

SEAN KELLY

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Artist Uncovers Secrets of Arms Trade in the Faces of Two Men Whose Lives It Changed Forever



Johan Grimonprez
| *blue orchids* |, 2017
Sean Kelly Gallery

"We hang the petty thieves and appoint the great ones to public office." This quotation, courtesy of the Ancient Greek fabulist Aesop, adorns the entrance to | *blue orchids* |, a 48-minute video by the Belgian artist Johan Grimonprez currently on view at New York's Sean Kelly Gallery. The video, and the use of the quotation, was conceived in 2013, long before Donald Trump became a serious presidential candidate or stepped foot in the Oval Office. But the connection to our current political climate is hard to avoid.

"That [quotation] inadvertently became what the United States is about right now," says Grimonprez. But the current administration's policies are part of a story that began decades ago. "It's a systemic problem, and a symptom of something larger, the whole cult of privatization and the celebration of the self," he adds. "I think it's crucial to come up with different forms of storytelling, to think about new political narratives."

Grimonprez's work has become an extension of this process. A constant seeker of knowledge—talking to him is like devouring a college reading list over 30 minutes—his work is constantly engaged in digging deeper into what is already familiar. When Grimonprez started to put together | *blue orchids* |, it was an attempt to take another look at the work he was doing for a documentary he was making with the journalist Andrew Feinstein called *Shadow World*, based on the latter's book, which was released in 2016. Moving closer, Grimonprez found interesting parallels between two of his interview participants: Chris Hedges, the former *New York Times* journalist and left-wing firebrand, and Riccardo Privitera, a mysterious former arms dealer.

"I was interested in the juxtaposition between somebody whose work is to expose lies and goes to all ends to do that, even goes through the hell of what humanity is all about, and suffers tremendous trauma because of that," says Grimonprez. "The other [person] is making his life based on lies and ends up, through his lies, also in a traumatic situation. So they mirror each other but from different ends of the spectrum."



Still from Johan Grimonprez, | *blue orchids* |, 2017. Photo courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery.

The result is an emotional portrait of the effects wrought by the production of war. Hedges and Privitera both speak openly in their interviews and are often on the verge of breaking down. Hedges is particularly mournful about the damage caused by a history of foreign intervention.

The interviews are intercut with news coverage and surveillance footage tracking the 2010 covert assassination of Hamas leader Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh by Mossad agents. But the focus is on the faces of the video's two subjects, stiff with anger, eyes unfocused. If *Shadow World* attempts to decipher the abstract mechanizations of the global arms trade—the depth and scope of the deception—then | *blue orchids* | is about how those same deceptions wreck human lives.

The two films remain formally and thematically linked, despite serving different purposes. Detailing the hidden web of corruption that surrounds the global selling of weapons, *Shadow World* takes a more traditional approach to telling its story, partly due to the time restrictions placed on a theatrically released film. You can only do so much in 94 minutes, and the goal was to simplify a complicated subject, to shed light on something obscured from view, not make it more difficult to understand. “This world is full of manipulation and false stories, so it was crucial to actually expose that,” says Grimonprez. “It was investigative journalism from the start, so we stayed true to the nature of what that demands.”

In | *blue orchids* |, both Hedges and Privitera are scarred by their experiences and are left with a sense of disillusionment. What they have seen—Privitera reads a particularly harrowing story about children that he saw killed—offers them little hope that things will change. At times, Grimonprez sounds equally discouraged. “I sometimes think that we’ve ended up in a society where we don’t know anymore how to talk about community or how we stand in the world together,” he laments. “We don’t have a vocabulary, and we don’t have the tools.” But, Grimonprez insists, there is hope to be found. He talks about how on the island of Andros in Greece, where he lives when not teaching at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, there are people who have begun to share harvesting and are learning how to live outside of a culture based around money. There is activism and widespread protests here in the United States. People are beginning to dismiss the stories they have been told and create new ones.



Johan Grimonprez, Ramond Tallis | *on tickling*, 2017, Sean Kelly Gallery

Immediately following | *blue orchids* | is another video, titled *Raymond Tallis | on tickling*. Grimonprez says its inclusion was an experiment, the desire to give the viewer a “breath of fresh air” after watching *blue orchids*. But it also signals where Grimonprez’s thinking has been taking him in his new work. In the video, Tallis, a neurologist and philosopher, says the reason we can’t tickle ourselves is because of our sense of otherness; we exist in the world only in relation to other people, in the formation of communities. For Grimonprez, this community is the alternative we need to be seeking, the path out of our perpetual cycles of greed and selfishness.

But is a work of art capable of telling these new political stories? In response, Grimonprez references the political theorist Michael Hardt, who says that politics is about awareness and education. “If these stories are out there that analyze a slice of what society is about, I think that’s crucial,” Grimonprez says. “I consider that part of my practice, which I can’t separate from my activism—how I stand in the world.”