2009), the two play all the roles, including a Portuguese brother and his Angolan half-sister, who are leaving home to join Operation Iraqi Freedom, and their parents. The film resembles both a performance piece — it was shot in a gallery, where Abrantes and Crotty spent a month building the sets and writing the script—and a home movie made by teenagers exploring the fluidly erotic potential of war. In its unrefined campiness, “Visionary Iraq” contrasts strongly with “Liberdade” (2011), in which the two filmmakers, according to Crotty, “wanted to produce a very weird, neutral, Hollywood-ian glaze over the film,” exhibiting an almost total absence of humor.

This pendulum swing between playfulness and gravity is manifested in different ways in the oeuvre of all four artists. In Abrantes’s solo work — “Too Many Daddies, Mommies, and Babies” (2009), “Baby Back Costa Rica” (2011), “Ennui Ennui” (2013), “Taprobana” (2014), and “Freud und Friends” (2015) — humor has been an increasingly dominant element. “Something like ‘Visionary Iraq’ was a reaction to what happened after two decades of postmodernism and people getting sick of art meaning very little in most cases,” the artist says. “I’m exploring comedy right now for a lot of the same reasons — trying to make people laugh because that is almost a firm confirmation that a connection is being made. If

somebody laughs, the thing is working.” This trend is also evident in Abrantes’s collaborations with Schmidt — “A History of Mutual Respect” (2010), “Palaces of Pity” (2011) — where comedic elements coexist with increasingly political statements.

Two recent works by members of the group depart from the earlier ones in actively, and successfully, attempting to meld humor with seriousness. Schmidt and Carver’s “The Unity of All Things,” the most ambitious film in the series, combines science fiction with erotic melodrama in a loose narrative that encompasses particle physics, gender swapping and teenage angst. “On a certain level that film was radically opaque,” Carver says. “There is a lot of humor, but it’s lost on people because there is an austerity to it initially. So I think cinema audiences can watch that film, certain cinema audiences, and see it as very sincere and moving, like the poetic avant-garde, and other cinema audiences can find it very grating, pretentious, and absolutely alienating.”

Similarly, Crotty’s latest work, “Fort Buchanan” — which comprises four sections corresponding to the four seasons, each exploring a different mood—represents an attempt at tragicomedy. The film, which screened at New Directors/New Films last year and will receive a weeklong theatrical release as part of the the Film Society series, “has these extremely hilarious moments but then moments where you’re really connecting with these characters,” says Crotty. To which Abrantes adds, “I think that’s a direction we’re definitely both going.”

Crotty, Abrantes, Schmidt, and Carver are all currently busy with different projects. Carver, who has lately returned to painting, is working with Schmidt on a project whose ultimate form is as yet unclear. Crotty, having just finished his first documentary, is collaborating on a film with James Kienitz Wilkins, another Cooper Union classmate of Abrantes and Carver, and mulling over ideas for a television show. Abrantes, the most prolific of the group, has already completed a new film in collaboration with Ben Rivers and is working on a series for Portuguese television. Like Carver, he has returned to painting and is also making ceramics in his studio, but within something closer to what he calls a “cinematic structure,” with the same sense of collaboration and community.

“We’ve taken it as our mission and with the flag of perversion or naughtiness,” Abrantes says. “It’s a logic to our work that spans the choice of using nonprofessional actors and dubbing a whole film, which is considered wrong. It even guides my interest in ceramics, which is something I’ve never really done before. We’re always doing things wrong as an emancipatory message: Yes, you can be an amateur, you can do all of this stuff. That’s exhilarating.”

Army Wives, Incest and Uncomfortable Racial Politics in “Friends with Benefits,” at the Film Society of Lincoln Center

BY SARAH SAVOLAARA

2.2.16. 12:15pm



Fort Buchanan

Friends with Benefits: An Anthology of Four New American Filmmakers

February 5-11 at the [Film Society of Lincoln Center](#)

The four filmmakers in Lincoln Center’s “Friends with Benefits” retrospective—Benjamin Crotty, Gabriel Abrantes, and Brooklyn residents Daniel Schmidt and Alexander Carver—share an obsessive commitment to distilling the perfect cocktail of high- and low-brow cinema. Amid colonial, literary and scatological pursuits, the directors mine situational satire through deadpan dialogue, locked-off camerawork and anachronistic aesthetics to varying degrees of success. With a weeklong run as the series centerpiece, it is perhaps fitting that Crotty’s *Fort Buchanan* is the most effective and cohesive offering across the six programs. In his feature debut, Crotty

doubles down on Shklovsky's "making strange" device by re-contextualizing dialogue from American soap operas as the stilted bargaining chips amongst a handful of French army wives and husbands, including the protagonist Roger, whose beloved Frank is off waging war in Djibouti. The quotidian aspects of the titular camp, a far cry from "don't ask, don't tell"-dom, are innately queered by this bizarrely direct language and Crotty's disorienting editing tactics—namely his use of extreme close-ups to punctuate a given scene when you least expect it. He has fun with the premise, too, teasing the stereotype of the repressed army wife in waiting by having a slew of characters compete for the affections of Roger's tetchy daughter in a series of amusing seductions.

While Crotty accounts for explorations of gender and sexuality through his narrative framework, such tropes can appear more deliberately put on in the work of his collaborators. American sexual colonialism is the central and only preoccupation of Abrantes and Schmidt's *A History of Mutual Respect*, which sees the two directors playing shallow, blissed-out men in Brasilia on the hunt for "clean girls" to fuck. It's supposed to play as an indictment of the entitled American male abroad, but it trades anger for a low-key absurdism that almost puts the viewer at ease. Abrantes in particular is more comfortable diverting where you'd expect him to push the envelope. His two best films in the series, *Freud und Friends* and *Ennui Ennui*, strut some ribald formal satire of reality TV, Obama and Afghan arms dealers but occasionally trade shock value for a committed response to the issues he probes, like, say, a pantomimed rape scene devolving into a fart joke.



Olympia I & II

On the other hand, his short *Olympia I & II*, co-directed by Katie Widloski, translates the Manet painting into two vignettes primed for optimum discomfort. The first casts Abrantes behind the camera as Olympia's estranged, incestuous sibling, whose gaze and unseen presence function almost as a proxy for the painter; in the second, Abrantes plays the titular prostitute, while his "Mammy" Widloski, done up in blackface, consoles him on a night of slow business, eventually transferring her paint onto his face as they swap spit. The latter reads as a muddled attempt to invert the power dynamic between the women in the painting, imagining the servant as a madam, but it mainly leaves the viewer with an unsettled feeling toward its depiction of race.

As the earliest piece of work in the retrospective, *Olympia I & II* sets forth the group's fascination with incest (Schmidt and Carver's *The Unity of All Things* casts actresses to play brothers in lust), but more crucially, the disconnect between the delivery of language and its intentions. *Olympia* is dubbed and subtitled in Portuguese, while its actors speak in the hushed, collected whispers that become Abrantes's trademark. Both he and Crotty employ the timbre to disquieting effect in *Visionary Iraq*, a

standout short about an incestuous brother (Crotty) and his adopted sister (Abrantes in blackface) on the eve of deployment, which includes the zinger, “I guess, I mean Iraqi democracy is still worth fighting for.” The film is shot in deeply saturated red hues that preempt off-screen bloodshed, and the dialogue—and at times, the picture—is conspicuously out of sync with its subtitles, suggesting a rupture between the characters and their supposed convictions. With sets constructed out of the sort of metallic upholstery found in industrial basements, *Visionary Iraq* is also one of the only lower-budget films showcased in the series. The majority of the works in “Friends With Benefits” feature cross-continental excursions and bold visual effects suggesting that the only way for these four American directors to realize this scope of whimsy was to pack it in and take it abroad.

BOYS TO MEN

Friends with Benefits at Film Society of Lincoln Center

by James N. Kienitz Wilkins

The boys' room, where it all began. After class, they'd gather between the sinks and the stalls in a sordid teen pisshole turned echo chamber of ideas—four friends harmonizing in a perfect acoustical environment, inventing that singular sound which would catapult them to greatness and riches beyond their wildest dreams: mellifluous contemporary fusion riding on four vocal leads. First known as *Unique Attraction*. Soon to be you-know-who.

Minus the music, money, and melanin, I cannot imagine a more useful anecdote to describe the filmmaking quartet of Gabriel Abrantes, Daniel Schmidt, Benjamin Crotty, and Alexander Carver. Lately, they have been hard to separate from their collective identity, a veritable boy band now formalized by a group retrospective, *Friends with Benefits: An Anthology of Four New American Filmmakers*, at the Film Society of Lincoln Center.



Benjamin Crotty, *Fort Buchanan*.

Like a section of graffiti scratched above a urinal, their history is open to interpretation: what came first, who contributed what, where to begin. As a fellow filmmaker and orbiting friend of each, I've been able to take a privileged yet slightly distanced position, forensically analyzing their markings up close, then taking a step back to hear their *a cappella*, clearer than ever, daring me to distinguish each contribution to rapidly growing playlist.

On Bended Knee

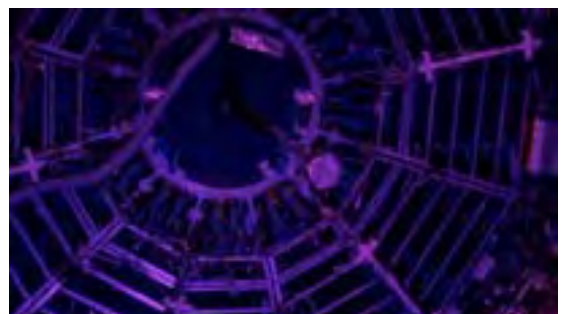
The creative marriage of Gabriel Abrantes and Daniel Schmidt produced *Palácios de Pena* (2011), which is undoubtedly their number-one hit single. While predated by a good number of shorts and recently eclipsed by feature-length endeavors, this 58-minute smorgasbord is like the master decoder ring to the anthology, offering not so much an enlightening take on postcolonialism as an inspired remix of juicy urges, intellectual whims, sexual realizations, and appropriated vibes, ranging from Pasolini's *Salò* (1976) to a pitch-perfect incorporation of Alphaville's hit ballad and video, "Forever Young" (1984). On full reveal here is Abrantes and Schmidt's signature (and financially prudent) technique of replacing dialogue with hushed and creepy dubbing, paired with scenes of beautiful-beyond-belief locations preserved in a golden 16mm that strategically belies their low production budgets, suggesting all is not as it sounds or seems.

A Song for Mama

But wait, did the CD skip a track? Jumping back in time, it was in the *chambre des garçons* of the French post-graduate film school, Le Fresnoy, that Abrantes met Benjamin Crotty, an American living in Paris. In "Slow Learners," a section of their early work, they reveal an embryonic taste for special effects and technical feats, especially in their co-directed films, *Visionary Iraq* (2009), and *Liberdade* (2011), the latter which plays a bit too much like a film school thesis meant to impress Mom and Dad. My favorite is *Visionary Iraq*, with its exchange of conventional grandeur for an unnerving, set-based melodrama offering plenty of glimpses into things to come (Abrantes's clenched, muscly ass is like the fifth Beatle in this anthology). It is an early document of an experimental process coming to life.

Just My Imagination (*Running Away with Me*)

The Unity of All Things (2013), by Schmidt and Alexander Carver, is like a sudden modal shift in the preestablished scales of collaboration. Carver, a visual artist, was hiding in the shadows but not absent, having first met Abrantes in their early days in the washroom of the Cooper Union School of Art. I suspect Carver's intellectual quiverings, combined with Schmidt's laidback and increasingly confident filmmaking and sound design, is what gives *The Unity of All Things* such an



Daniel Schmidt and Alexander Carver, *The Unity of all Things*.

unusual, contrapuntal energy. It is a folding and discursive tale—least of all about the construction of a particle accelerator—that flails to make sense of the world (and itself), while being the most lyrical of the films offered here.

Four Seasons of Loneliness

Crotty's *Fort Buchanan* (2014) is the driest and secretly funniest film. It's also the only film where homosexuality is a simple fact rather than a problem or joke. Although *Fort Buchanan* was also shot in chunky fragments like *Palácios de Pena*, it is a more unified whole authored by a single mind, despite running a mere seven minutes longer, earning it a week-long theatrical run at Lincoln Center.

I get the sense that Crotty's influence upon the group dynamic is a taste for linear stories. While his work seems to be playing with camp, TV genres, and Hollywood tropes, there's hard evidence suggesting all the play is a pretty serious interest, and will result in surprising future endeavors. Still, *Fort Buchanan* is an incredibly *French* movie, with the requisite sexiness and cinéma vérité stylings, offset by the deep nerdiness of its misfits characters (a crew led by a sad-sap cuckold trying to stay relevant to his bored Army husband), which lends the film a truly weird emotional impact.

Water Runs Dry

Schmidt and Carver's *La Isla está Encantada con Ustedes* (2015) and Abrantes's *Ennui Ennui* (2013) are the unusual digital deliveries, filmed in high-end HD. The absence of 16mm film is startling, particularly since all the other films exploit how 16mm looks simultaneously old and new. For better or worse, using 16mm in a digital age has become a special effect that suggests the possibility of the canonical by confusing origins, implying a mystical and elite access to a past revised with the filmmaker in it.

Regardless of the shift in medium of these "films," (to be fair: *La Isla está Encantada con Ustedes* was originally conceived as a two-channel installation), the subject matter remains familiar, almost to the point of self-parody. The recurring melody is yet again a tale of foreign policy with a colonialist-cum-filmmaker-proxy (emphasis on "cum") having a fun/hard-time in an exotic location pointedly defined by its struggle with these issues. Sometimes adding an adaptation or philosophical text to the mix, the result is a sort of auto-politics freed up for hijinks—an approach I can't help but assume is a European flair for having your cake and eating it too. I don't know how to trace the origins of this approach, but the ripples are very active in recent work by contemporaries such as Ben Rivers, Miguel Gomes, and others. In

Relax Your Mind

Abrantes's newest work is a return to form while offering fresh attempts at self-analysis. *Taprobana* (2014) is a scatological adventure about the poet, Camões, commissioned by the film festival, CPH:DOX, in a forced collaboration run off the rails and gone blissfully bananas. As I understand it, Abrantes found himself stranded in Sri Lanka minus the promised collaborator, his friend without benefits, becoming in reality the type of protagonist he so often depicts: a cultural mercenary seizing control to do what he does best.

In an entirely different way, Abrantes creates a version of himself and his unconscious in *Freud und Friends* (2015) that is as hilarious as it is gratingly obnoxious. He is a dedicated provocateur, and it makes sense that this unclassifiable flippancy grew out of the restrictions of another commission: the IndieLisboa film festival asking for a portrait of Lisbon, Portugal. Part of what makes the comedy effective is that Abrantes is actually one of the least neurotic people I know, and his willingness to create such a putrid, idiotic performance lampooning his ethnic heritage seems very honest, openly acknowledging the narcissism and fearlessness which has defined his work to date.

Better Half

Indeed, the identity of these boys is the key to their flow. A globe-trotting nature is what defines their voice. They are “New American” filmmakers who basically don’t work or majorly exhibit in the USA, and even when they do, are at its furthest borders, engaging in far-flung artistic and political histories, and importantly, sources of funding, almost negating their American backgrounds. It has been a fruitful approach, and very likely, necessary. Not only would their work hardly be possible in the dandruffy climate of our bad faith American Indie film environment with its moral/financial incentives, it is *not* possible, given their continued energy to make impossibly ambitious work, despite what record executives call “crossover appeal.”

***Friends with Benefits* will run February 5 – 11 at the Film Society of Lincoln Center.**

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filmcomment

American Friends

A group of playfully iconoclastic collaborators fool around with the essential laws of attraction

By Dan Sullivan (/author/dan-sullivan) in the January/February 2016
(<http://www.filmcomment.com/issue/january-february-2016/>) Issue

It's a cliché that the shock of the new tends to preclude immediate embrace and appreciation. But nowadays there's usually at least one champion for every iconoclast that comes along. That's certainly true for Gabriel Abrantes, Daniel Schmidt, Benjamin Crotty, and Alexander Carver, four filmmakers who, over the past decade, have quickly amassed a shared body of work that intoxicates, titillates, tickles, and scandalizes. But while this nomadic quartet of collaborators have made and screened films all over the world, their reception has often been nearly as complicated as the movies themselves.

The films of Abrantes and co. have challenged outmoded distinctions between “art cinema” and artists’ films, between work that travels the festival circuit (where it has received a mixed response) and work that belongs in a gallery (where they have been warmly welcomed). This might have something to do with the fact that these four Americans (though Abrantes is now based in Lisbon and Crotty in Paris) have, in a relatively short span of time, arrived at a cinema that's all theirs: in which bad taste melds with deft riffs on the history of Western culture and globalization; in which irreverent humor buttresses images of breathtaking beauty; and in which an insolent surfeit of references—to paintings, novels, plays, films, and television series alike—is seamlessly synthesized with the pleasures and ruptures of the unconscious. Parker Tyler wrote in *Underground Film* that “the hardest thing for a very radical idea to do is stay very

radical,” and they seem to have taken this to heart, committing themselves to undertaking an investigation of desire so singular that it demands a closer look before it races too far ahead for us to catch up.

A key distinguishing trait of these young, hopped-up visionaries is the unique character of their association: neither a tightly knit collective in the style of the post-’68 Zanzibar group, nor an informal network of friends (and sometimes rivals) like the French New Wave, their grouping seems more like a swingers’ party, with collaborators freely swapping partners. Of the four, it is Abrantes who has emerged as the group’s most prolific and polarizing figure. He has directed or co-directed at least 18 shorts, featurettes, and omnibus segments since 2006, a sustained frenzy of activity that has yielded an eclectic oeuvre marked by strong continuities, some of which have effectively set the terms for the rest of the group’s explorations of colonialism, culture, and Eros.

Olympia I & II

Written and directed with Katie Widloski, *Olympia I & II* (06) is a diptych staging of the Manet painting by the same name shot on Super 16, as is nearly all of Abrantes’s work. The first half finds Manet’s nude prostitute in repose (played by Widloski) chiding her off-screen brother (Abrantes) for being too chicken to act on his incest fantasies. “If you’re here to fuck your sister, don’t be such a pussy about it,” she taunts him, which he counters with shrill, defensive whining. The second half turns the tables, with a made-up Abrantes now playing the whore, complaining that it’s been a slow night on the job. Widloski reappears as a consoling servant in blackface, fetching him a Coke and ultimately making out with him, smearing grease paint all over his delicately powdered countenance. Unsubtle as its provocation first appears, *Olympia I & II* sneakily advances a moving portrayal of desire run amok and of childlike longing, complicated by the film’s curious if undigested connection between 19th-century European painting and American minstrelsy.

Most of Abrantes’s key shorts have been co-directed. *Visionary Iraq* (09), his first collaboration with Benjamin Crotty, then a classmate at the Tourcoing art school Le Fresnoy, is a ludicrous melodrama (in which the directors play all on-screen roles and the visual schema echoes the Kuchar Brothers and *Suspiria* in equal measure) concerning a Portuguese family whose naïve, incestuous children

enlist in the fight for Iraqi democracy. In *Liberdade* (11), also directed with Crotty, a young Angolan tries to resolve transcultural differences with his Chinese girlfriend and erectile dysfunction in one fell swoop by way of a breathless Viagra heist. *Fratelli* (11), made with Alexandre Melo, is a Pasolinian travesty of *The Taming of the Shrew* that evidences Abrantes's taste for classicism, period costume, and bacchanalia, not to mention his painterly visual sense.

But Abrantes's richest collaboration has been with Daniel Schmidt, with whom he directed the short *A History of Mutual Respect* (10) and the featurette *Palaces of Pity* (11). *A History of Mutual Respect* opens with a slow pan across waterfalls set to Nina Simone bemoaning (in an intro to a live performance of "Who Knows Where the Time Goes") that "time is a dictator, as we all know." The two protagonists (Abrantes and Schmidt) are young men whose search for "a love that's simple, direct, and unmolested" leads them from the stark modernist architecture of Brasilia to a lush jungle where they both pursue a young woman. Culminating in a double-cross revealed via text message, the narrative dissolves into a paroxysm of swirling, frothy water. Abrantes and Schmidt's characters seem to float across continents as if in a trance, their slightly stoned delivery marked by an air of automatism enigmatically suggesting a world of urges and appetites held at bay beneath the lotharios' mellow façades. Heterosexual libido mobilizes these two buddies to scour the globe in hopes of getting their rocks off, but it also severs their fundamental bond: the incestuous couplings of *Olympia I & II* and *Visionary Iraq* have been replaced with a couple of dudes on the prowl, and competition is inevitable. Through its libidinal gamesmanship, *A History of Mutual Respect* seems to posit that it's impossible to attain one's object of desire without throwing an ally under the bus—in other words, betrayal is a precondition for pleasure.

A History of Mutual Respect

Many of the motifs and formal strategies in *A History of Mutual Respect* are overhauled in *Palaces of Pity*. It's ostensibly about a feud between two Portuguese teen sisters following the death of their grandmother (played by Abrantes's real-life grandmother, Alcina) and their subsequent inheritance of a palatial estate saddled with a knotty Fascist legacy, but Abrantes and Schmidt keep the exposition light in favor of supremely inventive visual play. Jaw-dropping landscapes, sumptuous superimpositions, and narcotic

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slow motion elevate a mise en scène littered with dog-headed lawyers, young girls decamping for abyss-like dance clubs, and, in one hallucinatory aside, sensitive knights (Abrantes and Schmidt again) weeping after death sentences are pronounced upon a pair of Moorish homosexuals by a medieval court. *Palaces of Pity* sets the stage for yet another incest scenario, only to subvert that expectation by instead depicting a rivalry between sisters. On the eve of and in the wake of their grandmother's death, the ties between the siblings fray to the point of severing; one of the sisters resolves to kill herself and all of their friends by burning down the castle they've inherited during a sleepover, but the two wind up reconciling amid flames and smoke, their relationship repaired through arson. The erotic connection between the Moorish lovers in the film's middle section is too pure and too attuned to their libidinal drives for their world to bear, so they are condemned to die; the sisters revive their relationship by obliterating their world. *Palaces of Pity* puts a new spin on the duality of creation and destruction, suggesting that both are merely different forms assumed by the erotic imagination within a dialectical chronicle of pleasure and persecution, intimacy and antagonism, lovers and siblings.

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Abrantes would revisit some of the ideas explored in *Palaces of Pity* with *Taprobana* (14), his most fully realized solo work to date. It is an utterly hypnotic sort-of biopic of Portugal's national poet, Luís de Camões, here portrayed as a zonked-out 16th-century libertine whose art will influence centuries of Portuguese culture but whose appetites banish him to Hell. *Taprobana* doesn't delve into the nature of desire as inventively as *Palaces of Pity*, but it does find Abrantes refining his own visionary techniques for rendering it: the scene in which Camões appears before a divine jury to determine whether he's off to Paradise or the Inferno is visually astounding, using CGI in conjunction with Super 16 to conjure an otherworldly Dantean space. Juxtaposing this with shots of Camões reclining and making love in the open air (including a scene of coprophilia that will repulse many but would likely make Georges Bataille proud), Abrantes might not dig as deeply here as in his films with Schmidt, but he nevertheless remains committed to illustrating a history of desire as the force that determines man's fate in both the here and now and the beyond.

After completing *Palaces of Pity*, Schmidt teamed up with Alexander Carver, one of Abrantes's Cooper Union classmates, who, like Abrantes, came to cinema from painting. Together they made *The Unity of All Things* (13), a feature-length, science-fiction-inflected dissertation on yearning that rates among the group's very best and most visually accomplished works. Shot with a patchwork of Super 16 and Super 8 in opulent locations in China, Switzerland, and the U.S. (including particle colliders in Beijing, Geneva, and Long Island), the film's narrative follows a group of physicists involved in the construction of a new accelerator on the Mexican border. *The Unity of All Things* is replete with startling and ravishing conjunctions of image and sound, darkness and light, the sea and the stars: balancing its cosmic sense of scale with an unwaveringly dreamy atmosphere, the film argues for desire as the metaphysical ground underlying all phenomena—including that which belongs to the supposedly objective domain of science.

The Unity of All Things

The incest theme is refreshed in *The Unity of All Things* through Schmidt and Carver's simultaneously sensual and cerebral approach. The brazen portrayal of sexually involved siblings that marked *Olympia I & II* and *Visionary Iraq* is reconfigured as a tender, almost innocent attempt by the lead scientist's sons to reconcile their internal contradictions (suggested in part by their being played by women) and figure out what exactly their bodies want, in order to decide whether to own the taboo or renounce it. Thus, the film curiously ends up being a kind of coming-of-age tale centered on the acquisition of sexual identity in parallel with quantum physics' quest for the fundamental truth of matter.

Schmidt and Carver followed *The Unity of All Things* with *The Island Is Enchanted with You* (14), a 28-minute nonnarrative meditation on the ties between colonialism and carnality. This work, which exists as both a film and a two-channel video installation, collapses together a vision of imperialist exploitation and libidinal revolt in 16th-century Puerto Rico with a host of arcane theses about the emergence of public health campaigns in the 19th century. But *The Island Is Enchanted with You* intends to arouse rather than lecture; it features copious slo-mo, mystifying CGI, an island capable of speech, and a musical interlude set to reggaeton singer El Joey's "Fantasia Sexual" that may be one of the most unexpected and delightful moments in recent cinema. Unlike *The Unity of All Things*,

this film avoids making a grandiose statement about desire, despite its self-consciously heavy use of loaded signifiers (contemporary pop music, period garb, etc.). Instead, it is an immersive, historical snapshot of the pleasures Western imperialism and exoticism has sought through contact with foreign beings, places, and forces, and the complicated consequences of those encounters.

Following his own collaborations with Abrantes, Crotty went solo for his debut feature, *Fort Buchanan* (14). This sui generis homefront soap opera chronicles the sexual intrigues among a makeshift community of randy husbands and wives living in the woods outside a fictitious U.S. military base in Alsace. Roger (Andy Gillet, of Eric Rohmer's *The Romance of Astrea and Celadon*) is struggling to raise his teenage daughter, Roxy (Iliana Zabeth, who was in Bertrand Bonello's *House of Tolerance*, as were several of the film's other actresses), in the absence of his husband, Frank (French soap star David Baiot), who is stationed in Djibouti. Roxy is eager for sexual initiation, which two of the service wives, Pamela (Pauline Jacquard) and Denise (Judith Lou Lévy, also the film's producer), compete to carry out. Meanwhile, Justine (filmmaker Mati Diop, a classmate of Abrantes and Crotty at Le Fresnoy) has her eyes on hunky Guillaume (Guillaume Palin), willfully disregarding his preference for dudes. This ensemble eventually takes a by turns leisurely and chaotic trip to visit Frank, followed by a melancholic final act that details the soldiers' return home and the closure of the base.

Fort Buchanan

Fort Buchanan is both emotionally astute and seriously funny, and draws upon an eclectic constellation of references: Rohmer films, reality shows, and episodic television (Crotty sourced and collaged nearly all of the dialogue from a vast archive of teleplays). Crotty expands upon the exploration of libidinal forces by Abrantes et al. by recasting it as burlesque, at once silly and sincere, built atop a complex pop-cultural matrix. *Fort Buchanan* suggests that our understanding of desire is nothing more than our familiarity with its cultural representations—that its truth is a matter of artifice and reference. Postmodern, for sure, and yet no less moving for being so.

The gang's forthcoming projects—a collaboration between Abrantes and Ben Rivers, entitled *The Hunchback*; a long-gestating feature co-directed by Abrantes and Schmidt; a feature-length tale of

forbidden love to be co-written by Crotty and experimental filmmaker James N. Kienitz Wilkins (another Cooper Union alumnus) —promise to further enlarge the scope of their shared project. While it may be difficult for a radical idea to remain radical, these four filmmakers have already demonstrated that they have enough tricks up their sleeves to keep things very interesting from here on out. Their admirers and detractors should consider themselves warned.

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is the assistant programmer at the Film Society of Lincoln Center.

Embracing the Sublime and the Idiotic: 5 Questions with the Filmmakers of “Friends with Benefits”



by [Whitney Mallett](http://filmmakermagazine.com/author/whitney-mallett/) (<http://filmmakermagazine.com/author/whitney-mallett/>) in [Directors](http://filmmakermagazine.com/category/interviews/directors/) (<http://filmmakermagazine.com/category/interviews/directors/>), [Festivals & Events](http://filmmakermagazine.com/category/festivals-events/) (<http://filmmakermagazine.com/category/festivals-events/>), [Interviews](http://filmmakermagazine.com/category/interviews/) (<http://filmmakermagazine.com/category/interviews/>) on Feb 5, 2016

When it comes to both geography and genre, the loose collective of American filmmakers made up of Gabriel Abrantes, Alexander Carver, Benjamin Crotty, and Daniel Schmidt favor radical destabilization. Their films are hard to categorize. They're set in an array of countries, including France, Djibouti, Iraq, Puerto Rico, and underneath the US-Mexico border, and they're not quite family drama, not quite political farce, and not quite science-fiction, though they borrow elements from each. The scenarios in their films often interrogate post-9/11 geopolitics and the legacy of colonization, but at the same time, the filmmakers approach these subjects with an absurd sense of humor that undercuts any self-seriousness.

Anchoring their early career retrospective at the Lincoln Center Film Society, which kicks off this weekend, [“Friends with Benefits”](http://www.filmlinc.org/series/friends-with-benefits-an-anthology-of-four-) (<http://www.filmlinc.org/series/friends-with-benefits-an-anthology-of-four->

[new-american-filmmakers/](#) (Feb. 5-11), is the U.S. theatrical release of Crotty's feature *Fort Buchanan*, which played at Rotterdam and Locarno in 2015. The film, very reminiscent of Eric Rohmer, follows a group of French military wives and gay husbands navigating the distance between their partners stationed in Djibouti. Other highlights from the program include Abrantes's short comedy *Ennui Ennui* (2013), featuring drones, warlords, and slapstick humor, and Carver and Schmidt's sci-fi tone poem *The Unity of All Things* (2013), a feature about queer incest and particle physicists. I talked to Abrantes, Carver, Crotty, and Schmidt about their collective body of work and they chose to answer the questions in one voice.

Filmmaker: You're working in a lot of different languages in these films: English, French, Portuguese, Cantonese, etc. Obviously there are specific histories and circumstances for each of these choices, but altogether, how does this multi-lingual texture add to the sense of post-globalism in your collective body of work?

Abrantes-Carver-Crotty-Schmidt: The plurality of languages in our films is a byproduct of our desire to work with subjects, identities, and histories that are marginal to dominant U.S. cinema. Our films are often developed from absurd or convoluted premises. For example, taking dialogue from popular American TV dramas and translating and transposing it onto a story set in a queer colony of French bohemian army wives. Or by making a pastoral science fiction set in the United States, but populated predominantly with East Asian women where the dialogue in the film is mostly in Cantonese and about particle physics and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Or by making a film about a re-staging of the Aristophanes comedy *The Birds* set in modern-day Haiti. These are a few examples of how we start with highly decentered plot lines. Because of these tendencies, our films have a troubling if not anarchic relationship to identity, politics, and history.

This instability is very evident in the use of language. The dialogue is meant to be comedic in its unnerving relationship to the look of the films which sometimes feel self-serious. Most of our films are dubbed with the actors recording their voices in a hushed whisper next to the microphone. This creates a disquieting and sometimes funny separation of voice and body that highlights the artifice of performance. It has a ridiculous effect, giving the

impression that we are putting words into their mouths. This ventriloquizing is further complicated by the appropriations and transpositions of different cultural subjects and narratives onto one another. We don't think this is meant as a metaphor for the globalization but is rather a play with the expectations of what a "minor" world cinema may look or feel like.

Filmmaker: How do you approach race and casting, especially considering, I imagine, that some of these films are cast primarily from among your friends and acquaintances?

ACCS: We have often cast non-professional actors. Sometimes they are our friends and sometimes they are people we meet in the places we shoot. This comes from our interest in working with people who have a more innocent or eccentric relationship to the camera than a professional actor. At times these decisions are motivated by an ethical desire to give screen time to subjects and people who don't appear often enough in dominant cinema, and other times, this decision is aesthetic in that it complicates the performance style of our films as we mentioned.

This sensibility is very influenced by Pier Paolo Pasolini's obsession with casting the "saints," "christs," and "madonnas" in his films from the pimps, thieves, and prostitutes of Rome's subproletariat. Where Pasolini may have had a more ardent belief that this fetishism for the authenticity of poor boys was noble, we have more conflicted feelings about our desire to make films about things beyond our immediate realm of experience.

We also have a genuine aesthetic fascination with the juxtaposition of different performance styles. Utilizing both professional and nonprofessional performers creates a dynamism where the purported authenticity of feeling is somewhat confused or destabilized.

Filmmaker: History is a subject of a lot of your collective work. Does that inform your decision to use analog mediums and 16mm for many of these films?

ACCS: We are drawn to the sensuality of analog film and the contrast that it has with the more alienating aspects of our work like dubbed dialogue, or the bombast and irony of the storylines. It also creates some practical

constraints and freedoms that we find useful in structuring our predominantly “on-location” shoots. We don’t shoot very much — sometimes only one take. The improvisational method of our film productions is very apparent in our final edits. The resulting amateur feel works best when it deflates some of the grandiosity or esoterism that can feel stagnant or airless.

— **Filmmaker:** There’s taboos like incest and erotic defecation in many of your films. I feel like there’s a universalist tendency in your work to be like one love, we humans, of all races, in all time periods, are horny perverts. Why is it significant to show the way we interact based on sex, power, and perversion?

— **ACCS:** The prevalence of scatological and fetishistic elements can be seen as a somewhat cautious inheritance of ’60s and ’70s libertine culture. But the prevalence of sexuality in our films also comes from a skeptical impulse that renders the political as corrupted or overshadowed by biological imperatives and the perversions of power. This again parallels Pasolini’s ultimate skepticism about his own valorization of the poor which is evident in his film *Salò*, where the sexual brutality of sadistic aristocrats toward innocent youths is unrelenting. We try to temper the cruelty in our films with the ambiguity of complacency and victimhood. This is perhaps the most suspect and unifying aspect of our films.

Filmmaker: You’ve curated this program of queer films titled “Lifestyle Porn” at the Light Industry and Spectacle Theater, that’s framed as tracing a change in homoeroticism in cinema, from marginalized otherness to bougie lifestyle fetishism. Though you don’t use this word exactly, I think you’re getting at a depoliticization. With this in mind, do you aim to frame your own films as politicized or at the very least formally ideologically challenging?

ACCS: Our films are an attempt to meaningfully depoliticize, diffuse, or obfuscate. This is not to say that we don’t constantly reference and engage with complex politicized subjects and histories in our films. We believe that “depoliticization” and “politicization” are not straight-forward concepts and that in the case of art they are especially convoluted. This lack of understanding about what political or apolitical art may or may not be is a central concern to us. Our films struggle with these moral complexities and in

the process often flirt with nihilism. We continuously lampoon the bad politics of our films with a comedic force that embraces the sublime and idiotic with equal measure.

Sophisticated Engineering on Notebook

Sophisticated Engineering

Exploring the Film Society of Lincoln Center's series "Friends with Benefits: An Anthology of Four New American Filmmakers."

[Alice Stoehr](#) 05 Feb 2016



Taprobana

"These poets are so intelligent," notes King Philip II of Spain toward the end of Gabriel Abrantes' *Taprobana* (2014). "They put a sex scene in the end, and I forget I didn't understand the rest. Such sophisticated engineering." He's talking about the Portuguese national epic *Os Lusíadas*, but he could as well be describing Abrantes' eclectic body of work. The Lisbon-based filmmaker's steady output of avant-garde shorts holds together a chain of idiosyncratic filmmakers currently being feted by the Film Society of Lincoln Center's "Friends with Benefits" series. Since 2007, Abrantes has matched an affinity for abstruse, looping narrative with a bawdy sense of humor. Although his work frequently draws on sources like Manet or Aristophanes, it's never hindered by the dictates of good taste. Ribald slapstick abounds, for example, in the Shakespeare-derived frolic *Fratelli* (2011), which he co-directed with Alexandre Melo. The characters are earthy, their jokes puerile, and these traits carry over as well to the randy mountain travelers in *Ennui ennui*, Abrantes' grating War on Terror satire.

Many of these shorts transpire against backdrops of sprawling, sun-dappled greenery. Such settings introduce grandeur to ignoble scenarios like the sex tourism in *A History of Mutual Respect* (2010) or the inheritance squabble in *Palaces of Pity* (2011), both made in collaboration with Daniel Schmidt. Each of these two films takes shape around a relationship: in the former, it's the friendship between two men (played by the directors) together in the jungle; in the latter, two teenage girls vying for the estate of their late grandmother. The push and pull of rivalry and affection structure these collaborations. The same interpersonal forces are at play in *The Unity of All Things* (2013), Schmidt's subsequent feature, which he co-directed with Alexander Carver. It's less aggressive than Abrantes' work. Bathed in soft blues and purples, it's subdued, even soporific.

The film's subject matter is nebulous, as it flits from one mystery to another, loosely mapping the sexual on top of the scientific. A physicist wanders desert caves, planning for the construction of a particle accelerator, while her two sons discover new, incestuous inclinations. A panther and a pit viper figure into the proceedings. Each member of the ensemble takes a turn speaking at length in an ethereal whisper about the secrets of the universe. The soundscape buzzes with insects and bird calls or roars with the pounding surf. Schmidt and Carver never explicitly tie all these pieces together, opting instead to gently lead the viewer through the plot with tantalizing sensory stimuli. This storytelling through implication makes *The Unity of All Things* a disorienting experience, occasionally frustrating but still never less than beguiling.



The Unity of All Things

Like *The Unity of All Things*, Abrantes' early short *Too Many Daddies, Mommies and Babies* (2009) employs elements of science fiction as a means of untangling the bonds of family. This apocalyptic melodrama's heroes are two men intent on raising a child together, even though it'll require abandoning their research post in the dying rainforest.

Despite running a mere 25 minutes, *Too Many Daddies* is chock-full of twists, which amp up the drama to the point of absurdity. The mood is further heightened by the choice to shoot entirely on snow-sprinkled sets drenched in Bava-esque red and green light; no sunlit outdoor expanses here. The artifice is yet more pronounced in *Visionary Iraq* (2009), which stars co-directors Abrantes and Benjamin Crotty as every member of a Portuguese family, including a son and daughter who've signed up for military service. They deliver their non sequitur-laced dialogue in stilted mumbles, foregrounding the story's flimsiness.

Crotty's most recent solo work, the feature-length *Fort Buchanan* (2014), expands on these shorts' reimagining of tawdry family melodrama. Through four seasonal chapters, it details life at a rural outpost of the French military, where army wives and one lonely army husband work together to stave off tedium. The ensemble's lustful misadventures tend toward laid-back comedy, but the jokes are bittersweet. Binding this community together is the knowledge that children come of age; marriages weaken and crack; and new life goes hand in hand with death. *Fort Buchanan* is the most mature and traditionally pleasurable outgrowth yet from this ring of promising filmmakers. Its championing of tight friendships rings especially true, too, given Crotty and his associates' ethos of unabashed collaboration.

senses of cinema



📷 Taprobana

A Diaspora of Desire: Gabriel Abrantes, Daniel Schmidt, Benjamin Crotty and Alexander Carver

👤 Jordan Cronk © July 2016 📁 Feature Articles 📖 Issue 79

When Gabriel Abrantes' *Taprobana* (2014) screened at the Toronto International Film Festival as part of a three-film program of new Portuguese cinema, there was little to suggest what perverse wonder lay in store for the unsuspecting viewer. As one such Abrantes neophyte, the work of the prolific 31 year-old provocateur having somehow eluding me despite a half-decade of relatively high profile festival berths, I can certainly speak to the bewildering rush elicited throughout the film's brief 24-minute runtime. What transpired was at once beautiful and grotesque, quaint and indulgent, serene and surreal – a far cry from the program's other two films, *The Figures Carved into the Knife by the Sap of the Banana Trees*, by Joana Pimenta, and the late Manoel de Oliveira's last completed work, *The Old Man of Belem*, neither of which could otherwise reasonably be described as ordinary. No matter individual notions as to the film's artistic merit (or lack thereof), it's safe to say that what we witnessed from Abrantes that afternoon was genuinely original, a burst of cinematic ingenuity so unapologetically strange that one couldn't help but take notice.

A riff on the creative gauntlet faced by the Portuguese poet Luís Vaz Camões as he worked to complete his 16th century Homeric epic, *Os Lusíadas*, *Taprobana* mines the biographical surface of its source as a pretense to spin a yarn of ahistorical debauchery. In Abrantes' reimagining, Camões (played by Natxo Checa), after indulging in a bit of scene-setting scatophilia with his Asian lover, Dinamene (Jani Zhao), embarks on a quest to obtain opium in the guise of a monk, along the way encountering, amongst other abnormalities, a horde of naked, shipwrecked nymphs and a monkey with a man's face superimposed onto its head, manifestations of an inner turmoil stubbornly coalescing into useable stimuli. With its freewheeling lasciviousness and impetuous logic firmly established, it's unsurprising that the film eventually finds Camões on trial in purgatory, deliberating on a life of divinity versus damnation as crude visual effects ignite in a display of meta-cinematic immolation.



Gabriel Abrantes

Come to find out, *Taprobana*, while certainly indicative of Abrantes' libertine wile, is, by his standards and if only spiritually (which is to say, secularly), something of a faithful rendering of its subject's tortured existence. But then not much of Abrantes' work, sensibility, sexuality, or even nationality is easily classified. Born in North Carolina of Portuguese ancestry, the filmmaker, who currently resides in Lisbon, has studied film at Cooper Union in New York, Le Fresnoy in Tourcoing and L'Ecole National des Beaux Arts in Paris. His filmography, which comprises dozens of short and medium-length works, bears out this transnational identity, with films produced across multiple continents and in various dialects (the dialogue in *Taprobana* alone is spoken in a combination of Sinhalese, Spanish and Portuguese). Further complicating matters is the director's longstanding collaborative spirit, a process of creative reciprocation that has crystalised a collective of like-minded aesthetes who, often working together in various pairings, have produced a singular body of work in complete opposition to prevailing trends in international cinema. That they seem so totally unconcerned with dominant modes of cinematic dissemination, to say nothing of decorum or decency, makes their combined efforts seem all the more vital.

As a multifarious and non-binary assemblage, this group of artists and filmmakers can appear at times to be in a state constant of reorientation, though a recurring combination of names have emerged as particularly fruitful bedfellows: Alongside de facto figurehead Abrantes, the trio of Daniel Schmidt, Benjamin Crotty and Alexander Carver have together formulated a unique filmic sensibility, at once informed by each individual's formal and theoretical voice yet indivisible from their combined creative energy and sensitivity. Though not nominally of a movement comparable to that of, say, the Le Bank filmmakers, the Dziga Vertov Group, or any number of New Waves, this cohort of alarmingly young American filmmakers with art school ties and polymorphous conceptions of cinematic propagation are of an equally oppositional philosophy to that of their forebears. A recent retrospective of the group's work at Lincoln Center was titled "Friends with Benefits", and that's as accurate a summation as any, as emblematic of their communal filmmaking ethos as it is their genre/gender-bending approach to narrative. Still, that these filmmakers and their stylistic flights of fancy have yet to be christened with a definitive sobriquet is wholly appropriate given their shape-shifting nature.

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The impetus behind the Lincoln Center retrospective was the Stateside release of the Paris-based Crotty's feature debut, *Fort Buchanan* (2014). Though not yet as prolific as Abrantes or Schmidt, Crotty, who studied with Abrantes at Le Fresnoy, embodies much of what makes the quartet stand out amongst their peers. Expanded from a short of the same name, *Fort Buchanan* follows a group of army spouses who, left behind at a remote military base as their partners attend to government-related work abroad, toil away the days with conversations of casual carnality and forlorn displays of melancholia. Newly arrived, Roger (Andy Gillet) and his adopted daughter Roxy (Iliana Zabeth), seem to inadvertently disrupt their deceptively idyllic surroundings: Roger with his androgynous sensuality, which appears to cast a spell over men and women alike, and Roxy with her teen angst and blunt rejoinders. Shooting on 16mm, Crotty matches the sexual tension and unrequited yearning with images of tactile warmth, rich textures, and vivid colour combinations, as dense and humid as the forests engulfing the camp. The casually liberated characterisations and loose narrative markers (it's cardboard dialogue adapted almost entirely from the reality television show, *Army Wives*) likewise find stylistic correlates through anachronistic pop cues and sequences of surreal visual enchantment. The result is as unclassifiable as any recent American indie, modest in means yet bursting with ingenuity.

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In many ways *Fort Buchanan* is a distillation of Crotty and his comrades' many thematic and aesthetic tendencies, as well as a testament to their cinephilic integrity. If these are filmmakers unafraid of flaunting their desires, they're equally confident disclosing their influences. *Fort Buchanan* is divided into four chapters and arranged by season in a conceit lifted directly from Éric Rohmer, while also dealing in irony and triangulated desire in a manner not unlike the French master's "Comedies and Proverbs" series (lest these details be chalked up to mere coincidence, one may recall that Gillet previously starred in Rohmer's *Les Amours d'Astrée et de Céladon*, 2007). Abrantes' films, meanwhile, have continued to evince the unmistakable imprint of Pasolini, in both their penchant for lowbrow reimaginings of highbrow literary texts and their bi-curious sexual concerns (like his compatriots, Abrantes also continues to shoot almost exclusively on 16mm). These and other touchstones – encompassing allusions both offhand and deliberate to Straub, Kuchar, Anger, Warhol, Buñuel and Jack Smith – have commingled throughout Crotty and Abrantes' individual films; it's no wonder, considering their promiscuous creative methodology, that these too would infect their many collaborations, whether together as co-directors, or when Abrantes has teamed with Schmidt, whose own pair of co-directed films with Carver further reinforce this constellation of influence.



The Island is Enchanted with You

Schmidt and Carver's *The Unity of All Things* (2013), the group's only feature prior to *Fort Buchanan*, stands as perhaps the most ambitious work to emerge from the group. Set on the border of the US and Mexico, the film centres on a team of Asian-American research scientists as they break ground on a new particle accelerator. The science-fiction intimations that haunt many of the group's productions are here brought to the fore as the film's industrial locales (filmed at multiple real-life particle colliders) and neon abstractions frame a drama of gender-agnostic desire between the lead researcher's two teenage sons, each played by female actors in drag. In Schmidt and Carver's utopian vision, the ordinary is rendered extraordinary through simple yet radical gestures, the actors' ambiguous physiologies, the filmmakers' antiquated aesthetic presentation (shooting on a combination of Super-8 and Super-16mm), and the narrative's surreal conflation of the earthly and the cosmic suggesting a worldview, to paraphrase one character's astute observation, more vertical than lateral in its understanding. Much like Schmidt and Carver's follow up, *La isla está encantada con ustedes* (*The Island is Enchanted with You*, 2014), in which tales of Puerto Rico's colonial past are considered in futurist terms through a combination of lo-fi CGI, hypnotizing musical sequences, and pansexual cultural rites, *The Unity of All Things* reorients genre conventions through queer coordinates and emerges with something less strange than startling prescient.



Palaces of Pity

Schmidt's collaborations with Abrantes have often taken the form of character studies, allegorising issues of Portugal's past and present through deceptively intimate tales of desire, family and friendship. Their first film, the aptly titled *A History of Mutual Respect* (2010), which also lends Abrantes' production company its name, stars the directors themselves as a pair of horny best friends turned bitter rivals battling over the same aboriginal female. Appropriately, these displays of animal lust are set against the lush Portuguese jungle; as the two men stalk and attempt to seduce their prey, with Abrantes at one point pursuing the girl through the forest on foot and in the nude, the tenuousness of their bond is revealed and later betrayed when they're each forced to choose between their friendship and their libido. The teenage sisters at the centre of *Palácios de Pena* (*Palaces of Pity*, 2011), Abrantes and Schmidt's second pairing, are also at odds with one another, angling on their inheritance and jockeying for position as heirs to their grandmother's estate following her death. With its contemplative tone, exquisite architectural designs, and expansive countryside vistas, the film unfolds something like a modernist pastiche, albeit one with a great deal of historical weight tied up in its intergenerational and imperialist particulars. Subtly complex, these two films attempt to chart colonial trauma back to its roots by examining the lingering effects of its sublimation.

— In an interview with Nick Pinkerton for *Film Comment*, Abrantes describes his mentality with matter of fact, self-aware pride – “a ‘Kill your idols’ kind of thing,” he calls it. “You take a genre and then you switch that code to make that genre either appear as offensive, reveal some offensive or politically incorrect aspect of the Hollywood model or auteur model.” These comments are in reference to one of his very first films, *Olympia I & II* (2006), which he co-directed with his Cooper Union classmate Kate Widloski, and they speak succinctly to how Abrantes approaches art, whether his own or that of an entire lineage of exalted or established rank. In this instance it’s Manet and his iconic painting, which Abrantes and Widloski proceed to simultaneously deify and defame by recasting themselves as, alternately, subject and servant amidst the artist’s grandiloquent decoupage. In the first part, Widloski assumes the role of the eponymous prostitute, lying on a satin sofa in the nude while berating her offscreen brother (voiced by Abrantes) for not acting on his incestual urges; in the second, Abrantes plays a less volatile, more despondent Olympia, and Widloski, made up in blackface, her humble servant. Similar liberties are taken with Shakespeare and Aristophanes in *Fratelli* (2011), which Abrantes made alongside Portuguese actor Alexandre Melo, and *Ὀρϕιθεῖς* (2012), in which semi-sacred texts are reframed as multicultural farces. In each case what could play as sheer bastardisation instead reinforces the material’s poetic probity, even as their cinematic translations likely resemble something far more belligerent than intended.

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Rather than curb these juvenile impulses, Abrantes has in recent years simply reoriented his epistemological concerns while bolstering his comedic bonafides. In the same *Film Comment* interview he espouses a newfound embrace of unchecked comedy as an act of, if not maturation, than at the very least of evolution. “I’ve made so many of these shorts, at this point, that it’s gotten to the endpoint of criticizing myself and it’s like, ‘Okay, let’s move on,’” he says. “I think that’s why I’m into comedy now. Parody or satire, when it just stops at that, is extremely limiting as a form. Whereas actual humor is something far more complex.” However you classify them, Abrantes’ most recent films, which include, along with *Taprobana*, *Ennui Ennui* (2013) and *Freud und Friends* (2015), are working in an entirely different register to that of his previous work (though *Taprobana*’s obscenities are efficiently offset by its bio-historical referents). Indeed, compared with something as technically humble yet the matically ambitious as *Visionary Iraq* (2009), in which Abrantes and Crotty, in their first co-directed short, star as every character, male and female, in a cheeky send-up of the modern day soap opera (complete with wartime escapades), these recent works can seem almost outrageously overblown. Often playing like two or three films at once, both *Ennui Ennui*, a madcap espionage farce concerning the kidnapping of the promiscuous daughter of a French ambassadress in Afghanistan and the ruthless drone warfare tactics employed by an oversexed approximation of Barack Obama, and *Freud und Friends*, a self-lacerating spin on *Sleeper* (1973) in which Abrantes’ erogenous dreams are analysed by his real-life girlfriend, are nigh-on ludicrous concoctions that move through genres like partners in an orgy.

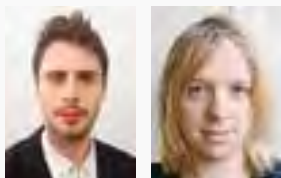
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In addition to an untold number of projects in various stages of development and a recently completed medium-length feature co-directed with British experimentalist Ben Rivers, Abrantes is said to currently be working on a feature with Schmidt about a self-centered reality TV star who adopts a child while on vacation in Haiti. If nothing else, this tireless work ethic speaks to his insatiable need to create, as it does an undeniably infectious energy which animates all those in his orbit (or even his periphery; the similarities between Abrantes’ cinema and Miguel Gomes’ celebrated pillaging of *Arabian Nights*, 2015, is subject for another essay entirely). The cinema of Abrantes, Schmidt, Crotty and Carver, occasionally on their own but more often when working in tandem, is a globetrotting project of passion, of politics, and, most especially, of desire. At their best these films locate the focal point of these notions and reallocate their signifiers until all that remains is that intangible yet unmistakable feeling of ennui – a very human feeling that these filmmakers appear capable of locating in the most far flung of locales and articulating through the most atypical of scenarios. Above all, the desire these directors embody is one of experiential resolve: Uniting all things, theirs is an altruistic cinema of self-possession that embraces imagination, imperfection, and the irrational, positing desire as both humanity’s crucible and catalyst, reconditioning past transgressions even as it shapes future titillations.

LA ISLA ESTÁ ENCANTADA CON USTEDES

THE ISLAND IS ENCHANTED WITH YOU

DIE INSEL IST VERZAUBERT VON EUCH

Alexander Carver
Daniel Schmidt

Alexander Carver Geboren 1984 in den USA. Beginn 2006 an The Cooper Union, New York, ein Kunststudium, das er 2011 mit einem MFA an der Columbia University, New York, abschloss. Arbeitet als bildender Künstler und Filmregisseur. Sein Debütfilm *THE UNITY OF ALL THINGS* war auch seine erste Zusammenarbeit mit Daniel Schmidt. 2014 präsentierte die Videokunst-Biennale in Genf eine Filminstallation von ihm.

Daniel Schmidt Geboren 1984 in den USA. Filmstudium an der New York University, Abschluss Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA). Drehte eine Reihe von Kurzfilmen sowie zwei abendfüllende Spielfilme, die im Programm zahlreicher internationaler Festivals gezeigt wurden.

Alexander Carver Born in the USA in 1984, he began studying art at The Cooper Union in New York in 2006 and completed his studies with an MFA from Columbia University in New York in 2011. Working as a fine artist and film director, he made his film debut, *THE UNITY OF ALL THINGS*, in collaboration with Daniel Schmidt. One of his film installations was exhibited at the Biennale of Moving Images in Geneva in 2014.

Daniel Schmidt Born in the USA in 1984, he studied film at New York University and graduated with a BA in Fine Arts. He has made a number of short films and two feature films which have all screened at numerous international festivals.

Filmografie

Alexander Carver 2013 *The Unity of All Things* 物之合; Co-Regie: Daniel Schmidt
2014 *La Isla está Encantada con Ustedes* (The Island is Enchanted with You);

Co-Regie: Daniel Schmidt

Daniel Schmidt 2010 *A History of Mutual Respect*; Co-Regie: Gabriel Abrantes 2011 *Palacios de Pena* (Palaces of Pity); Co-Regie: Gabriel Abrantes 2013 *The Unity of All Things* 物之合; Co-Regie: Alexander Carver
2014 *La Isla está Encantada con Ustedes* (The Island is Enchanted with You);
Co-Regie: Alexander Carver

1511 verführen und ermorden die Native People in Puerto Rico einen Vertreter der Kolonialmacht. 300 Jahre später, ein weiteres Kapitel kolonialer Geschichte: Im Auftrag der spanischen Krone reist der Arzt Francisco Javier de Balmis 1803 zusammen mit einer Anzahl Waisenkinder nach Puerto Rico. Sie sind Träger des Lebendimpfstoffs, mit denen Balmis eine erste Massenimpfung gegen Pocken durchführt. Ein Blick in die Gegenwart: 2014 produziert Puerto Rico mit Subventionen aus den USA eine große Anzahl von Pharmazeutika.

In *LA ISLA ESTÁ ENCANTADA CON USTEDES* verbinden die Filmemacher Stränge kolonialer und postkolonialer Geschichte zu einem lyrischen Film, in dem sich die Dynamiken der Macht und die Lust des Einzelnen spiegeln und ergänzen. Ein moderner Reigen, der das Gestrern im Heute neu inszeniert. Der sexuell konnotierte Blick dominiert. Eine Comédie, in der die Wirklichkeit den Machtstrategien untergeordnet ist – und die zeigt, wie Gesundheit und Ökonomie gestern und heute aufs engste miteinander verflochten sind.



Lydela Leonor, Alexander Carver, Raul de Nieves, Carlos Solis-Keyser, Frankie Brun

In 1511, Indigenous people in Puerto Rico seduced and murdered a representative of colonial power. Some 300 years later, a further chapter of colonial history: in 1803, by order of the Spanish Crown, a doctor named Francisco Javier de Balmis travelled to Puerto Rico with a number of orphans. They were carriers of the live vaccine with which Balmis executed one of the first mass immunisations against smallpox. Switch to the present day: in 2014, Puerto Rico produced an enormous amount of pharmaceuticals with subsidies from the USA. By interweaving strands of colonial and postcolonial history, the filmmakers of *LA ISLA ESTÁ ENCANTADA CON USTEDES* have created a lyrical work that mirrors and expands on dynamics of power and lust. A modern roundelay that restages the past in the present. Led by a gaze of sexual innuendo, this is a comedy in which reality is subordinate to strategies of power – while revealing the closely intertwined nature of health and economics, in the past and present.

USA/Schweiz/Australien 2014

28 Min. · QuickTime ProRes · Farbe

Regie, Buch **Alexander Carver, Daniel Schmidt**

Kamera **Charles Ackley Anderson**

Produzenten **Daniel Schmidt, Alexander Carver**

Sound Design **Daniel Schmidt**

Visual Effects **Ian Wilmoth**

Darsteller

Raul De Nieves (Taino / Spanische Rektorin)

Lydela Leonor (Taino / Puertoricanische Waise)

Lea Cetera (Taino / Spanische Waise)

Carlos Solis-Keyser (Taino / Francisco Javier de Balmis)

Frankie Brun (Konquistador / Spanische Waise)

Alexander Carver (Diego Salcedo)

Produktion

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Weltvertrieb

noch offen

FILM COMMENT

Notebook: The Unity of All Things

By David Gregory Lawson (</author/david-gregory-lawson/>) on January 14, 2014

One of the highlights of this year's Migrating Forms, Alexander Carver and Daniel Schmidt's debut feature deploys an allusive network of metaphors grounded in physics, geological time frames, and the borders between the physical and the virtual. Set largely at a particle accelerator on the verge of shutting down for good, the film uncovers the similarities and discrepancies between the pursuit of scientific knowledge and the experiences of the flesh.

Carver and Schmidt's provocatively esoteric hodgepodge of human endeavor—Mao's Cultural Revolution, the burgeoning sexuality of adolescents, talk of drones and spirituality—is equally experimental and narrative in design. Michael Robinson's *Circle in the Sand* comes to mind, as do the shorts of Portuguese filmmaker Sandro Aguilar, who works from his own idiosyncratic notions of what could broadly be termed sci-fi tonalities, and the uncanny narrative structures of Apichatpong Weerasethakul. *The Unity of All Things* resembles all of these in certain aspects, if only superficially, though it remains wonderfully difficult to categorize, making it avant-garde to a T.

Deep underground in an undisclosed somewhere, Xia Huang, the program's aloof-verging-on-forbidding matriarch, is hosting a visit by her teenage sons (actresses Celia Au and Andrea Chen). The boys take considerable pride in their physical beauty but struggle to form an identity and conceive of themselves as independent from their role as brothers or from their mother's much-noted brilliance. The young pair, whose flashes of cruelty toward one another are as scathing as their features are porcelain-smooth, have their doubles in the two remaining scientists at the depopulated facility: Huang's right-hand "angel" (Haruka Hashimoto), and another woman (Jennifer Kim), pregnant by an anonymous sperm donor, who's nearly as demanding for would-be mentor Huang's embrace as the teenagers are.

There are two more pairs (or doublings): wanderers played by the directors themselves, introduced at the halfway mark exploring a cave (at which point the title card finally appears), and a couple of Mexican biologists hunting for a "non-indigenous exotic" (which might be a helpful way to think of this curious film). "It's becoming difficult to track this jaguar with all these physicists, particle physicists roaming the desert," one of the researchers remarks in hushed concern during the film's ascension from the prenatal tunnels of the defunct accelerator to the deathly-white sunlight of the border.

As Huang prepares to secure funding for a new particle accelerator, her grasp on reality becomes increasingly slippery; her children remain awestruck if understandably confused. Carver and Schmidt's film is essentially structured into three parts, each corresponding to a shift in geographical location and the characters' emotional temperatures. The first is set during the accelerator's end days in its facilities and surrounding forests; the second at the U.S.-Mexico border, where the terrain for a new accelerator program is being scouted; the third, basically an epilogue, in three separate places after the program's team has disbanded. But there is a fluidity to the scenes that merges past and present, moving beyond a strict definition of when or where. (One recalls how Huang tells her kids that, eons ago, the universe was one "perfect liquid.") As the boys talk about a Chinese soap opera featuring a time-traveling kung-fu master, a shot of fireworks reflected in a pair of black eyes is superimposed over a shot of a far-away valley (a memory from the boy's youth); clouds rolling off a mountainside cross-fade to "become" the smoke from the fireworks.

Wry fluctuations in tone carry the narrative from one ellipsis to the next, and at times the humor undercuts the myopia of the narcissistic characters as they yearn for whatever shreds of certainty they can grasp (about anything whatsoever, their lives spent in the pursuit of Total Understanding). So the grim emotions at their and the film's core become, if not humorous, what with all the increasingly unruly behavior (a flipped table at a party, one brother hitting the other in the face with a rock), then perhaps easy to relate to. These are defensive attempts at keeping that grimness at bay, like the grapefruit pink sunset that occurs during a funeral, with chuckling old women telling good-natured but dirty jokes and anecdotes about the deceased. Gradually, the characters' impassivity (vacant stares and rigid body language) gets chipped away to reveal their throbbing insecurities: a son's fear of being the least loved; or in the case of Huang, an exceptional intellect coming to terms with the limits of her abilities.

Light on plot, the film is heavy on character backgrounds and declarations (or confessions) of motivation. The detachment of the performances is disquieting, if slyly amusing for its deadpan humor; what's more, the performers have all been dubbed in voices with almost robotic cadences, the hyper-articulate scientific jargon hyperenunciated. This clarity is itself doubled in the subtitling of the English-language dialogue, suggesting a split between body and action: what sound like the words of people confident, fully in control of themselves read, when paired with the on-screen action, like the babble of people hesitant, even fearful, at the very thought of rejection or uncertainty.

Particle science is the movie's grand metaphor for longing and the precarious nature of personal connections. (The scientific project at hand involves constructing a miles-long particle accelerator, which requires finding a suitable space underground to house the gargantuan, delicately complex, and potentially unstable device.) Huang and her motley brood define themselves to a great degree in relation to one another, and they seek messily, earnestly, to clarify the nature of their relationships, and what these relationships might mean to the ongoing definition of each of their identities. This is less along the lines of sci-fi allegory than the sensual transcendence of Rimbaud: "from the soul for the soul, summing up everything, perfumes, sounds, colors." The beautiful existence of something like a particle accelerator—a testament to man's ingenuity and scientific derring-do that "looks like a chrysanthemum," as one of the boys says—registers most significantly in the image of that boy's fingers as he walks hand-in-hand with his brother, skimming along a part of the accelerator itself, "where the beams cross."

That image of the boys helps portray the workings of the unimaginably powerful multibillion-dollar modern marvel as a kind of tender caress, bridging the infinite and the ephemeral. Touching and being touched becomes the film's defining gesture: a slap seen in the background of a shot as a geologist, in the foreground, lectures on the folly of building an accelerator in mountains that, by their very existence, testify to an era before man a boy's hand on a pregnant belly, seen in silhouette through the windows of a high-rise from many stories below.

Carver and Schmidt's rich images have a vaporous quality, a mistiness hanging over the abundant grain of their Super-16 and Super-8 photography. The color palette morphs subtly from acid-wash to colors that are thicker, darker, then back again to something downier before progressing in slight variations and combinations of the downy and the dark. During an early night scene the patterns of grain buzz so visibly, and gorgeously, that it appears a layer of reality is beginning to peel off.

Taken in this light, the film's effect is similar to viewing a lab sample (a drop of blood, say) under a microscope: when seen with the naked eye it has a uniform color and consistency, but when examined closer it's apparent there are numerous different substances (cells, fibers, nutrients, waste products) with discrete elements replete with countless different truths ready to be probed for meaning. (This observation could also be applied to the film's fluid but segmented structure.) The movie's muddy, indistinct blacks are outlined in shadowy blue, sometimes set alongside a deep purple or purple-pink that, in its synthetic-bold hue, seems to announce the presence of an invisible fabric holding the various egos and their accompanying neuroses together in shifting harmony and discord. These blues and purples reach their apogee in an eerily calm nightscape of Huang stroking the head of her favorite underling, who lays unconscious from a snakebite in her lap, as that searched-for jaguar appears nearby—signaling a fade to black.

Corpus Laboris

08.25.13



Joaquim Pinto, *E agora? Lembra-me* (What Now? Remind Me), 2013, digital video, color, sound, 164 minutes.

NOW IN ITS SIXTY-SIXTH YEAR, the Locarno Film Festival remains a cineast's festival devoted to discovery. Each August, the southern Swiss town, situated ten miles from Italy (an oasis with palm trees and views of the Alps), dresses up in the ubiquitous yellow leopard print (as per Locarno's mascot) to play host to one of Europe's oldest festivals. Locarno benefits from a serendipitous combination of Swiss organization and Mediterranean charm, and as such it offers an antidote to Venice's glitzy industry influence, retaining an enjoyably easygoing atmosphere while also championing cinema as art.

This "frontier" festival, as it's been dubbed, has always adopted an expansive curatorial stance. To put it bluntly, Locarno exists to showcase films that are "difficult, complicated, or ignored by other festivals," according to Italian critic Carlo Chatrian, the festival's new artistic director, who also asserted the importance of celebrating cinematic "histories" rather than cinematic milestones. This year's edition included a complete retrospective of George Cukor, whose sophisticated 1950 melodrama *A Life of Her Own*, starring Lana Turner and historically dismissed as one of his worst pictures, turned out to be one of the festival's purest delights.

Chatrian envisions borders as lines that connect rather than divide. And indeed many of the old divisions are made irrelevant in Locarno's two main sections, the International Competition and the Filmmakers of the Present (for emerging directors), both of which make no categorical distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, narrative and experimental. This year's Competition included twenty features and eighteen world premieres, with new work by auteurs Hong Sang-soo, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Corneliu Porumboiu, Albert Serra, Joaquim Pinto, and Joanna Hogg. Concessions to local taste do exist, however, and can be found nightly in the Piazza Grande, the eight-thousand-seat outdoor cinema, where you can catch middlebrow fare or the action vehicle *Two Guns*—an admittedly perverse choice for the festival's opening night.

The connective tissue among films this year, including the festival's winners, was an intense focus on the corporeal. The Competition jury, presided over by Filipino director Lav Diaz, awarded the festival's top prize to Catalan director Albert Serra's unapologetically idiosyncratic costume drama *Història de la meua morte*, and bestowed the Special Jury Prize on Joaquim Pinto's profoundly intimate documentary *E agora? Lembra-me*. Serra's dryly comic film—which he described in a press conference as "unfuckable"—follows Casanova's (and, by extension, the Enlightenment's) last days as the debased lover wanders northern Europe and encounters the dark, romantic forces of Dracula. Featuring protracted scenes of arousal, defilement, and neck biting, as well as an extended dismemberment of a cow, Serra's ponderous ode to excess somehow manages to beguile with its lugubrious tone and painterly digital video compositions. On the other hand, Pinto's triumphant return to filmmaking is a stream-of-consciousness diary film consumed with the maladies and vicissitudes endured by the human body in the twenty-first century. Shot on multiple formats, it documents Pinto's yearlong experimental treatment for HIV and Hepatitis C. Much of the film focuses on his relationship with husband Nuno and their life together in remote Azores, and it features a sex scene as tender as it is graphic. João Pedro Rodrigues's medium length *O corpo de Afonso*, a highlight of the noncompetition films, consists of the director auditioning naked men—many of whom are unemployed—for the role of Portugal's first king, in a film in which the metaphorical body comes to include all of that country's citizens.

Stomach pains, real and imagined, dog Paul, the film-director protagonist of Corneliu Porumboiu's wry competition entry *When Evening Falls on Bucharest, or Metabolism*, which contemplates both the end of celluloid as well as the limits of the body. (The film is composed of eighteen shots, the longest of which runs eleven minutes.) "When you're filming, you put what interests you in the center, not at the margin," a doctor tells Paul as they stare at video images of his endoscopy. The director shrugs and walks away—a reaction many had to Porumboiu's film. However, its careful architecture and one particular dinner scene involving

Paul Dallas on the 66th Festival del film Locarno - artforum.com / film

Chinese food left me more than satisfied. Architecture, in the form of a peculiar modernist townhouse, plays a central character in British director Joanna Hogg's excellent *Exhibition*, a cerebral, ambiguous film that stars Liam Gillick and musician Viv Albertine (of the Slits) as H and D, a bourgeois middle-aged artist couple looking to sell. Hogg's film, which deftly trades art-world satire for a much more mysterious exploration of marriage and creativity, is greatly aided by Albertine's fully embodied performance artist, a possible "objectophile" disposed to erotic encounters with furniture and merging her body with parts of the house, which she almost never leaves.



Alexander Carver and Daniel Schmidt, *The Unity of All Things* 物之合, 2013, digital video, color, sound, 98 minutes.

On the other side of the world, pilgrims traveling to a sacred Nepalese temple are transported high above the jungle via cable car in Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez's mesmerizing *Manakamana*, which was rightly awarded the top prize in the Filmmakers of the Present section. (The eclectic jury was led by Hartmut Bitomsky and included Canadian musician Peaches, who treated festivalgoers to a performance in the Piazza.) Spray and Velez's structuralist ethnographic film, produced at Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab, is a kind of anti-*Leviathan*, in which the viewer is constantly aware of their position in time and space: The camera never leaves the cable car, and the length of each shot corresponds both to one leg of the journey and to the length of a roll of 16-mm film. Passengers, who face the camera and are framed by the landscape moving behind them (a nod to rear projection), range from a pair of elderly Nepalese women enjoying ice cream to, shockingly, a quartet of bleating goats—all of whom appear as if by magic each time the cable car enters and leaves the terminal. Another journey film in this section is Alexander Carver and Daniel Schmidt's *The Unity of All Things* 物之合, an ambitious experimental narrative involving particle physics that was shot in sites as far-flung as Jiuzhai Valley in China and the Sonoran desert, near the US-Mexico border. The film takes on nothing less than the instability of everything, from gender to the nuclear family to the cinematic image itself. Its utopian concerns were echoed in Ben Rivers and Ben Russell's collaboration *A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness*, a tripartite feature exploring variations on collective and solitary experience shot in Estonia, Finland, and Norway that screened in a section entitled "Signs of Life," named after the Werner Herzog film.

Herzog, who was in town to receive the festival's top honor, gave a surprisingly pragmatic master class in which he voiced support for shooting features on cell phones. His latest "film," *From One Second to the Next*, a texting and driving PSA for AT&T released online to over 1.7 million views, was a late addition to the festival and played alongside *Fitzcarraldo* in an example of Locarno's lateral appreciation of cinema.

— Paul Dallas

The 66th Festival del film Locarno ran August 7–17, 2013.



Things Fall Apart: Alexander Carver and Daniel Schmidt's *The Unity of All Things* at BAM's Migrating Forms



by Paul Dallas (<http://filmmakermagazine.com/author/paul-dallas/>) in [Directors](http://filmmakermagazine.com/category/interviews/directors/) (<http://filmmakermagazine.com/category/interviews/directors/>), [Festivals & Events](http://filmmakermagazine.com/category/festivals-events/) (<http://filmmakermagazine.com/category/festivals-events/>), [Interviews](http://filmmakermagazine.com/category/interviews/) (<http://filmmakermagazine.com/category/interviews/>) on Dec 13, 2013

The Unity of All Things, the first feature by artist Alexander Carver and filmmaker Daniel Schmidt, is an erotic queer sci-fi with an experimental narrative that combines particle physics, critique of global capitalism, various existential quandaries, and playfully perverse digressions into gender politics. It's an unclassifiable micro-budget film shot on Super 16 and Super 8 in locations ranging from China, Switzerland, Chicago, and the Arizona desert, and has dialogue in at least three different languages. As its title might imply, the film's ambition is undercut by a generous serving of self-aware humor.

The film receives its New York premiere tonight as part of Migrating Forms, the eclectic showcase of moving image art and under-the-radar films that has migrated from Anthology Film Archives to BAMcinématek for the first time this year. I caught *The Unity of All Things* last summer when it played at the Locarno Film Festival, where it competed in the Cinèse di presenti section for new filmmakers. With its jagged rhythms, offbeat humor and seductive images all conspiring to confuse and intrigue (in more or less equal amounts), Carver and Schmidt's film was a singular entry among the more linear offerings.

The Unity of All Things follows several female particle physicists, including a mother of incestuous teen boys, who are engaged in an effort to build a new particle collider on the U.S.-Mexico border. But that's just the start. Also figuring into the scheme is China's Cultural Revolution and the sudden appearance of a black panther, to name two. While I won't claim to have a full grasp its fragmentary narrative, I'm fairly certain that a complete understanding is neither necessary nor entirely expected by the filmmakers. This is a film designed to mirror and project a destabilized universe. Character, genre, tone, and even image, are all vibrating in a state of simultaneous contradiction. If that sounds abstract, it should. But you can also just enjoy the film's unique sonic and visual textures, and be more than fulfilled.

I caught up with the filmmakers earlier this week for soba noodles and a heady discussion about collaboration, colliding particles, and China's one-child policy.

Filmmaker: The film seems to be positioned between the art world and the film world. One hand, it's a 90-minute narrative feature that screens in cinemas. On the other, it's a highly conceptual work that's formally experimental.

Carver: If it was a more complete narrative or was aesthetically more coherent, it would probably serve a film-going audience much better. Art audiences still tend to have an allergy to narrative, though this is changing. I think the film would serve an art audience better if it were more faithful to some experimental ethnographic mode, or was, say, a psycho-geographic essay film.

Filmmaker: Humor is something that has, in some ways, not been embraced in certain experimental genres. It plays a big part in this film.

Schmidt: Humor is one of the main attractions to cinema and art for me. I also find humor in things that might not in a more populist sense be considered humorous, whether it's a Bresson film or the Panahi film you showed at the Guggenheim recently [*This is Not a Film*]. Largely, when humor is done in a satirical sense, as it's been employed in this movie and in previous movies I've made, it's definitely meant to destabilize and to call into question different sorts of political and narrative structures, and see them in a refreshed way. The humor is fairly idiomatic to our community of friends and collaborators, and I hope it speaks to a larger audience. It absolutely has an allegiance to my previous experiences with the movies I made with [Gabriel Abrantes], but it's also very different and is very particular to how Alex and I relate to each other and our humor, and the pleasures and problems we have with that.

Filmmaker: Let's talk about particle physics, which is a central component of the film's narrative.

Schmidt: My dad was a particle physicist for pretty much his whole adult life. I was working on another film with a friend, and looking for a spectacular location, and CERN was on the list. I visited to location scout, but also to visit the last place my dad worked. He had previously worked at two other particle physic labs: one on Long Island and one in Chicago. I had never been to any of them before — well, maybe once when I was a child. Anyhow, after that previous project had finished on different terms and with different locations, I became interested in doing a project that investigated these spaces because I found the cultures [at the labs] very strange. And of course, the science that they're doing [accelerating and colliding particles at nearly the speed of light] and the ambitions, as well as its affiliation to my father, was all really interesting. The particle physics communities at the three laboratories each had a very distinct culture. This was partially due to the financial health of the different institutions. The two in the U.S. had been recently defunded, and CERN in Switzerland is doing very, very well financially. Another interest that got sparked by visiting these sites, and also by reading about them, is that these laboratories are vast. I think CERN is 27 km in circumference. And they have to be located somewhere, even though they're international endeavors, and they're underground. And they become hotly contested items for which different states or regions have to prove that they can financially support them.

Filmmaker: Is a particle collider dangerous?

Schmidt: No. I mean, only in Dan Brown's mind. There's a lot of conspiracy that they are.

Filmmaker: And what is the goal of a particle collider?

Schmidt: Ultimately, the goal is to understand the origin of the universe and the fundamental structure of matter. Obviously, Alex and I were pretty interested in the mythic and superhuman quest aspect. Essentially, the mechanics of it is isolating sub-atomic particles and accelerating them with this underground ring and a system of magnets to speeds approaching the speed of light, colliding those particles and analyzing those collisions. A lot of the science goes into creating detectors that determine whether a certain piece of information is interesting or not because there's no way they can store all the data they create.

Filmmaker: There are a number of different characters in the film, and you play with a confusion of identities. There's even a set of twins who appear to change gender. But, as viewers, we are somewhat on the outside of these characters.

Schmidt: Psychology doesn't really exist at all [in the film], and [it's] replaced with desire. Everything is rendered as erotic, basically, in one way or another, but this eroticism and sensuality is not a reflection of the characters' psychologies or the cultural psychologies that they belong to, but is simply a force.

Carver: The film is deliberately reckless and playful with representation, and this is sort of uniformly distributed. It's not just people that are treated with this irreverence, but whole landscapes. There's a type of satirical play. What Daniel and I were contending with, since it was our first collaboration, [was] watching the subject matter, in a gravitational way, sort of implode and then explode as we gathered more and more content and reached a critical mass. Our job was to cast a wide net and see what stuck in the film conceptually. Why we want to make a film like this is because we're reacting to the contemporary. The contemporary is an accelerated, destabilized, global capitalist world.

Filmmaker: Let's talk about some of the material choices that went into making the film.

Schmidt: What are for you the conspicuous material details in the film, that either you enjoy or are confused by?

Filmmaker: On a pleasure level, I respond to the film's circularity and sensuality. I especially like the scenes on the beach that bookend the film and are accompanied by the electronic score. But in terms of conspicuous formal decisions, I think there are two main ones: the decision to separate sound from image, in terms of dialogue, and the decision to shoot on Super 8 and Super 16.

Schmidt: Each of those decisions comes from a different place. The technique [separating of sound and image] I started using when I began working with Gabriel. He had developed it with our friend Katie on a film they made together called *Olympia*. On one level, it's a pragmatic solution to dealing with non-professional actors and a small crew where you don't

enter more guarded locations and to work with performers who might be able to just give you a physical performance without intoning the lines, or even being able to speak the correct language. When it comes to post-production, we dubbed all of the characters with a mix of the performers' actual voices as well as other people's voices, and it's done for different reasons. This technique allows for many modulations [of a] performance. And it primes us to a mindset of revision at a point in the process where most people [have to commit to a performance]. We can put in new lines; we can have them [speak dialogue] in a way that contradicts the performance.

One of the other main production considerations is that we shot this movie over the course of 18 months, but staggered with large four or five month interludes between shoots, which also allowed for revision. I think is evidenced in final movie, which is a mix of different apparatuses to deal with the content. Because we're shooting on film and we have a small budget, we're only afforded to do one take or two takes, three at the most. It's sort of a *modus operandi*. It commits us to the performances. It's an intentional thing — I'd like to try working with a larger crew—but something [this process] works on its own terms. We shot at each particle collider for a week. It's on film. You're not going to go back to reshoot it. We trusted our cinematographer, Charlie Anderson, who's a fabulous guy. We developed a way of working over the course of the different shoots.

Carver: At the end of the day, the control over the composition, the image, is something that we relinquished from time to time, in just getting this thing accomplished.

Schmidt: The decision to shoot on Super 8, rather than Super 16 in China was really due to trying to keep the project on celluloid, but I was satisfied with how it looked. [There was a greater risk of confiscation with a larger camera.]

Filmmaker: Did you write a script with dialogue?

Carver: Writing the film was something that had to evolve as we worked on the project, because we were trying to balance so much subject matter, and we really wanted the film to be sensual and humorous and perverse. To maintain a level of chemistry, we'd sort of write forward and erase back. I think it ultimately helped to create a very pliable structure. One of the technical challenges was how to maintain the narrative threads. They're very minor, but they exist. Another challenges was how to make certain that we were balancing [the different characters], because it's an ensemble film and we didn't want any in particular to be the center of the film.

Filmmaker: How did you cast the film?

Carver: That was also something that developed over time. Our friends were the first people we reached out to, so we cast many of them. The primary concern was how to cast the young boys [the characters are twins]. It's inferred in the film that they have a sexual relationship. We knew that would be an issue or a problem. I was meeting Daniel at JFK because he'd just flown back from China, and we had a kind of meeting there. We talk a lot about the context of our decisions, and why these boys have a sexual relationship and how it relates to broader concerns or subjects. And I said to him, "What would you think about actually casting women to play the boys?" for a number of reasons.

One of the things we'd been talking about while developing the film project was the various differences of Chinese society that so fascinate the Western world in a sort of passive-racist sense. We were trying to weave a tapestry of desires that was very much informed by these sentiments. So one thing that concerned us was the single-child policy in China in relation to its modernity, and the perverse fascination Westerners have with this policy. In addition, the gender bias in China for male children is also a fascination. We were interested in creating these characters that could literally embody something along those lines. It could be twin boys — an anomalous thing — existing in a state of exception. They have a sexual relationship and are, sort of, fetishistic objects in China, but also for Westerners thinking about them as well. In keeping with the film, which is already very queer, to push it into the scope of gender, and to do it in a way that would siphon too much attention, so we wanted to absorb it into the fabric of the film as much as possible. We were interested in having them pass, to a certain degree, but to have very conscious gender slips in the film. And we do use body doubles to show male genitalia, which bookend the film, and is conspicuously absent in the rest of the film.

Filmmaker: Let's talk about the genre of science fiction and its relationship to your film.

Carver: Like all good science fiction, keeping the big picture in mind is important, because on a smaller, syntactic level, it's all nonsense. [The film] is not a true allegory because it's not coherent, but [it has] a poetic structure that's thinking things and feeling things in a broader set of terms. I think that's one thing that makes the film difficult to penetrate. The most fundamental aspect of science fiction is system building and world creation. It's the necessity to create another space, another society, another social order, another world. In our film, we don't really do that. We simply take the world and mutate it a little, shift it a little, destabilize it. That's sort of our hypothesis, that it's sufficient to create science fiction, and the act of science fiction predominantly woven around this socio-historical text, which [includes] the appropriation of language and Chinese history and the narrative of modernity. Our postulation is: is it science fiction for us — two Americans in their twenties — to narrativize in Chinese language and about Chinese history? The film sort of takes that force of the global capitalist order — that hubris and psychosis — and applies it to science fiction and opens up the wound, which is the Occident-Orient divide. For anyone who's going to look at it with a close read, it's certainly problematic.
