

NICHOLAS PROJECTS presents

The Will To Death

By Diego Ramirez

Inherent Vice, curated by Katie Paine, is a group exhibition that deals with the Thanatos¹ of pictures and objects. Paine is an artist, writer and curator with an interest in the archive and its relationship to time. In this group show, she curates a darker enquiry into the preservation of objects by exploring the ways in which they self-destruct. Paine introduces this theme with the title of the exhibition, *Inherent Vice*, which refers to an archival terminology that accounts for an object's tendency to self-immolate. It describes a process where the item's inherent properties provoke its own demise with the passing of time. For example, the chemical composition of acetate film entails that the material begins to degrade as soon as it is produced, because its materiality is destined to cause its own disfigurement. Thus, one of a preservationist's tasks is stop film from erasing itself, to combat its will to death in the knowledge that if left unchecked, the film will inevitably self-annihilate. Inspired by this concept, Katie Paine brings together the work of Aaron Christopher Rees, Deanna Hitti, Nicholas McGinnity and Kathryn Honey to consider how the archive desires to return to oblivion.

Misanthropic² Repulsion

The connotations of this condition are arguably pessimistic, as one of the main purposes of archival practices is to elongate the presence of a moment in time and sustain its eventfulness. The inherent vice of materials eclipses efforts of conservation with a penumbra of futility, as it arguably demonstrates that time can never be captured and human history is engulfed by nothingness. Like our bodies, the material evidence of our presence is in a continual state of decomposition. Still, it

¹ (in Freudian theory) the death instinct.

² a person who dislikes humankind and avoids human society.

remains oddly compelling how inherent vice appears to evoke a suicidal act rather than a natural death, presumably one caused by the unbearable trauma of holding a hideous imprint: humanity [something akin to carrying an alien in the womb]. It seems, in fact, that the archive would rather kill itself than contain a trace of our gagging existence.

Conversely, one could also state that this is a banal condition, given that everything on earth is in a perpetual state of transformation and death. The potential fatalism of inherent vice seems to rely on both the archive's neurotic mission to document, classify, administrate and preserve knowledge, as well as our own perception of this ethos as a valuable enterprise. Seen through a more detached lens, however, we can appreciate how the death drive of pictures and objects is simply part of a natural process: things on earth are meant to die. They constantly dissipate and transform to evade our grasp. Despite the delusional anthropocentrism and hallucinatory narratives of power propagated by Western knowledge, human cultures are insignificant and easily obliterated by the environment.

Therefore, in a postcolonial world, it remains a comical tragedy that the West patronizes its Others for their perceived mysticism, when even the most sophisticated markers of progress, such as archival practices, seem as primitive as Celtic witches casting a spell with sticks. Exotic mythologies and the occult may appear as conglomerates of junk that have been worthlessly amassing themselves for centuries, but they often redeem themselves by assigning humans a marginal value – unlike the archive, which positions us at the center of an anthropocentric fantasy. What I'm encouraging here is not humbleness, but rather a sense of self-awareness: the continual realization that we can at best manipulate the elements around us. Inherent vice symptomizes the limits of the archive, bringing forth the contours where our intervention is rendered pathetic. It is an index of destruction and a micro-representation of the disasters that can effortlessly liquidate the human race, such as earthquakes, fires and tsunamis. Thus, it seems appropriate to tease out inherent vice as a dark narrative of misanthropic Thanatos.

Unworthy of Reality

Indeed, the archivist may seek to preserve the life of objects, but like a shadowy code written by a mad hacker, these entities are ironically corrupted by a death drive. Photography, one of the archive's preferred mediums, often appears as an ill shaped phantom: the camera's efforts to record and extend the memory of an event gives birth to a treacherous malformation of reality. Ethnographic pictures, for instance, may present themselves as objective records ("scientific") of a culture or its peoples. However, closer inspection reveals a grotesque and self-destructive simulacrum.

Stereotypes are exemplary in this regard, as they exceed the reality of the subjects they intend to signify. A picture of an ethnic type is continually enveloped by predetermination, as it often responds to colonial desires rather than a cultural reality. These imperial deliriums belong to a vicious current of vilifying semiotics that lock into a network of subjugating forces – a series of empty signs, where each one refers to the next colonial wet dream. In this web of domination, stereotypes imitate each other without accountability to a source. In other words, they are copies that have become their own original. According to Jean Baudrillard and his simulation model, these simulacra become more real than reality. As he argues that to keep functioning, these destructive signs require something more real than themselves (like a graphic of a ball depends on a real ball to exist as representation). Therefore, they realize a more heightened version of reality to sustain their function: like an Internet meme spoofing Baudrillard reminds us, "shit just got hyperreal".

In a world realized by semiotics, one could argue that marked subjects are continually superseded by dreadful racial signs. Because when shit gets hyperreal, we find that the reality of the Other is confused with imperial hallucinations (hypersexual latinx, for example). Subjects

bearing ethnic markers know the terror that is felt when stereotypes attempt to consume their subjectivity. They know the pull of these media holes and the threat of being torn apart by their ethnic singularity. The horror of being displaced by a universalized version of themselves. A hyperreality that is made possible by the global investment in an empty sign.

We can identify, therefore, two inherent vices in photography. Firstly, photographs destroy themselves physically (their chemical composition contributing to self-decay). Secondly, they self-annihilate by perverting their own inner logic (the sign supersedes the signified). They cease to capture reality, preferring to realize it instead, and consequently, corrupt their own integrity. Photography in its conventional state perishes as it murders its original referent and transforms into a nefarious simulacra.

Aaron Christopher Rees is a multidisciplinary artist who recycles images to consider how technology and the act of picture-making mediates our experience of the world. For *Inherent Vice*, he explores the corruption of images with a series of prints based on damaged photographic negatives. In this case, holiday pictures that have been disfigured by x-rays whilst crossing through airport security. The result is a highly artificial surface that depicts abstract aberrations of colour and form. Like a trans-dimensional portal nearing total malfunction, the erratic quality of the image nullifies its ability to transport us to another place and time. This phantasmagoric aura inflates when one discovers that Rees does not entirely remember the context or site in which the photographs were taken. In other words, his memory, like the photographs, has been obscured, reduced, smudged and distorted. Faced by this phenomenon, one can't help but wonder if it is not the image, rather than the residue of a lived experience, which realizes memory. Similar enquiries have already been articulated by Rees in some of his past works: including *Speculative Foundations* (2016), where the physical site of Sutton Projects seemed to conflate with the screen space of a series of LSD screens that reproduced what lied

behind them, creating the illusion of a hyperreal transparency or a media window into our most immediate surrounds.

Also working with pictorial systems, Deanna Hitti presents *Volume Arba 'ah (Four)* (2016): an artist's book of 46 pages re-printing Orientalist³ depictions of the Middle East. This work is indicative of Hitti's broader printmaking practice, which spans installations and artist's books investigating depictions of the East rendered by the West. The book featured in this exhibition regenerates a succession of Western fears and desires with a print process known as *cyanotype*, which is a low-cost technique commonly utilized to produce copies or blueprints. Dating back to the 19th century, cyanotypes are typified by their cyan-blue tone and accessible means of production. In *Volume Arba 'ah (Four)*, the artist employs this medium to assemble an object that embodies the notion of Orientalism in its multifaceted apparitions: as literature, art and science. It is curious to note that the medium of cyanotype is fragile when exposed to light but perduring if stored in the dark. This property allows *Volume Arba 'ah (Four)* to articulate a powerful message, as mis-representations of the Middle East, devised to validate Western myths of superiority, equally vanish when light is shed on their imperial origin.

Moving away from the pictorial to the sculptural, *Fixture #4* by Nicholas McGinnity is a plate of plaster containing infinite bulges, fractures and deformations mounted on a chrome frame. The work repurposes the process of analogue photography to test the material and reconfigure it as a bodily texture. The piece was made by applying spirits to the surface of Styrofoam to acquire a distorted exterior, a form that McGinnity refers to as his "negative". Then, he casted the results in plaster to produce a "positive" – which is the exhibited object. This is a process that echoes analogue photography, which consists of exposing a film or plate to light in order to generate a negative that is later chemically developed. Both stages entail a disfigurement, as they exert

force to the material to change its constitution. Like staring at the monstrous cast of a contorted body preserved in the midst of terror in Pompeii, *Fixture #4* exhumes a sense of illegibility, curiosity and abjection. The undecipherable forms, cracks and curvatures in the surface become the focal point of our gaze, as its warped lines and diseased bubbles force us to ponder what exactly we are looking at: a passed instance of decay or the act of decay itself? Nicholas McGinnity has explored this troubled texture in the past to similar ends with works such as *Arches High* (2015), a cylindrical plaster sculpture previously exhibited at Arterreal Gallery in Sydney.

Finally, Kathryn Honey employs the medium of plaster to produce *Untitled (Tablet)* (2016) and *Untitled (Useless Object)* (2016), exploring various forms of visual distortion and modes of image-reproduction. The first is a tablet submerging close-ups of sculptural images shot by the artist that are accompanied by fragments of fabric and unusual yet subtle marks in the plaster's surface (ranging from a scratch to a missing corner). The latter is a cast of a vase that owes its name to the fact that the sculpture evokes the form of a container, yet is incapable of performing its function: the pieces seem to put forth the act of casting as process burdened with imperfections. Paine observes after a studio visit: "Honey's works are Janus-like objects: like relics of our present, they seem portentous of some strange future: each object contains images referencing the canon of art history, such as Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage* and various classical sculptures, alongside images of street signs and New Balance sneakers." The photographs submerged in plaster resemble fossils swallowed by earth: endlessly registering the passing of time in a state of forced stagnation.

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3 In Edward Said's usage of the term: the representation of Asia in a stereotyped way that is regarded as embodying a colonialist attitude.