



Michael Bracewell: BLACK/SILVER

Cover image: see note 4, a fragment of an email from Michael Collins

1. (Vancouver)

I am aware that there is a world out there that functions without regard to me. There are wars and budgets and bombings and vast dimensions of wealth and greed and ambition and corruption. And yet I don't feel a part of that world, and I wouldn't know how to join if I tried.

2. (London)

The consumer of contemporary visual culture is placed within a process of looking and seeing that must begin by interrupting the ceaseless image flow of late postmodernism. Our experience of the modern urban world is filled with visual white noise, which becomes a reverberating monotone of image and data. To create pockets of stillness or moments of being within this waterfall-roar of random semiotic code is both a personal and a cultural reflex: to create space for subjectivity to be reclaimed, individually, socially, and geopolitically. The point at which the mundane becomes, if not an epiphany, then a space to think within.

3.

Epiphanal moments—I've been thinking about them a lot lately. I've always thought of them as good things, but epiphanies can cut both ways. In those instants of insight, the world suddenly makes sense in a way that it hasn't before—but that is not always a happy event.

4. (Somerset, England)

Been sorting out some stuff... Found some old vinyl and photos. Here's one Andy took of me at The Factory after The Cramps gig at Max's. Don't remember much about it. I'd taken too many Haliborange and snorted too much Trill. Were you there?

5. (Los Angeles)

I come to a red light, tempted to go through it, then stop once I see a billboard sign that I don't remember seeing and I look up at it. All it says is "Disappear Here" and even though it's probably an ad for some resort,

it still freaks me out a little and I step on the gas really hard and the car screeches as I leave the light.

6.

Samuel Beckett says:

It only means that there will be a new form; and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. That is why the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates. To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.

Right on.

7.

Whatever their conceptual or aesthetic intention, any fine artistic engagement with the commercial imagery of mass culture, in the late postmodern period, creates a connection with its broader semiotic context.

So now what?

By now there have been successive generations of Warhol's children —the ones who grew up to know only a total Pop world. They have been the witness-participants in the rise to power of a renewed cultural materialism, wholly enmeshed in the socio-cultural relationship between technology and consumerism. Cities have become mono-environments, mass media is fragmented into a form of virtual multi-tasking, in which the lines between information, advertising, and entertainment become increasingly blurred. The visual culture resultant from these conditions is by definition accelerated and in a state of constant updating; its tempo is anxious, enervated. The dew is no longer upon it; rather, perhaps, a clammy perspiration indicative of a steadily over-heating power source that sickens from an illness that has yet to be defined. There are fewer and fewer semiotic idiosyncrasies in what might be termed the "taste and

texture” of the visual language of much advertising for low-cost products: “there is no there, there” to borrow the famous pronouncement from Gertrude Stein. Rather, there is flatness: product shot and price, in large letters and digits, and in bright colors, become—in the subway, in the supermarket, on the magazine page—infinately transferable exclamations; their temper is declamatory, but their urgency hollowed out.

8.

POP = SEX × MASS PRODUCTION

9. (Newcastle and Liverpool)

The second the houselights went down, the first ten rows of the audience broke ranks and ran hell-for-leather to the front of the stage. Ran, that is, as best as their sheath skirts, antique fox stoles, bomber jackets, platform boots, dark glasses, meticulous *coiffure* and zealously upheld sense of self-possession would allow. They were all young, and their excited faces, red from the heat and the crush, seemed at odds with the mascara, powder, lipstick, and lip gloss that was intended—in a key chain code of associative ideas—to summon up some camp Americana sci-fi reclamation of Betty Boop or Humphrey Bogart by way of the Weimar decadence.

Beneath a low, pale blue cloud of cigarette smoke, Art Deco compacts—in the middle years of the 1970s, still easily salvaged from suburban jumble sales—were produced from ancient mesh handbags that had once been the property of flappers who were the great aunts and grandmothers of these pop children; and with fingers gloved in black or cream satin, rippling up to the elbow, a diamante bracelet sitting on the wrist, over the glove, young women dabbed at their cheeks and cheek bones with rouge or fern-scented white power. They held amber cigarette holders or wore tortoise shell dark glasses with celluloid lenses of mill-pond green; here and there, one of their boyfriends was sporting a second-hand tuxedo, its satin lining the color of vanilla ice cream; spiffy net veils seemed to tumble from the front of pillbox hats; and all around were young people—mostly suburban and provincial—dressed in vivacious home-created ensembles that pursued their own fantasies of modern artifice and synthetics, like

stage clothes worn as street wear: outlandish styles and fabrics, nearly all touched with sexual fetishism — lurex and vinyl, plastic, old air hostess uniforms, scarlet high heels, greased back hair, faux leopard skin, green nail polish.

By now, the drumbeat had taken up a military, marching rhythm, quickening the pulse, blowing a gale of rising excitement. In the darkness on the stage, you could just make out the pin-prick beam of a roadie's torch, guiding some shadowy figures; to the side, long banners hung ceremoniously beside a bank of amps, each black monolith of which was topped with a winking red light, as though sentient, alert. The kids at the front had started stamping and clapping, their shining eyes fixed unwaveringly on the center stage; then, from out of nowhere, a terrific double-crash on the drums was joined by the preposterous, haunting, uplifting sound of an electric oboe conjuring up an implausibly pastoral melody — only to give way to what sounded like a reversed crescendo, deafening yet still intact, whipped up into new frenzy by the screaming chords of an electric guitar, and the scything screech of an electric violin.

The roar from the audience was deafening: anyone down at the front who happened to glance around the packed auditorium, trying somehow to imprint the scene in their memory, would have seen nothing but entranced, ecstatic faces — in the stalls, the circle, the balcony, rising up as one mass into the twilight corners of the old Edwardian theater. And as the roar intensified, the tall, slick figure of the singer snaked seductively into the spotlight, center stage; he moved in curious, marionette movements, as if he was a film of himself that stopped and started; at the level of his hips, his hands chopped the air. Hitting the crest of the rising wave of sound, he crooned out a line that dropped down a scale with effortless finesse —

10. (London)

One of the other things that was important in the idea of the band was the notion that you could make things that were serious art, and they could also be “popular” — that was the ideal. Not to make something obscure that only a few people would ever see or listen to. The same was

true for me: that I had made this costume and hadn't compromised, but had been as far out as I wanted to be; and it had become really popular. One wanted to get away from being an artist in the art world sense — one wanted to move out of the art world. So you weren't making paintings or making a big splash at the ICA; you were actually out there in the 100 Club or wherever, in popular culture, and loads of people loving what you did. At the same time, it was all about elitism.

11. (London)

In the Golden Age—that is the 1970s, the Phoney Wars were ... Style Wars ... Style became a weapon to forge your own legend. Style started to be accessible in a quite unprecedented way.

12. (Bromley, Kent)

Barker, a.k.a. "Six" was a member of the so-called "Bromley Contingent" of very early followers of The Sex Pistols and the retail and fashion work of McLaren and Westwood. Other members would include the musicians Siouxsie Sioux and Steven Severin, and the writer Bertie Marshall, then known as "Berlin" in homage to the perceived glamor and decadence of the Weimar republic. Originating from suburbia, but all determined to leave its security as soon as possible, the Bromley Contingent became the British sub-cultural equivalent, in many ways, of Andy Warhol's notorious "superstars"—volatile, at times self-destructive or cruelly elitist, but dedicated to a creed of self-reinvention and personal creativity.

13. (New York City)

In short, the culturati were ENJOYING THE REALISM! —plain old bourgeois mass-culture high-school goober-squeezing whitehead-hunting can-I-pop-it-for-you-Billy realism! They looked at a Roy Lichtenstein blowup of a love-comic panel showing a young blond couple with their lips parted in the moment before a profound, tongue-probing, post-teen American soul-kiss ... and—the hell with the SIGN SYSTEMS—they just loved the dopey-campy picture of these two vapid blond sex buds having their love-comic romance bigger than life, six feet by eight feet, in fact, up on the walls in an art gallery ...

14. (London)

Red brick mansion flats — their outline ghostly in a pale mist, suffused by the light of a low winter sun; rain blackened pavements flanked by fences of corrugated iron; old shop fronts and pub doorways, their paintwork peeling — an ancient time of groceries wrapped in newspaper: spuds, beans, tins of sardines and rice pudding. Fags and gold top; thick hair, through which clear brown eyes, like those of young children, seemed to stare with both vacancy and intent from pale expressionless faces. Heavy coats, reeking of incense and damp and pot; unwashed jeans and black suede ankle boots; mornings of freezing fog and fine rain — the Cromwell Road a dreary vista of dingy mansions, some of their high windows with rags and flags for curtains.

And endless, endlessly strange rooms — rooms painted black, rooms thick with the perfumed smoke of smouldering incense and the muscular smell of pot; rooms papered with posters; rooms that opened off other rooms down corridors which had once led to servants' rooms and sculleries — now illuminated by dim red light bulbs and odoriferous with mildew, the unchecked foliage of the overgrown garden pushing against the windows as though to overrun the house; sunlit rooms that seemed haunted by a broken promise of benign domesticity — placid long haired couples baking bread, restoring Eden in Paddington or Maida Vale.

Yet all had been transient, and, ultimately, illusory: mere mirages in a vast expanse of squatted and rented accommodation, where nothing was ever as it seemed, and the only logic to be celebrated was a switchback of contradictions and reversed affirmatives. When anyone, for example, had asked Edward a question, he might reply “Yes No” or “No Yes” or “Dada.” To reverse language and action had been his favorite reflex — a necromantic device some said, or a hippy affectation to stick it to the Man. Of course, his interlocutors could never know and were not meant to know. To be as slippery as spilt mercury was the aim, and then to reverse the scatter of soft hard particles into a single mass once more. To run alongside the windows of the bus and hold a mirror up to the visiting tourists, as they leaned out with their cameras.

But then Peter had reached the point where he no longer knew why the

game was being played, and nor, in truth, cared. “Well you know — we’d all love to change your head.” So mocking, the sharp reproach from on high; and so absolute: the end of an epoch. And then to ask himself, was he mad? And to be told, as was Alice, that we are all mad, had eventually — as the rooms and their occupants became centrifugal, with he and Sylvie clinging together in the center of their spinning maelstrom — seemed a negative affirmative too much to bear.

In his worker’s black jacket, bewildered and beaten, he had faced for a last few months a society not simply indifferent but hostile to radicalism: a people who chose not to Be Here Now, or become an Uncommon Market or an Anti-university or a Yes No college, with The Cause their campus. Fat chance.

That would have been in 1970. Suddenly, after all the sound and the fury, it was over and silence returned. One by one the rebel causes swiftly fell. The student anger seemed to have burnt itself out; the protests stopped. There were no more sit-ins, no more excited votes, and no more invasions ... Where did it all go? A later historian would write: “Perhaps the Old Left’s suspicions of their juniors had been correct: that for them ‘the Revolution’ was just one more fashion, a way of enlivening the years before one finally had to face up to real life.”

15.

Some company recently was interested in buying my “aura.” They didn’t want my product. They kept saying, “We want your aura.” I never figured out what they wanted. But they were willing to pay a lot for it. So then I thought that if somebody was willing to pay that much for my it, I should try to figure out what it is.

I think “aura” is something that only somebody else can see, and they only see as much of it as they want to. It’s all in the other person’s eyes. You can only see an aura on people you don’t know very well or don’t know at all. I was having dinner the other night with everybody from my office. The kids at the office treat me like dirt, because they know me and they see me every day. But then there was this nice friend that somebody had brought along who had never met me, and this kid could hardly believe that he was

having dinner with me! Everybody else was seeing me, but he was seeing my “aura.”

When you just see somebody on the street, they can really have an aura. But then when they open their mouth, there goes the aura. “Aura” must be until you open your mouth.

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Voices: (1) Douglas Coupland, *Hey Nostradamus!*, 2004. (2) MB, notebook, 2013. (3) US Christian website, 2014. (4) e-mail from Michael Collins, 2014. (5) Brett Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 1985. (6) Samuel Beckett, interview with Tom Driver, *Columbia University Forum*, 1961. (7) MB, “On the Art of Albert Oehlen,” 2013. (8) MB, notebook, 2014. (9) MB, notebook, 2014. (10) Interview with Carol McNicoll, 2005. (11) Peter York, *Style Wars*, 1980. (12) MB, “What Did You Do In The Punk War, Mummy?,” 2004. (13) Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word*, 1973. (14) C.A. Howe, “Treasures From The Wreck of ‘The Unbelievable’,” 1993. (15) Andy Warhol, *From A To B And Back Again*, 1975.