





Guy Oliver interviewed by curator Paul Luckraft, 4 June 2018

**Paul Luckraft:** In your new video you appear in the guise of a television arts presenter – a mode that runs through a number of recent works. Who is this character in relation to you, and where did he emerge from?

**Guy Oliver:** At a certain point in my work I became a narrator figure, imparting information and consciously referencing cultural moments. I suppose my work is to do with selecting moments from recent history or popular culture and putting them together using a cut-and-paste approach. I've always had an interest in television and I've become fascinated by the archetype of the art broadcaster, which is very tied to a BBC tradition. In the 1960s and 1970s there were people like Kenneth Clark, Robert Hughes and John Berger, who seem to come from and define another period of time.

**PL:** Yet the style of those presenter figures still perpetuates today – it's front and centre of a lot of arts broadcasting, because it's so effective.

**GO:** Yes, they set a certain template, and I like working within – and subverting – established formats. I think there's something to be said for templates of expression, like painting. The challenge is finding ways to deviate from it, yet stay within the boundaries.

**PL:** Was your intention to satirise the TV arts presenter format, or was it a homage?

**GO:** There's certainly a spoof element, tongue in cheek and slightly sarcastic. But it's also meant to undermine my position as an artist too. I'm suggesting my own unreliability and pointing to the problem of being me.

**PL:** That's a nice way of putting it – 'the problem of being me'. This seems to be the starting point for a number of your works.

**GO:** I try to balance sincerity and ambiguity. There's a strong autobiographical element to

these films. People will ask questions about the reliability of certain things, but I want to explore and slightly subvert the relationship between my life experiences and the broader subject matter.

**PL:** The new video centres on an idea for an artwork you never realised when you were an undergraduate student. It opens up a broader set of concerns around the idea of artistic agency and protest. When did you set upon this premise?

**GO:** The premise is true, in that I had this idea. At that time George W. Bush was President of the USA and there were all the implications and fallout from the Iraq War. I had a kind of sincere but kind of jokey idea for a T-shirt. I thought it could work, but I don't know how seriously I was pursuing it, and at a certain point it became clear it was too late.

**PL:** You missed the slot?

**GO:** Yes, exactly. It then became an interesting idea to redo, precisely because it was out of date. It's part of the joke that a lot of my ideas float around in my head for a long period. About five years ago I had the idea of making a video about the T-shirt. Obama was President, so it really didn't make as much sense then as it does now, with Trump in office. When Bush was President, I guess a lot of us felt it couldn't get any worse...

**PL:** You just had to let the electorate bring on the next 'bad guy', and then all your artwork fell into place.

**GO:** It's made it more resonant, for sure. I'm interested in an approach to time that is layered, with cycles and repetitions within recent histories. I like the feeling in the work of a certain confusion, something slightly detached from the present.

**PL:** Johnny Cash features heavily in the piece. Is he a figure you have wanted to work with for a while?

**GO:** I've referred to him in other works I've made, and I'm interested in him as a political figure, this contrary mainstream maverick. For many he occupies a position in American culture that is tied to the identity of Nashville and country music – which is often perceived as Republican-leaning, right-wing, Christian and socially conservative – but throughout his career he made radical gestures, aligning himself with the marginalised and dispossessed, and really followed his own uncompromising path.

**PL:** You have previously spoken about tragedy and comedy, with the two things often existing at the same time in your work. What in particular do you find productive about the knife edge between these two seeming opposites?

**GO:** Comedy is something I think about a lot. Counter-intuitively, it is often very extreme, and addresses serious and troubling issues. We use jokes in difficult circumstances and that's very human – a natural reaction to pressure. I look to comedians who push things towards the dark and strange, such as Chris Morris or Kim Noble.

**PL:** This relates to the places where contemporary art is permitted to go. There is a debate today around what those boundaries should be. Your adoption of comedic modes maybe permits you to bring things in that you wouldn't necessarily be able to do in your own voice.

**GO:** Well, this confusion often happens in comedy and drama too – people mistake the voice of a created character for the author's own. For example, Sarah Silverman, whose stand-up is all about social manners, offence and language, is amazing at breaking those things apart in a shocking but clever way. You may gasp rather than laugh, and I think that's valid; that's a reaction.

**PL:** Have you ever caused

offence with your work, do you think?

**GO:** When I was at the Royal College of Art I presented paintings that sampled images of Jar Jar Binks from the *Star Wars* franchise. I was interested in making the stupidest painting I could make. Playing dumb is a sort of strategy in itself when the world is kind of overwhelmingly confusing and dumb itself. Massively ill-judged on every level, the Jar Jar character was always criticised as being a racially offensive caricature, and within the paintings I included found internet images that put Jar Jar's face next to an image of the footballer Ronaldinho. I was shocked that these existed, but decided to include them because they reflected another ugliness – that of internet culture. My paintings did cause some offence, which is understandable. I wanted a certain amount of confusion about my position, even though I know it's risky. But I'm interested in difficulty – in zeroing in on uncomfortable areas of popular culture that might signify some sort of deeper malaise.

**PL:** It might be said that you double down on making work from the perspective of a heterosexual white male artist.

**GO:** Yes, my work is connected to ideas of masculine identity and Britishness, and it's hard to avoid elements that are problematic, such as football hooliganism or outmoded comedians like Bernard Manning. I'm thinking about the fact that different generations share the same cultural space, but that as opinion shifts and value systems change, tensions emerge. A lot has been made of the generational split within the Brexit vote. For me it's fundamentally about memory. That's why there are references to defunct technology in the exhibition, such as the VHS tape.

**PL:** You've made hybrid painterly/sculptural works for this show, one of which is based on the shape of a VHS display

rack. How have you developed this aesthetic over recent years?

**GO:** Collage is the central link across all that I make. I'll be inspired by found moments or images, which then form the starting point. It's often a crude low-fi approach, a very blunt way of collaging one image or idea with another. I push and pull between analogue and digital processes and I'm interested in what happens when these different forms and subjects bleed through each other – when politics reveals itself within sport, for example – and then I try to imitate that formally.

**PL:** In contrast to the notions of collectivity that sport suggests, in the new video you reference gestures that are violent and nihilistic: for example, the Chris Burden piece from 1973, which shows him shooting at a 747 with a pistol. You go on to wryly suggest that radical gestures such as this are not possible in the same way today.

**GO:** Yes, there's a line in the film, 'Those guys thought of everything.' I'm interested in the hyper-masculine performance persona that came out of the conceptual artists from the 1960s and 1970s. It was a Ground Zero period of art that we've mythologised and tried to recreate ever since. But repeating something radical makes it no longer radical, yet radicalism is what we fetishise in the art world, so, broadly speaking, we're a bit stuck. It's a reference to the dilemma of being an art student trying not to do what's already been done, thinking of a novel idea but discovering that Bruce Nauman did it in the 1970s. The film is an ode to the naivety and idealism of a self-absorbed art student who thinks that a T-shirt might actually change the world.

Reverse: 1995, 2018 (detail). Acrylic, spray paint, silk emulsion and silkscreen on laminate floorboards. Courtesy the artist

**Artist's presentation** Sunday 5 August, 3pm. Free. Exploring the incongruous and often absurd meeting of politicians and pop culture, the artist presents a musical performance lecture, alongside a screening of his work *Songs of Eternal Praise*, 2016–17.

**Guy Oliver** (b. 1982, Barnet, UK) lives and works in London. He graduated from The Royal College of Art (MA Painting) in 2015 and previously studied Fine Art BA at The University of East London. Recent solo and two-person shows include *Live From San Quentin*, Random Access Gallery, Syracuse, New York (2018); *Zona Mista* (with Robbie Howells), Westminster Waste, London (2017) and *Did You Think I'd Leave You Dying?*, Chalton Gallery, London (2017).

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