

CAREER SUICIDE

Art produced in the name of institutional critique has become rather pretty and polite. But not Justin Lieberman's: his reminds us to kill our idols

PERHAPS THE BEST PLACE to start this text is by stating the obvious: Justin Lieberman has an intimately antagonistic relationship with art and culture. Or maybe it's more accurate to say that Lieberman is a firm believer in art's classically avant-garde duty: to be antagonistic. What he makes is not only anything but pretty, it is often anything but politically correct, and does not abide by any of the usual niceties that govern social intercourse or artistic discourse. In fact, it is tempting to see Lieberman as a kind of Rodney Dangerfield from *Caddyshack* (1980), casually elbowing his way into polite, golf-club society (the artworld?) and recklessly hammering everyone around him with lewd and obnoxious quips about their issues of repression, unconscious motives and outmoded Victorian values and manners. But Lieberman is a bit too calculating and maniacal to fit the part. Indeed, there is something cheerfully psychotic about his work and its methodology; it is full of a hammy, menace-to-society irony

be followed absolutely and logically' – reversed it – 'Logical thoughts should be absolutely followed to the point of irrationality' – and exploded it, both on a plastic and conceptual level (Lieberman's exhibitions are, incidentally, often accompanied by texts penned by the artist, which are less explications of the work than thoughts that motivated him throughout the process of creation. And although his texts are certainly enlightening, in the end they probably produce more questions than answers).

For instance, his two-part/two-gallery exhibitions at Zach Feuer Gallery and Marc Jancou Contemporary in New York last year, respectively entitled *The Corrector in the High Castle* and *The Corrector's Custom Pre-Fab House*, took questions of collecting, accumulation and archiving to the hilt. These two exhibitions centred around Nobusuke Tagomi, one of the protagonists from Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), a dystopian sci-fi what-if-the-Axis-powers-

words **CHRIS SHARP**

reactively fuelled, one suspects, by American pop-culture's penchant for equating any kind of sustained reflection with insanity. What he does can be squarely located in a distinctly American tradition that includes the likes of Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Jim Shaw and Cameron Jamie, and is directly linked to the underbelly of less examined aspects of American popular culture, as well as general cultural strategies, taboos and a variety of mythologies of the artist and artmaking.

Lieberman makes the kind of art many people love to hate, which is to say, an art that aggressively resists any temptation to be beautiful, not to mention traditional and accepted notions of what art is, while nevertheless being seriously invested in the plastic dimension of artmaking. If there is a beauty to what he does, it is a beauty of methodology, of *jusqu'au-boutisme*, in which very little, if anything, is left to chance, but also in which everything, more importantly, seems to be thoroughly plumbed. It's as if Lieberman took one of Sol LeWitt's more memorable Sentences on Conceptual Art – 'Irrational thoughts should

won-the-Second-World-War novel. The Feuer show featured collections of (mostly) Americana, from baseball cards to serial-killer paraphernalia, preserved and ruined in a resin reminiscent of *Ghostbusters* Ecto-Plazm, with carefully crafted 'placeholders' (a diehard collector's replica of the one missing, unlocatable item that would complete the collection) – from the discontinued Fruit Brute cereal box to Charles Manson's waistcoat, made by the Family and sent to him in prison. Meanwhile the Marc Jancou show spun off in a different direction, taking Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's architectural study *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) as a point of departure.

The show largely consisted of an igloo-like armature outfitted with a motley carapace of junk and signage – including a 1970s snowmobile, a lifesize Jolly Green Giant, foam-filled inflatable toys, an illuminated FedEx sign and a seven-foot shark – and came with a computer program (which could be consulted via a computer inside the structure) that meticulously archived and detailed every object in the dwelling. Meanwhile,

Systems, Souvenirs, and Self-portrait as Bernardo Buffet for the People of Philmont, 2009 (installation view). Courtesy Sutton Lane, London & Paris

MARTOS GALLERY



*Systems, Souvenirs, and Self-portrait
as Bernardo Buffet for the People of
Philmont, 2009 (installation view).*
Courtesy Sutton Lane, London & Paris



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a sculpture of the Corrector himself, replete with buckteeth, squinty eyes and a Nazi swastika cape, presided over the show at the entrance. In both shows, issues of meaning and purpose seemed to be bound up with collecting and the cultural relativity with which anything is liable to become a classifiable and 'meaningful' artefact.

More recent exhibitions see the artist explicitly engaging artistic fashions and myths about artmaking and the artist in general. In this sense he is treading on ground already tilled by Kelley and McCarthy, yet he is doing so in a more unrelentingly analytical mode – to the point of navel-gazing, but navel-gazing of the most productive order. In a show last autumn titled *Systems, Souvenirs, and Self-portrait as Bernard Buffet for the People of Philmont*, at Paris's Sutton Lane, Lieberman created a complex scenario wherein he positioned himself as a suicided Buffet – one of France's most celebrated postwar artists, and generally seen to

have been rendered critically obsolete by the rise of a younger artist, Daniel Buren (Buffet's schlock existential figuration was presumably no match for Buren's wholesale indictment of painting).

The main piece of the show consisted of a stuffed dummy of Buffet with a plastic bag over his head (his singular method of suicide), applying dots to a signature Buren striped waistcoat and wielding a kind of ad hoc Eiffel Tower paintbrush. The ironically self-mythologising/historicising analogy was a clear dig at all those painters, as seen in, say, New York's Miguel Abreu Gallery, who position themselves in a tradition of institutional critique, which should by nature be antagonistic, and nevertheless make very beautiful paintings. Yet Lieberman's work could hardly be said to be more attractive than Buffet's illustrative, depressed postwar depictions of Paris, clowns, religious themes, sexual situations and the like.

The artist's current exhibition, entitled *Salto Mortale*, at the Bernier/Eliades gallery in Athens, further explores these issues, but in a more general way. Suicide, and the myths that surround the suicided artist, dominate the exhibition. The artist crafted a series of painting/sculptures of various suicided writers in which a painted likeness, executed with amateur skill, of the writer is propped up against various paraphernalia loosely evocative of the writer. For instance the French writer Raymond Roussel is propped up against a gaudy blue ottoman upon which can be found a circular, resin-covered structure of Twinkies. Another sculpture, entitled *The Last Bookshelf* (2010), which addresses suicide in a more general way, consists of a small library on suicidology, enclosed by a black bookshelf, which has been sculpted to perfectly frame it (picture a graph of sorts). Given how simultaneously taboo and romantic the subject of suicide is, the bookshelf seems to hint at ideas of containment and conformity (picture an art school). As Lieberman himself has said, he's not out to 'debunk per se', but rather exert pressure on certain received (often romantic) ideas about art and culture through a sustained (certifiable? – see above) examination of them. Of course, any treatment of art and suicide inevitably points towards deep-rooted, romantic notions about the greatness of an oeuvre being proportionate to the self-destruction that attended its creation. And this could explain why Lieberman has ironically included a self-portrait in the show (propped against a stuffed hamster in a hamster wheel): maybe he has every intention of being a 'great artist' even if it means spending himself on the hamster wheel of mediocrity trying. ❦

Justin Lieberman: *Salto Mortale* is on view at Bernier/Eliades, Athens, until 8 April

The Corrector's Custom Pre-Fab House, 2009, mixed media, dimensions variable. Photo: Cary Whittier. Courtesy the artist, Marc Jancou Contemporary, New York, and Zach Feuer Gallery, New York