



HOLLYWOOD IN THE GALLERY

Alex Da Corte's *Bacon Brest* plays with the fragmentation of high, middle, and lowbrow culture within Hollywood's increasingly diffuse visual culture—where all players, themes, and visual cues are destined to endlessly recombine to produce the next slate of new movies, television programs, spinoff toys, video games, product placements, etc. Despite Hollywood's imperative to embody fresh, new, innovative modernity, as early 20th century Marxist theorist Walter Benjamin might note, a creaky industrial mode informs how art is made in this age of digital mass reproduction. Da Corte calls attention to the omnivorous cultural imperative that informs Hollywood's production and its often relentless hegemonic representations. His work can operate at the level of fan culture, suggesting via textual poaching and cultural jamming that Hollywood's image gallery can be configured to locate moments of transgression from hegemonic norms, as it blurs the once staid boundaries of high and low culture. On one level, the title of the exhibition refers to two white male Hollywood personalities who are not the defining luminaries of Hollywood celebrity, nor are they figures of radical artistic or political possibilities. Instead their names invoke a more workman-like approach to producing easily consumed and disposed popular art that flirts with high, middle, and low.

Bacon refers to the journeyman actor Kevin Bacon and despite not being the brightest star in Hollywood, his willingness to star in numerous films and television places him at the centre of the *Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon*, a trivia game that connects any Hollywood actor or director to him through a series of films. A fascination with the interconnectedness of Hollywood has helped spawn the website *The Oracle of Bacon*¹, which connects the actor to contemporary Hollywood personalities usually through not more than two or three films. The Bacon Oracle demonstrates the insularity of Hollywood film production, despite the notion that it speaks to and for diverse audience's tastes. By focusing on the element of labour, the

Bacon Oracle allows fans to locate connections between film narratives perceived to be radically discontinuous. Fans using the Oracle are inclined to regard actors and directors as the well-worn and entirely replaceable cogs in a machine.

Bacon's career as an interchangeable yet highly recognizable face points to the industrial quality of stardom, where film acting, as Benjamin notes, is about "the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the 'personality' outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality', 'the phony spell of a commodity'."² Bacon, as a something less than bankable star, may not offer viewers the spell of personality or the phony spell of commodity. But in a Brechtian mode his cinematic presence points to the industrial nature of Hollywood performance, where his familiar face and mannerism from role to role offers not the unique aura of the actor's stellar performance but something more akin to a vaguely lucrative endorsement of a script.

Brest refers to New York-born director and writer Martin Brest, who is perhaps best known for his uneven career having directed the financially successful *Beverly Hills Cop* (1982) and the notorious Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck flop *Gigli* (2003). His film school short *Hot Dogs for Gauguin* (1972)—broadcast nationally on Saturday Night Live in 1980—provides an example of the blurring between high and low in both its title and its plot, which describes a photographer wishing to create great art by blowing up the Statue of Liberty. Thus the blending together of Bacon and Brest stands in place for an industry that is prone to chew through and cannibalize idea and images, and also treat anatomy (e.g. Breasts) like processed meats (e.g. Bacon).

In *Highbrow-Lowbrow: the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988), historian Lawrence Levine marvels at how early 19th century America

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had not yet fixed cultural capital with distinctions like high and low brow, and as such, minstrel plays could parody Shakespeare in racialized, bawdy performances that were grasped by a wide and popular audience. He declares, "a rich shared public culture . . . characterized the United States . . . less hierarchically organized, less fragmented into relatively rigid adjectival boxes."³ Da Corte aims at a less hierarchically organized public culture that is open to interrogation via a do-it-yourself (DIY) aesthetic that troubles mass culture. This do-it-yourself retrofitting aims to reconfigure the iconography of cast-off bits of Hollywood's imaginary; Da Corte complicates Hollywood's limited repertoire while simultaneously celebrating its ability to transgress high and low boundaries.

An example of this high/low mash up is *OK HOLE (BACON TEAR/DREAMWORK DRIP)* (2013), which includes an image of a figure wearing two identical hoodies and a mask with bacon leaking out of its eye socket. The image recalls both the Ghostface mask in the *Scream* series as well as Edvard Munch's icon of modernity, *The Scream* (1895). Rather than being white, the mask is painted black, pointing to the limited racial imagery of the film series. The use of the hoodie also alludes to the February 2012 Florida slaying of black youth Trayvon Martin by his Hispanic neighbour George Zimmerman. Zimmerman judged Martin's hoodie to be suspicious, claiming self-defence in killing the unarmed Martin with one bullet to the chest. Thus this "scream" speaks to a specific moment beyond the hermetic world of the Bacon Oracle where Hollywood seldom treads. Da Corte mashes up Hollywood's "scary" images to expose Hollywood and by extension America's possessive investment in white privilege.

In relation, the life size Catwoman cardboard cutout of Anne Hathaway's body (from *The Dark Knight Rises*, 2012) has an image of Halle Berry's face pinned over it, recalling a procession of white and black actresses who played Catwoman, with Berry having taken on the role in 2004. The first

Alex Da Corte, *OK HOLE (BACON TEAR/DREAMWORK DRIP), Sic Comic Tragic Arc, After Hours*, 2013.
Photo: Blaine Campbell

two seasons of the 1960s television series features the white Julie Newmar as Catwoman, and in its third and final season cast the black singer Eartha Kitt. Cultural theorist Henry Jenkins notes the adult fans of TV show saw Catwoman as "a way of exploring issues of feminine empowerment, or resistance to male constraints and to the requirement to be a good little girl." Da Corte calls attention to how Catwoman as a heavily eroticised hybrid human/animal figure is always riddled by questions of racialized representations, suggesting female empowerment is but one piece of Hollywood's complex and largely unconscious tendency to re-work "old" material in order to maintain a straight white male phallic order. Thus *Bacon Brest* revels in the humanist and Marxist conundrum of how to demystify the aura of the commodity form to lay bare more humane relations.

NOTES

¹ <http://oracleofbacon.org>.

² Benjamin, Walter, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." (1936), <http://design.wishiewashie.com/HT5/WalterBenjaminTheWorkofArt.pdf>, p. 9.

³ Lawrence W. Highbrow-Lowbrow, *The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Harvard UP: Cambridge, MA, 1988), p. 9.

Dr. Daniel Keyes teaches English literature and Cultural Studies with an emphasis on media studies at UBC Okanagan in Kelowna, British Columbia. His research reflects an interest in media and performance and is informed by his dissertation on the performance of testimonials on daytime talk shows in the mid-1990s. More recently his research focuses on the problematic expressions of cultural nationalism in 1950 and 1960s theatre productions throughout BC; television studies with a focus on reality TV; and contemporary articulations of whiteness in the Okanagan.