

Setting the Scene

Guest curator: Paul Carey-Kent

1 - 30 April 2017

Funny, Looking Back: Joe Madeira's Setting the Scene by Paul Carey-Kent

Joe Madeira's online project pictorially and literarily sets the scene for his return to making art after a decade taken up with running a gallery and pursuing a career in corporate branding. That in itself is an interesting evolution, but the spotlight is on two other developments.

First, an innovative medium: Madeira has produced a suite of 12 digital drawings, making the most of the latest technology – which enables much more sensitive results to be produced, including the apparent effect of pressing a pencil down softer or harder, drawing at varying angles, generating the characteristic look of charcoal on textured paper, making surfaces glossy, and replicating intricate patterning. All those things can be added and removed at will, and can be rotated, distorted or folded in on themselves. It's becoming common for artists to work in such ways for planning and preparatory purposes, but Madeira is adopting these means as his primary expression. He sees the touch screen tablet as a natural home for these works – they do not have to pretend to be anything else.

Second, Madeira alludes to the emergence of his own personal identity – continuing on, albeit in a radically different presentation, from the conceptual photographic works he made in the late 90s. Those photographs were closely related to his MPhil thesis, tutored by John Stezaker, on 'Post-Humanism: The post-modern idea of self', itself consistent with his interest then in such artists as Diane Arbus, Cindy Sherman and Paul McCarthy; and now in young artists too, including Eddie Peake, Jonny Briggs and Samara Scott. Madeira's own story is of moving, 25 years ago, from Portugal (where he graduated in communication design) to England; and of moving on from relationships with women to the realisation that he was gay.

It makes sense, then, that a fluidity of self-perception feeds Madeira's work. Having said which, I can easily imagine someone picking up initially only the formal properties of Setting the Scene: the staging of elements, the creation of ambiguous spaces, the layering, the references to the languages of abstract painting, the contrasts in (virtual) texture. Spend time, however, and the psychodrama comes into focus, together with various ways of cordoning-off the action to stress its voyeuristic aspects. The contrasts between different registers – glossy and hairy; cartoonish and realist; architectural and organic – start to feel fetishistic. The forms themselves emerge as fully figurative.

Are those chicken drumsticks, an archetype of fast food, taking centre stage in *The Arrival*? What's going on with the tube-body ruptured in *It's Showtime*? Is that an extrusion of nose, tongue, penis, toothpaste or ejaculate? Are those three turds performing a Whitney Houston song in *The Next Big Thing*, as if something has gone seriously wrong – or do I mean right? – with a talent show? Of what do we have a *Private View* as we look, one presumes, through one of the suggestive slots we can see in the opposite wall: balloons, testicles, plums, breasts? Are we in an art gallery or a sex club? Is that a smoking bum or a smoking gun in *Oops I Did It Again!*? Each answer seems as good as another: these are in large part matters of decision, not of fact – just as I'm who I discover myself to be, not just what God or genetics or convention determine.

The dozen digital drawings form a theatre of still life replete with bodily references and the tropes of advertising (e.g. the Nike swoosh can be seen in several works). A parallel is drawn between the branding of objects and lifestyles typically seen in advertising and the self-branding which constitutes finding your own identity, especially in an online context. The use of social media, after all, frequently amounts to the staging of the self. And Madeira seems to have smuggled any number of rude bits into apparently formal black and white exercises in the balance of forces. The recurrence of cats' tails becomes priapic, *The Collector* is improperly engaged, and we become suspicious of the nature of *Back Stage Glory*. Even the emptiness of *Proscenium* may be a ruse, the better to let us imagine what lewd acts have just concluded on its stage.

Studio
11 Brookwood Road
London SW18 5BL
United Kingdom

T +44 (0)20 7112 8838
M +44 (0)7901 880 770

joemadeira.com

Where else would you find cocks and proscenium conjoined? I'm reminded of another artist who moved between men and women at different stages of his love life: Cy Twombly butts graffiti and name-calling up against painterliness and classical culture, and his early statement that he was 'drawn to the primitive, the ritual and fetish elements' [i] could well be applied to Madeira.

So if the double exploration - of a new medium, of the formation of the self - which animates Setting the Scene sounds rather serious, the touch is light. You might call it halfway between comic books and geometry, a combination which takes me back to schooldays. And there is something here of the teenager's tittering way of seeing sex in everything, and something of how a mature person reprises what they worried about as an adolescent, and laughs at how seriously they took it all. Why did I care, they might ask, so much about what other people might think? Why didn't I just come right out with myself? It can be funny, looking back.

[i] Cy Twombly in 'Editions de Regard', 1952

For further information, interviews with the artist or high-resolution images please contact joemadeira@me.com or call +44 (0)20 7112 8838

Studio
11 Brookwood Road
London SW18 5BL
United Kingdom

T +44 (0)20 7112 8838
M +44 (0)7901 880 770

joemadeira.com

JOE MADEIRA

Joe Madeira is a London-based Portuguese-born artist and curator. Graduating from the Faculdade de Belas-Artes de Lisboa in 1989, he completed his Master of Arts in graphic design at Central Saint Martins in 1992 and his Master of Philosophy at The Royal College of Art in 1996 with a research paper in Post-Humanism: The post-modern idea of self. His work subscribes to a form of speculative realism, as he deals with the human condition, exploring themes of sex and desire, gender, technology and identity, fiction, representation and questioning meaning.

In an age of rapidly evolving digital landscapes, Madeira is interested in the increasingly porous boundary between the virtual and the concrete self. He questions how people construct their own identities and realities, and how the freedom to reinvent oneself in the virtual landscape allows us to listen to our primal carnal desires whilst designing our avatars. This freedom is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, in which life can be seen as a play in which we are all characters, the madness and freewheeling of a carnival being the perfect stage for liberation of the self. This 'new materialist' approach, in which we seek to expand our interpretation of our place in the world is achieved by using digital tools, such as an iPad and an Apple Pencil. Madeira builds up layers that force different mark making styles to exist on one plane. He is also able to create and sketch out ideas that allow for fluid movement - layers and elements can be manipulated, hidden and moved about to either reveal or obscure.

Madeira is also the founder of Cabin Gallery and has exhibited exciting emerging artists such as Jonny Briggs, Kate Lyddon, Charles Richardson, Aglae Bassens and Zhu Tian.

PAUL CAREY-KENT

Paul Carey-Kent is an art writer and curator, based in Southampton, who writes regularly for Art Monthly, Frieze, World of Interiors, Border Crossings, Photomonitor, Artcritical, Saturation Point, Artlyst and has a weekly column at Fast Art Daily (FAD). He blogs at <http://paulsartworld.blogspot.co.uk>. During 2017 he has shows at Union Gallery, Transition, the House of St Barnabas, Platform A Gallery Middlesbrough and Laure Genillard. Paul also works as a financial policy analyst in health and social care.

#SettingTheScene