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Art Review

SLATER BRADLEY

Man in the Mirror

Slater Bradley created his own world populated by the lost icons of his youth; now he's staking out new territory on New York's forgotten island

SLATER BRADLEY ROSE TO PROMINENCE seven years ago as part of Team Gallery's stable of New York-based twentysomethings who collectively gave Pop art a dark twenty-first-century makeover. Alongside Banks Violette's black-metal-inspired minimalism, Cory Arcangel's vintage electronics and Ryan McGinley's scenester snaps, Bradley's referentially adroit work felt, at least superficially, at home. There was his video *The Laurel Tree (Beach)* (2000), in which Chloë Sevigny delivers a screed on dilettantism from Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger* (1903) over the soundtrack of Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963); and then *The Doppelgänger Trilogy* (2002–4), Bradley's suite of constructed 'lost' performance footage of Ian Curtis, Kurt Cobain and Michael Jackson, all played by Benjamin Brock, who, crucially, resembles Bradley. After befriending the artist in the late 1990s, Brock went on to become his perennial onscreen alter ego, dramatising Bradley's negotiations with the cultural field in a way that felt dead-on to anyone who ever experienced the pull of fandom, or yearned to be someone else. When the trilogy was purchased by the Guggenheim and exhibited in its New York museum in 2005, Bradley became the artworld equivalent of his musical icons.

Of course art that takes as ephemeral a subject as popular culture risks dating itself just as quickly – criticism that could be made of some of Bradley's contemporaries. Yet as the dust clears on the trends of the early 2000s, Bradley's conceptual interests have proved more durable than many initially imagined. In conversation during preparations for

his late-autumn exhibition at LA's Blum & Poe, Bradley occasionally used the term 'Slaterland' to describe the particular creative universe he inhabits, as if by way of explaining how he's managed to survive the carinibalsing trends of the artworld for this long. While it has assumed many guises over his short career, 'Slaterland' has also frequently reflected Bradley's concern with the dynamics of cultural mythology: the processes by which icons and spectacles are erected, and by which a community of devotees, amateurs and hangers-on are mobilised around them.

Many of Bradley's early films were predicated upon a relative anonymity of authorship – and, conceptually, intended to pass for the real thing, as news broadcasts or fan archives. In *Female Gargoyle* (2000), a work Bradley shot on the fly during his perambulations through New York, a woman perches on the top ledge of a building, evidently contemplating suicide. By inserting a black band with the text "Amateur Video" above the frame of the image, Bradley suggests this scene of personal drama to be a fragment of a news broadcast, thereby illustrating how the qualities of amateur documentary can be exploited to lend credibility to reportage; and how easily the exceptional events of everyday life are transformed into media spectacles.

As Bradley explains, *The Doppelgänger Trilogy*, with its obsessive attention to detail – from the branding of Nirvana's guitars to the choreography of Jackson's crotch grab – attempts to address the repercussions of the suicides of Curtis and Cobain and the gradual





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seclusion of Jackson: “They’re about trying to fill the void when someone is dead and you need more footage of them. You need to get the same high you once did when you were younger, listening to their stuff, but there’s no footage left.” The contradictions inherent in Bradley’s aspiration – the fact, for example, that these devotional acts of fandom are equally the greatest of fakes – strikes, in a way, at the paradoxes inherent in relationships built across the divide of celebrity and real life: between art and death.

Bradley has now risen to a level of visibility where amateur methods would smack of disingenuousness. He remarks, “I wasn’t an artist during the early work: I was an amateur, and an amateur video has no author. Now that I’m an artist and have made a name for myself, there’s no reason for me to continue to claim anonymity.” After taking such incisive looks in *The Doppelgänger Trilogy* at how we incorporate and remember pop culture’s icons, it’s somehow appropriate that Bradley would now train his gaze upon his own newly minted celebrity. In his recent series of drawings shown at London’s Max Wigram Gallery in September, for example, he pens with gold marker over the backgrounds of past photographs: shots of Brock dressed as Curtis, Cobain and Jackson. One thinks of Warhol’s *Gold Marilyn Monroe* (1962), created soon after the starlet’s death, where the painted gold background at turns glamorises and memorialises her silkscreen head. Bradley’s drawings assume a similarly elegiac tone, reflecting both upon the musicians of the trilogy and upon an earlier era of his own creative output.

Bradley’s relationship to his primary actor, Brock, has also shifted. In the trilogy, German scholar Paul Fleming notes, Brock’s status as surrogate for Bradley and his cultural heroes exceeds that of a mere doppelgänger, or ‘identical replicant’: insofar as Bradley ‘casts another as himself, so that he in turn can play another’, Brock consequently becomes a ‘triple-gänger’: a heretofore unknown figure, built to fit the shifting, mirrored surface of postmodern identification and influence. In Bradley’s newest works, Brock’s role is even more existentially





indeterminate, as the characters he plays feel like assemblages of cultural excerpts as opposed to specific icons. A Romantic air of loneliness and melancholy underscores Bradley's creative and directorial autonomy. In *The Abandonments* (2006), one of the two videos Bradley will exhibit at Blum & Poe, Brock plays the role of a suited Victorian dandy (top hat, tails – the works) who meanders through a particularly desolate swathe of Roosevelt Island. The ill-defined connotation of the setting – a small strip of land abutting the eastern side of Manhattan – bolsters the surreality of watching Brock trudge, leaden-footedly, with a CGI raincloud following overhead. At one point, without warning, Brock bursts into a rendition of *Singing in the Rain*, the cloud loses its wispy coiffers and Bradley lets it be known: his tongue is planted firmly in his cheek. Yet it's impossible not to read the subtext of the joke. As with past videos, Bradley's performative use of pop culture is neither simply a mode of escapism nor a flimsy placeholder for the emotional lives of his characters and audience. Our triplegangers may be proof that we are replaceable, but they also offer the promise of change: there will always be artefacts to uncover, genres to adopt and personae to become.

A fitting companion piece to *The Abandonments*, Bradley's latest film, *Blackwell's Island* (2007), is unlike any past: no characters, music or narrative of which to speak, just a sequence of tracking shots of Roosevelt Island, set against the backdrop of Manhattan, using footage recorded by the inventor Thomas Edison in 1903 and by Bradley in 2007. Here the montage runs the gamut: approximately aligned overlays produce an eerie, trans-historical synchronicity, while isolated shots and symmetrically flipped composites draw Bradley's spatio-temporal mapping into dense, psychically allusive terrain. Formal differences aside, this film thematically resonates with the trilogy and other Bradley works in its invocation of the distant or near-distant past. As Bradley explains, much as the individual works of the trilogy were recorded on period-specific equipment to create a consonance between personal and material obsolescence, his footage for *Blackwell's Island* was shot

using recently discontinued Kodachrome Super 8 stock. What we're left with, then, is a "conversation between two dead languages", as he puts it. Each speaks its own version of future-perfect, the tense of a city built upon an ideal of progress, yet each describes a spot of land that never cleanly slotted into the New York mythology. Considering this, it's unsurprising that a man of Bradley's creative temperament would be drawn to Roosevelt Island, or that his tripleganger, Benjamin Brock, actually lives there. These types of phenomena have a logic all their own, originating at some point in that half-reality where a copy meets its original an idea, its inception. It's the logic, in short, of 'Slaterland'. ❖

Work by Slater Bradley is on view at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, until 22 December. See Listings, page 118, for further information

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Recorded Yesterday (2004), single-channel video, silent, 2 min 2 sec
Phantom Release (2005), single-channel video with sound, 2 min 50 sec
 Both from **Tripleganger Trilogy**, 2002–4. Courtesy the artist and Team Gallery, New York

Staff 2007
 gold marker on c-print
 20 x 25 cm (Frame 51 x 46 cm)
 courtesy the artist and Max Wigram Gallery, London

Blackwell's Island 1903/2007
 (after Edison), single-channel video with sound, 11 min 40 sec
 courtesy the artist and Team Gallery, New York

The Abandonments 2005–6
 single-channel video with sound, 6 min 5 sec
 courtesy the artist and Team Gallery, New York