

Art Monthly
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bodybuilders against a riot of competing patterns on the men's trousers (it is a local fashion to cut them to order from printed cotton) and textile-draped stage sets. They hold bouquets of artificial flowers – appropriated from the more commercial style of portrait shot – to point up the issues of sexual identity and objectification.

Four of the seven new 'Code Noir' triptychs are exhibited in the modest space of contemporary African specialist Jack Bell. Works by four of the gallery's artists were included in Charles Saatchi's recent survey 'Pangaea: New Art from Africa and Latin America'. This included Agbodjelou's previous triptych series, 'Démouilles de Porto-Novo', 2012, which depicts local women, naked save for masks, in a grand 19th-century mansion that was commissioned by Agbodjelou's grandfather, so acknowledging Agbodjelou's personal role in bringing the time periods together.

'Code Noir', likewise, spans eras and agencies with sufficient nuance to do more than merely celebrate black identity and lambast the colonial legacy. Ex-slaves who returned to Porto-Novo utilised their experience and toughness to become successful business people, and Agbodjelou weaves the local community of descendants of slaves into the natural anti-binarism of the triptych format. Most show, life-sized in the central panel, a resident holding a portrait of a slave ancestor, so that the display of personal histories alludes to Agbodjelou's own as the son of a portrait photographer. Either side of the central panel are views of Porto-Novo now, concentrating on places where the history of slavery was enacted – a basketball court, a fishing village and an empty passageway mark the site of a former child slave market, a slave export dock and the road of no return respectively – or memorials linked to the history of slavery. The viewer is kept on the move between past and present, survival and loss, personal and political. Emotionally, the figures seem to recognise the backstories of suffering while celebrating the positives which emerged from it – a balance echoing the positive intent behind the injustices of the Code Noir. Perhaps there is a whiff of Derek Parfit's bewildering yet fascinating argument in *Reasons and Persons* of 1984 that we owe no duty to future individuals to, for example, protect the environment from damaging pollutants – because if we do so it won't be those individuals who benefit but differently characterised ones whose genetic make-up is affected by the changed circumstances.

This show, then, takes forward what is emerging as a persuasive project. True, it could be argued that neither Agbodjelou's approach to documenting his community nor his layering of times and viewpoints are notably original in isolation, yet their visually powerful combination in the distinctive context of Porto-Novo carries a compelling charge. ■

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Southard Reid • Vitrine • Bosse & Baum

One of my favourite bodies of work when I was an undergraduate student in photography was Candida Höfer's zoo series from 1991. The series, shot with Höfer's typical technical elegance and depiction of socially utilitarian architecture leaning ever so slightly towards beautification, comprises large-format images of animals in their zoo enclosures. Ultimately, it was the bleakness of these images that drew me in; such graceful images, such refined colours, yet such totally miserable animals.

Years later, standing in front of a large black-and-white photographic print of an empty zoo enclosure in a small commercial gallery space in London (the print that is, not the zoo enclosure, which is actually in Warsaw), things are looking even bleaker. Joanna Piotrowska's exhibition 'Hester' comprises a series of photographs and a sound piece, occupying two floors at the positively tiny Southard Reid.

The print is grim. I mean, it is dark; the enclosure would look serviceable enough were it not empty, but its vacancy denotes some sort of unspoken tragedy. The image is hung sort of low, even accounting for my above-average height, and this makes me feel like I'm looking at the thing, not a photograph of the thing. It also makes me feel claustrophobic, like I'm going to be sleeping on that grubby mattress of straw tonight. I always felt, looking at Höfer's images, that there was something degrading about the animals' entrapment in itself, and that this was worse than any specific element of their circumstances – looking at this image, I'm feeling panicky and short of air.

This emphasis on claustrophobia is pervasive throughout Piotrowska's concise selection of photographs – enclosed interiors, doors and stairwells, and the small gallery itself. There are images of people, but there is no eye contact. In one image the artist reclines and stares upwards, blankly glaring out of shot. Her neck is supported by another person's hand and, as is familiar in Piotrowska's previous works, there is some faintly familiar sense of intimacy here, but it is sort of estranged or not quite remembered. There is some enigmatic relationship between the subjects, but as an onlooker you feel slightly excluded. The same can be said of the relationships between the various images themselves, that there is a sort of gloomy game of Cluedo underway: doors, ornate walls, a zoo enclosure, someone's knuckles – what does it all mean? What is most disconcerting is that while I look into Piotrowska's XXXIII / Frowst, 2014, (Piotrowska with her intimate neck support) and wonder what I'm witnessing exactly, I am totally disorientated by the falsity of the pose; it can't possibly be occurring for any reason other than the production of this image. As if pre-empting the nauseating disorientation of her audience, Piotrowska has installed a quiet (frankly, barely audible) recording of her reciting meditative exercises in the first-floor gallery space. So low are the tones, however, that I can't help but feel that these images are having some sort of surreal conversation about me under their breath.

Next I'm in an ice-cold Bermondsey Square, my gloveless hands adhering to the metal of my handlebars and I'm walking my bike backwards away from Vitrine Gallery's window space, frozen breath rising from my mouth, eyes transfixed by an expansive red hot sunset. I'm trying to get back far enough to take in all 16 metres of Michael John Whelan's installation *Only In*, 2014, while remaining close enough to feel some of the warmth. *Only In* is a single image appropriated from a 1984 magazine advert for US automotive manufacturer Jeep. The piece takes its title from Jeep's slogan 'Only in a Jeep' which, over the years, has captioned advertising imagery of attractive Jeep owners undertaking a variety of all-American outdoor activities. The specific image employed by Whelan depicts a Jeep parked atop the crest of a grassy hill looking out across an endless vista of hills, mountains and forest all aglow with the fire of the iconic American sunset – the colours of the Wild West. Silhouetted in the foreground is a young man, standing in the open-topped vehicle, leaning against the Jeep's roll bar behind him, his hand resting on it. Raised out of the vehicle such as he is, the figure becomes like that of a man on a horse, surveying the land that lies in front of him. The image is a top-shelf advert of its time, a bastion of capitalism, and an image so sympathetic to American insecurities, so loaded with carefully considered meanings and

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Holly Hendry
'More and More,
More is More'
installation view

Joanna Piotrowska
XXXIII / Frowst 2014



association. However, presented here, Whelan has enlarged the image beyond recognition, cropped it to the proportions of Vitruvius's window space and divided it into vertical strips for the large-format print process. The image has been totally degraded and stripped of its purpose, yet in the context of the Bermondsey Square window, it could well be an advert. Walking past this vibrant, glowing image, one might well assume that something is on offer, but were one to give the banner one's full attention (something adverts on the street are vying for constantly) what would one assume is for sale?

In 'more and more, more is more', **Holly Hendry's** solo show at Peckham's Bosse & Baum, the audience is encouraged to think about their engagement with space on a domestic level. Hendry has constructed a sort of abstracted household within the gallery – wobbly-looking metal structures demarcate some partitions or walls, sculptural elements of wood and metal support large castings reminiscent of sofa cushions or futon mattresses. There are latex castings of what look like industrial ventilation pipes, and a large section of the exposed ceiling girders are being consumed by a throbbing, pulsating inflatable – the whole space is hinting at a sort of invited tactility but the materials are off. The cast sculptures are just imperfect enough that they don't actually resemble soft furnishings; you can tell that if you try and touch them they are likely to crumble under your fingers. The metal frameworks aren't quite convincing enough, there are holes in surfaces with superfluous strips of metal running through them, and unnecessary and inexplicable flourishing, semi-circular bends and dips. The exhibition takes its title from Rem Koolhaas's influential essay on 'Junkspace', wherein Koolhaas discusses the relationship between architecture, space and the human body, and at the exhibition's opening a series of choreographed

performances activated the works and contextualised some of the objects in relation to the space, yet the sculptures themselves hint at an ossification of domestic space, animating the gallery not with an influx of life but rather through a muffled kind of haunting. ■

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North-west Round-up

Harris Museum and Art Gallery • Grundy Art Gallery •
Abbot Hall Art Gallery

In the early 1900s, Variety was the name applied to a style of entertainment previously known in Britain as Music Hall. Now showing at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery in Preston, **The Varieties** is a group exhibition co-curated by Harold Offeh and Clarissa Corfe, inspired by the career of local acrobat, clown, filmmaker and mayor, Will Onda. Posters, publicity material and scripts from Onda's career feature as a small part of the show, but the emphasis is on young artists who use performance as an investigative tool, even if they are not strictly speaking 'performance artists'. Offeh himself has created a series of what he calls 'skits', on video, including *Highbar*, 2015, a reference to Onda's daring performances on the triple high-bar, but 'pathetically re-enacted' by Offeh, who grabs hold of the cross-frame of a children's swing, dangles for a while and then jumps down. Another film sees Offeh in drag recreating a 'serpentine dance', a style popular in early silent films, utilising twirling gestures and swirling dresses.

Offeh's set of large, colour-lit platforms spelling out the word ONDA occupies the centre of the main gallery, around which Mark Bleakley has filmed his performance *Self Portrait (Drying Clothes)*, 2015, in which the artist, wearing only boxer shorts, picks up his damp garments while adopting sculptural poses, to the accompaniment of Ray Charles's song *Let's Go Get Stoned*. Nearby, Florence Peake's *Satin Boots, Fiery Horses*, 2014, is a film of the artist's hands manipulating wet clay into figures representing the characters in George Eliot's first novel, *Adam Bede*. Peake's fingers, with bizarrely pink false nails decorated in plastic flowers, get clogged in gloop as she tells the sad tale of love, pregnancy, imprisonment and religiously inspired marriage, enacted by the squidgy, almost formless clay characters. When eventually one of them dies, she simply squashes it. Another video work, Erka Nissinen's *The West Project*, 2010, filmed in Hong Kong, is a parable of the urban takeover of rural areas of China. Characters disguised as human feet are forced to run away by the grossly padded figure of the Finnish artist disguised as a corporate developer. Seconds later, his head is cut off and lies on the ground mouthing silently, while a heavily bandaged man looks on. The consciously homemade look of the costumes contrasts markedly with the beauty of the landscape.

'The Varieties' noticeably includes work by several painters with interests in playing to the crowd. Dave Mackintosh is a fast worker, apparently making 500 paintings a month. *You'll Never Learn*, 2011, brings together seven paintings in red paint on black card, mounted on a large oak construction reminiscent of a school climbing frame. The images, of figures, objects and landscapes, are arranged to suggest an eerie narrative. Sean Penlington's work, using paint, beeswax and electrical tape, acknowledges the carnivalesque. Blackpool artist Stuart Edmondson's paintings include *Seascape*, 2011, which incorporates a photograph of the sea, but in terms of colour they all echo the clash of grey against gaudier reds, blues and yellows so characteristic of Lancashire's famous seaside resort,