

## The Free Space of Disobedience An Interview with Joseph Baker

In what way do combinations of images/objects play a role in your art practice?

The combinations of images and objects have developed over the years. In 2001 for the piece 'Midwatch' (1999/2001) I was interested in developing the practicalities of how to screen video in a group exhibition environment. At that time there were a lot of dark booth constructions, like little sheds or shelters in the gallery space. I found these totally unhelpful aesthetically, blocking the relation between the video and other artists' works on display, it provoked me to think that these booths had arrived from some other place and were excluded from the curation. So I fictionalised this position and imagined the booth arriving through the gallery wall from some other place. The booth I made related to the subject of the video 'midwatch'; midwatch was set on a ship returning from the first British nuclear tests in the south pacific. The box i made was constructed from plywood sheets and scorched all over, making a charcoal surface. I left a negative image of a battleship unscorched along the side. My fictional narrative for the object's history was that a battleship had passed between the wood and a nuclear blast, burning the box with gamma rays, leaving a silhouette of the ship unburnt on the side.

So here the object has a fictional relation to the video, not a relation to the imagery of the video, but to the mythology of the work.

Later in *Reversion of the Beast Folk* (2004) I constructed a polystyrene foam cave entrance with seating, as a vignette to the projection screen laying behind. The connection was much more obvious, the video was set in a cave. But what was more important to me with this work was that the material appeared to be gesturally *laissez faire*, that it reminded me of squirt cream waiters in cheap Mediterranean restaurants put on unattractive deserts to make them more appealing.

So my objects are not made to impress, they have visible defects and reflect on the squalid intention of charming the audience into liking something which is clearly sub-standard. This is about honesty, about commodification, somewhat influenced by Art and Language and CoBrA artists.

Do you see these combinations as a kind of collage?

Yes, the combinations do relate to each other to form a greater whole, but the objects are also separate entities, so not quite like collage in a Hausmann/Höch way. perhaps closer to film editing, that two sequences when put together inform one another.

Could the combined elements be separated and still function as stand-alone pieces?

no

Have any other artists been influential/inspirational in your choice to combine images/objects?

Yes surrealists and dada-ists for reprogramming the codes and signifiers of how to read images and objects, also Ed Keinholz, Joseph Cornel, a contemporary of mine; Fergal Stapleton who uses painting, sculpture, lighting and kinetic objects in a sensitive way. Also films such as Jacques Tati, Guy Debord and the music of The Fall.

How you feel that images/object work together?

For me the images are the videos, which i do not see as just images but a mythology, a fiction which informs the object and the object the video.

Do the combinations of images/objects create narratives for the audience?

Well I would hope so, but the audience has to want to search for this. For instance in my event based work with the wayward canon, also with the recent work *The Cassiopeia Plan* the audience is actualised by the work, by being there the audience become implicit in its narrative. For instance in The event co-created with Giles Round, we set up a situation where the audience has to make a shift from watching to being the work, by dancing and re enacting the last scene of the film. The film ends in a nightclub and the cinema itself becomes a nightclub. In The Cassiopeia plan, the audience is literally trained up prior to seeing the video, they are invited to participate in a yoga training session from a video lesson, then see fictional characters go through the very same movements. So the audience can actually physically feel the moves that the actors are making.

Do your combinations of images/objects operate on a subliminal/subconscious level?

Well there is an element of subconscious work to be done by the audience. My art is definitely more linked to the subconscious than the Cartesian mind, there are not really things to 'work out' it is more to do with complicity and a feeling of identification with the work. So not everyone has the capacity to identify. Some people misunderstand the work as referential, but the use of existing material is not intended to operate on a cognitive level, rather on a level of recognition, perhaps similar to the striking of friendship, of liking.

If so, does this make your work surrealist in any way?

The surrealists for me were the members of the surrealist group, with their Marxist and Freudian analysis. My work does have a political drive, of deconstruction and critique but does not attempt to raise the everyday above the real. It does intend to produce replacements for values we hold, there is a hope for construction of the new, which the surrealists shared. The surrealists set up an important method of stepping sideways from a situation to find a free space of disobedience to existing rules of existence. This is something i embrace wholeheartedly.