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Wed-Sat 11am-6pm or by appointment

GAVIN NOLAN

A King's Gambit Accepted

Private View

Thursday March 18th 6.30pm–8.30pm

Exhibition Dates

Friday March 19th – Saturday April 24th 2010

Gallery Hours

Wednesday–Saturday 11am–6pm or by appointment

CHARLIE SMITH london is delighted to present Gavin Nolan with his first London one person show since 2006.

Nolan has become internationally known for his brutal self portraits and portraits of those around him. More recently, however, the artist has begun to depict historical figures of consequence, leading on from his abject painting 'Portrait as the Suicide of Robert Benjamin Haydon Attempt no. 3', where a self portrait is superimposed onto the death mask of Benjamin Haydon, complete with gunshot wound and open slits to the throat.

For 'A King's Gambit Accepted' the artist has created a collection that continues to draw on historical figures, and in particular those who have committed suicide or chosen a definitive path of action that drives them towards an inevitable death, for example Adolf Hitler, Jesus Christ, Walter Benjamin and Ernest Hemingway. Nolan seeks to render biographical aspects of the subject in the painted surface, whilst aligning knowledge of their particular method of demise to art historical references. And by investigating notions of image and adornment in relation to interiority, the artist explores aspects of the subjects' private and public lives. A revelatory sense of psychological turmoil, paranoia and violence seeps out, with horror set against beauty and unease underpinning precocity.

Corresponding with these notions are a consideration of power and authority and their projection upon others, where a public surfacing of one person's private will can lead to populations adhering to cults, religions and schools of thought. We are encouraged to question the correlation between fame, notoriety, death and even mental illness; the ensuing relationships between them, and the consequent impact on society and the individual. Ultimately Nolan serves to emphasize how complex and interconnected are personal and public histories, interior and external worlds, and how the nature of a death can come to define a subject's life.

Please contact gallery for images and further information

Biographical:

Born: 1977

Education: 1999 – 2002: MA in Fine Art, Royal Academy Schools; 1996 – 1999: BA (Hons) in Fine Art, Loughborough University School of Art

Selected Exhibitions: 2010: The Reflected Gaze, Torrance Art Museum, Torrance; 2009: The Future Can Wait (curated by Xavier Ellis & Simon Rumley), Old Truman Brewery, London; Hexen Reflex (one person), Mark Moore Gallery, Los Angeles; 2008: The Past is History (curated by Xavier Ellis & Simon Rumley), Changing Role Gallery, Naples & Rome; New London School (curated by Xavier Ellis & Simon Rumley), Mark Moore Gallery, Los Angeles; 2006: Icons, Chungking Projects, Los Angeles; Unnatural Selection (one person), Sartorial Contemporary Art, London; 2005: Maji Jabii!! Fucking Brilliant!!, Tokyo Wondersite, Tokyo; New London Kicks, Wooster Projects, New York; The Sun Also Rises, Rockwell, London; 2004: Born, Cry, Eat, Shit, Fuck, Die, Rockwell, London

Collections: Marc Coucke, Ghent; Jean Pigozzi, Geneva; David Roberts, London; Dr Rainer Schiweck, Munich; Howard Tullman, Chicago; private collections in Germany, United Kingdom & United States

Written in accompaniment with the exhibition:

'Choose life or celebrate at the party of suicides'

Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield

And what a party: Walter Benjamin, Jesus Christ, Joseph Goebbels, Ernest Hemingway, Adolf Hitler, Marilyn Monroe, Sylvia Plath, Socrates, Virginia Woolf. There are no painters here, though according to the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard they top the table of suiciding artists. Well, okay, Plath and Hemingway, but they're relegation material paintingwise. And there is Hitler of course; but his speciality, and Goebbels' too, another failed artist, was more in determining what ought not to count as art, burning books and quarantining degenerate paintings, and befriending the filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl. It is difficult for a filmmaker to commit suicide says Godard, because you are not alone, to make films you must work with at least one other person. A painter or a writer on the other hand can become isolated, can lose himself. But this does not mean losing oneself in one's art, but that it becomes easier to lose oneself in one's solitude. There are no painters here because these are paintings.

The Nazis were the expression of the state become suicidal – after the Jews and the gypsies it would have been the turn of artists and redheads, until there was no-one left but the executioner of the executioner. The true Nazi could never be a true Nazi, because the Nazi absolutely at one with his ideology, the Nazi whose very identity is his cause, could never be pure enough, his self-identity would need to take the form of murdering himself as the act of distinguishing himself from himself. Such would be how the longest Knight's path closes, having taken every possible step it arrives back at itself obliged now to cross its own path at the very point of its departure. And such was the fate of art which in the name of an historical necessity claimed for itself the ability to discern the moment when it could touch its own propriety and sense the purity of art within itself.

If you choose to live in a society capable of mass destruction says Peter Sloterdijk (from whom the title of this essay comes) then you are a 'semi-agent' of a "cynical community of suicides". But you cannot overcome the problem simply by escaping or emigrating. Not by escaping into leisure time, which would be to party with the suicides, and not by going as far away as possible, whether it be outward (you could never get far enough away) or inward (an act of the mind to an inner elsewhere-than-here which would be Godard's lost writer). Either of the latter is a splitting and an accession to schizophrenic existence and thus a form of suicide in itself. A schizophrenic structure is one in which the I that kills is no longer distinguishable from the I that is killed. No, the only way of avoiding suicide is to choose life. And to choose life is to affirm possibility in the form of embodied enlightenment. But that possibility is nothing less than the creation of a new body. The chessboard at the mouth of the suicide, emerging from it or receding into it, is the stage of the choice, the staging of the choice between the new body of an embodied enlightenment or suicide.

Or perhaps what we have with these paintings is the long-awaited wall of 'the Federated Commune of Suicides', something that Paul Virilio anticipated as the natural outcome of anti-representational art mirroring the decline of representative democracy. But even then it would at the same time be the re-emergence of the very thing Virilio thinks contemporary art is putting to death: painting, the slow born-again flesh and blood of paint, laying claim not to purity but to the body of the artist.

Either way, these paintings are about suicide, and paintings made under the condition of suicide; not paintings made when the artist was feeling suicidal, or at least I don't think so, but paintings about suicide made when suicide appears to be one of the conditions determining the possibility of contemporary art.

According to one of the leading philosophers of art today, Alain Badiou, there are two conflicting and constitutive poles of contemporary art, two norms of what a subject is, two subjective paradigms at war with each other: the subject as its body, and the subject separate from its body. For the subject who identifies with its body the limit would be experimentation with death. In art this would be the body artist committing suicide in public. Nonetheless this paradigm is called enjoyment, because in the end experimentation with and identification with the body in life is enjoyment, in which death is part of life. But for the subject who refuses identity with its body the paradigm is sacrifice, because a refusal of the body in life is death. Here life is but part of death, where pleasure occurs in a world after this one, the same world where the suicide bomber projects himself. Today's war on terror is the struggle between these two paradigms. If the choice is between enjoyment and sacrifice then no art is possible says Badiou. The artist today must neither identify with his own body nor separate himself from it. The artist must seek a way between two suicides. And perhaps what we have with these paintings, the game played in front of the eyes of these suicides, is an image of Badiou's 'third way' between two suicides, an image of 'immanent difference', neither the immanence of identification with the body, nor the transcendence of its rejection. A game spilling from the mouth of the suicide or receding into it which opposes the choice between escape or emigration in favour of forms of living that what, open up play?

If it were not for art, or rather the way in which art can show us a certain truth about ourselves, that we are capable of the untrue and must welcome it as the condition of the true, then we would all have committed suicide long ago. So says Nietzsche. If we had only science and the ways in which it shows us the untrue, then by our honesty we would have been led to suicide. Only art makes existence bearable, as a fictional appearance. Art gives us the eyes and hands to fashion ourselves as fictions, so Nietzsche. But more than that it provides us with the good conscience to do so, art is the good will that lets us play, lets us float above ourselves to a place beyond our morality and our honesty from where we can laugh freely and playfully and experience our freedom. So Nietzsche.

But it would not be a freedom absolutely free from those things at which we laugh and still less a freedom from ourselves; on the contrary, we become tolerable to ourselves at this moment. Freedom is not simply our own property, if it were then we could decide on the freedom to kill ourselves and still survive. To decide on death believing that you are deciding for freedom is to meet with the resistance of what conditions freedom and is the condition of freedom, the experience of an other, the otherness of another person, another person in me or in front of me, through the experience of which I gain my freedom. That I laugh at that moment, that's the moment when the game and the saying of thanks are one and the same.

REFERENCES

Alain Badiou, 'The subject of art', trans. Lydia Kerr, Deitch Projects, in *The Symptom*, 6, 2005.

Jean-Luc Godard, 'Quand j'ai commencé à faire des films, j'avais zéro an', *Liberation*, 15 mai 2004.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

Paul Virilio, *Art and Fear*, trans. Julie Rose (London: Continuum, 2003).