

David Lock In Conversation With Ana Finel Honigman

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David Lock photographed in his studio by Hugo Glendinning

Like Leonard Cohen's lover in "Chelsea Hotel," we are all sometimes "oppressed by the figures of beauty." In "Misfits and Maladies," his first solo show of works on paper and paintings on canvas recently on view at the [Fred Gallery](#), London-based artist David Lock (recipient of the second annual Art on Paper award at last year's Zoo Art Fair) investigates our conceptions of physical beauty, and questions the values of male physical appearance. Lock lifts isolated handsome features of male models, matinee idols and rock stars from the pages of glossy magazines and then patches them together before reproducing the emerging Frankenstein faces into his disarming watercolor works on paper. Like Hannah Hoch's photomontages, Lock's de-contextualized splices cut through stereotypes and scramble the superficial signs of beauty, creating bitter-sweet images of broken beauty and the fragility of physical perfection.

In a review for the BBC Collective magazine, Dazed&Confused's Iphigenia Baal writes, "David Lock's assortment of

paintings might utilize the current choice a la mode of pretty, illustrative Warholian boys – lifted from that sign of the sickness of our times, fashion magazines – but they're put to a good and refreshingly intellectual use." Ideology aside, Lock takes classically beautiful faces and by rendering them ugly, makes interestingly beautiful art.



'Misfit 5'

ANA FINEL HONIGMAN: Why have you decided to paint the images you appropriate, and not collage them directly onto the page?

DAVID LOCK: With the Misfits series, to paint the images rather than directly collaging parts of the magazine into the painting allows me to gain some distance from the source material, and to create a space where it becomes obviously about painting. Of course, the cut up is central and I guess having this so direct in the content feels more exciting for me than simply bringing the collage in. I've recently found a collagistic approach to painting, to be the most effective in bringing together parallel realities, customizing etc, but I'm interested in how that becomes translated into paint. I make a collage for each painting, so each small painting becomes about translating those collaged qualities into a new material, and giving it life. The collages do have a different feel, as they retain the erotics and finish of glossy magazines, whilst the paintings lose that in their translation to watercolor. In that their

beauty seems more awkward, troubling, and uncomfortable which interests me, as they begin to become about something else entirely.

AFH: Define what you mean by the 'erotics' of the glossy magazine?

DL: I mean the photography, that reversal of the gaze where men have now become the spectacle, commodity fetishising, all that's inherent in the collage. My watercolours are an attempt to destabilize that. The aspirational bullshit; it's all based around lack. I resist that, it's really not important. Having said that, I do love fashion magazines, the feel and allure of them, so that contradiction interests me.

AFH: Is part of the process about creating an intimacy with the images by painting them?

DL: Yes certainly, I think about that with the Misfits, by making paintings of the collage, at some point the photo gets lost, and my relationship becomes about this new painting, its materiality. I looked at Elizabeth Peyton particularly, she really seemed to open up new possibilities for having a new kind of intimacy with subject matter. The scale is important in that too, in creating that intimate encounter. In the current show at Fred, I've shown 18 of them together, so although they are quite intimate, as a body they become very strong.

AFH: Do you ever paint various versions of the same collage, or is it always a one-to-one translation from the collage into a watercolor?

DL: Usually they are one to one, sometimes I have made several versions. They always look quite different, but I find I'm rarely as satisfied if the first version is very successful. There is a lot of trial and error. With a watercolour, it needs to be planned-you can't change your mind much. Sometimes I want to change my direction, and the painting fails, so I need to begin again. Sometimes, they just don't have what I'm looking for, and I'm left unsatisfied. However, I like the fact that they are not easy to make, so I might make several watercolours of the same collage, in that pursuit to find that quality that I'm searching for, and I often don't know what that is until I've created it, so I'm just trusting my intuition.

AFH: How do you select the particular images you appropriate?

DL: With regard to the large paintings, the particular images I appropriate can come from anywhere. When I begin a painting I try to keep the content as open as possible. The figures usually come from the mass media, fashion magazines, advertisements etc. I'm usually looking for something that's an already prescribed ideal. More often than not, it's usually something external, outside of myself, and bringing it in. It feels absolutely right to use the imagery in this way. I also take from art history. The "Eagle Beaches" painting appropriated the eagle from a Rubens painting "Ganymede" which then led me to Rembrandt's version of the same myth. I guess my search was how to paint that Ganymede painting today. The way I worked the painting was very akin to collage. The whole painting was a synthesis of mismatched elements, which I think is what gives the painting its tension. I also take imagery from National Geographic, particularly when I'm seeking the right context for my painting. They are always appropriated. It is really about using that "reality" to create a new imagined space to begin my painting. They are complete fiction in that sense. When I've decided on a context then I'm much more specific about what I'm looking for, but that is usually the point when the painting decides what it needs, and I'm just responding.



'Misfit 1'

AFH: Do you often appropriate sections of famous faces?

DL: Yes, certainly in fact, quite often. I am not concerned at all with who that person is though, usually with the collage it's like creating a jigsaw with no template to adhere to. I'm not really the ordered type, to have draws full of eyes, and chins or noses etc! Whilst I'm making the collage, I will scan magazines looking for the right image, so often it might be a famous face, as magazines are full of them. Though it's arbitrary to me that it's 'such and such famous personality'. Occasionally, that's quite interesting, there was one where I had a fragment of Gordon Brown's face, and bits of Mike Skinner's and Colin Farrell's jaw, amalgamated together it looked really hot, I was surprised! It does feel like being Frankenstein.

AFH: How has your art school training influenced your practice?

DL: It's interesting, when I was at Goldsmiths' one of the most insightful tutorials I had was with Thomas Grunfeld. I found much of his work very inspiring, and he talked about how most of the time, the disjunction is not going to work, and it's keeping your eye out for that one small margin. I really appreciate that now, as it keeps me much more rigorous, than just being merely taken by the disjuncture.

AFH: Are there faces, or facial types, you find yourself repeatedly drawn to?

DL: Sure, though I'm repeatedly drawn to strong angles and I like contrasts more, such as light against dark, and sharp focus and saturated colour, so within that it's anything goes. I'm giving myself a structure to work with, but it's usually the angles that are important to create a dynamic image, which is what I am usually after.

AFH: Could you describe your beauty ideal?>

DL: Kind of craggy I think, stubbly and kind of pock marked too; a bit damaged. Hairy, and dishevelled is good! An ideal suggests something to be attained towards, so for me it's somebody that has definitely lived and shows his scars. After I read J G Ballard's Crash, I was fascinated in that Avedon portrait of Andy Warhol, after Valerie Solanas had shot him. It was a really intense photograph. Warhol had this strange asexual quality, but when I read Crash I thought of that Avedon photograph, and it had this real erotic charge, and I completely deferred it on to the character Vaughn in the book. So Vaughn really fulfilled that desire for me, he seemed like the ultimate anti-hero.



'Eagle beach'

AFH: Do you primarily read fiction or theory?

DL: I find my influences come from both fiction and to a lesser extent theory, I try to take my inspirations from anywhere really though. There are some classic texts like Ovid's "Metamorphosis", to Katherine Dunn's "Geek Love", which were kind of cultural sign posts for me, whilst I was thinking about the "Misfits and Maladies" show. Also fashion magazines are useful in terms of thinking about masculinity. They often have great writers when you get beyond the self-appraisal stuff. It certainly influences how I think about certain paintings-what sensibility I am trying to cut through, or get to. By it's nature its operating on this surfacey, pop level and I don't under estimate its importance for me, of course I guess that goes back to Warhol, but I suppose for me its about taking my influences from anywhere, on many different levels.

AFH: Are you referring to men's fashion magazines or women's fashion magazines?

DL: Primarily men's fashion magazines. There are so many now, the market for them must be reaching saturation point.



'Werewolf'

AFH: The werewolf myth seems to have vanished from pop culture. Why do you think that is the case?

DL: It's a funny thing, I'm not sure if werewolves really have vanished from pop culture. I guess you're referring to cinema right? There have not been any, really notable werewolf events in recent times. Just poor b movies with bad CGI. You've got to go back to the 80's for the last great werewolf moments in pop culture, so that is going to take things off the radar. Hollywood are doing a remake of the Wolf Man for next year, which stars Benecio del Toro. It might be interesting, the original is such a good film. I'm not particularly concerned about how relevant to pop

culture the mythology is. I'm more interested in its folklore if I'm honest. Werewolves and human/beast hybrids go right back to cave painting. I'm more fascinated by that. The things I recall from growing up, American Werewolf, Company of Wolves, and of course Thriller (Michael Jackson), did have a much greater cultural impact than today, but I think it's hard to ignore David Altmejd at the moment. His werewolf aesthetic is very intense. The way he coalesces this with crystals, to become about energy and transformation is pretty powerful stuff.

AFH: Do you also respond to other artists doing work that's often described as "neo-Goth"?

DL: No, not at all really, not like Altmejd, I'm interested in that strange otherness that permeates from Banks Violette's sculpture, but it's not something I'm really concerned with. I'm really more interested in painters who are doing intelligent stuff like Dana Schutz, and Neal Tait.

AFH: Your work explicitly questions the status and role of men in contemporary society. What do you perceive as key concerns for men today?

DL: I'm not sure about that. That is such a difficult question to answer, as it's all so relative! I feel that I'm dealing with a particular type of man. Thinking in plural terms, there are obviously many different masculinities, with as many attitudes. Men are radically adapting to new contexts and roles. They can either embrace that, or feel threatened, but there is I think a general feminisation of society going on. I think sexual politics, self-image, success and doubt must be very common. It's hard without generalising, maybe a more helpful question is why am I drawn to such specific representations?

AFH: Why do you?

DL: I think my interest (with the Misfits) lies in how men are increasingly under those same body-centric pressures as women, so my work is dealing with playing off that, and subverting it in a playful way. I like the fact that all the collages come from the mass media, I'm just recycling what's already out there. I'm not defining that conventional ideal, but I'm not prepared to accept its limitations either.

AFH: Do you believe critical theory and the type of identity discourse popular in academia since feminism is helpful at advancing understanding of gender, or difference, or is it mostly irrelevant?

DL: The last two questions I guess seem more to do with a social sense of a criticality for me, than an artistic one. When I was a student, I really felt held back by filling my head with queer theory, post feminist positions etc to the detriment of my art, which I've really turned around in recent years, so my relationship to discourse has become quite ambivalent. With Critical Theory I think you would be really naive to assume discourse around gender, difference, and identity etc is mostly irrelevant, but of course you can choose not to engage your criticality around it, which is not the same thing. Although, whilst, I think theory to be a powerful tool on one level, I'm not sure it has a great cultural impact beyond academic discourse. If we're really talking about advancing our understanding of gender or difference, I think the mass media and attitudes there are much more relevant. However they can often seem more concerned with pushing us into self-hatred, and guilt for the way we look. I think difference is a really frightening concept to mainstream culture. That seems more pertinent than ever. I've really tried to resist theory recently, but I find myself continually returning to it, and I'm constantly trying to figure out where theory is trying to take me.



'Xeno'

AFH: Does your knowledge of theory influence the way you view art, as well as create it?

DL: To some degree, but it's of no greater importance than other influences such as film, art history etc. Recently I discovered 'point de capiton' or quilting point, from reading Zizek's interpretation of Lacan. The idea of a 'phallic' quality that sticks out, and does not make sense within a scene, thus rendering constituent parts as suspicious and creating an environment of total ambiguity. This is interesting to me when I'm creating my painting, as I'm looking for something that is slippery, that's inserting itself, but it's not so obvious. If the painting could remain constantly open and incomplete, that is something I'm looking for, and then obviously theory is useful then. It's really just another component though.

AFH: What was your initial introduction to Critical Theory discourse?

DL: I think Judith Butler, 'Bodies that Matter', the notion of how gender is destabilised within the performative, and Julia Kristeva's 'Strangers to Ourselves', which got me thinking about the uncanny. It is insightful stuff, but honestly, I find it quite tedious when I'm trying to think about art, and I'm not sure if art really does need it.

AFH: Are there examples of artists whose work you think successfully represents theory, without being hampered by it?

DL: I think it's running through Nigel Cooke's paintings, and also, for altogether different concerns in Wangechi Mutu's work, and they are not hampered by it. I think they are questioning the theory though, I don't think they are representing it. It's just theory, you need to do something with it and change it, otherwise it just stays on the level it

came from.

AFH: When you say “that seems more pertinent than ever” are you saying that the current political situation is making discourses about difference more relevant than they were a decade or so ago, when it could have been argued that Critical Theory had disseminated further into mainstream culture?

DL: For me I think I’m relating it to the general homogenisation of global consciousness, the negative effects of globalisation.

AFH: Do you believe that today’s general culture is suffering from a backlash in sensitivity?

DL: I think most of us really do want to be better at working across differences, we’re just not sure how to do it. The general culture is often so reactive, we need to get away from that. Maybe start accepting more the insecurities and doubts we feel about certain things.