

There's a Peter Pan syndrome at play in the artworld, with a number of male artists appearing, on the evidence of their work, drawn to the idea of inhabiting an eternal adolescence. Why don't they want to grow up?

WORDS: OLIVER BASCIANO

FOR A FORTHCOMING EXHIBITION, David Blandy has developed a computer fighting game in which one can either take on the avatar of 'David Blandy' or that of the British artist's recurring alter ego 'the Lone Pilgrim', a samurai warrior with traits familiar to anyone vaguely versed in kung fu pop culture. The Lone Pilgrim has some pretty cool moves, whereas the David Blandy character doesn't. The choice for the viewer is simple: inhabit the persona of the adult male with maturity, a work ethic and responsibilities, or indulge adolescent tendencies. It's a choice that a plethora of mostly male artists seem to be exploring in their practices, from Blandy's coopting of geek culture to Slater Bradley's tapping into the existential cool of numerous cultural outsider figures, and from Steven Shearer's idolisation of teen identity to Daniel Guzmán's aligning of rock motifs with those of his own Mexican heritage. For other artists, youthfulness is perhaps less overtly the subject of their work, but it's nonetheless present in the endless-summer, road-movie sensibility of Ryan McGinley's photos, the popular culture smacks of early Jonathan Meese and, to find a forerunner in the previous generation, the dropout punk ethos of Raymond Pettibon's drawings.

These artists do not just appropriate the signifiers of popular culture; they depict a subjectivity created through them. Though multifaceted in practice, they seem united in their public construction of an alternative identity that plainly and sometimes painfully reflects a representation of their own man-as-teenager identity construction. Shearer, for example, occupies this persona both in his choice of medium and in much of his subject matter. A series of works that took as their starting point the 1970s teenage pinup Leif Garrett (whom the artist apparently resembled in his own adolescent years) were billed by Shearer in a 2008 interview as a form of self-portraiture, documenting the melancholia of his own ageing. This identification with the teenage trope operates too in the obsessively detailed biro portraits the artist produces, which instantly evoke the classroom doodlings of a music fan. Indeed, music motifs are the mainstay of Shearer's output, ranging from *Activity Cell with Warlock Bass Guitar* (1997), an interactive installation in which the visitor can tuck himself away in a denlike structure to play the titular instrument, to the more recent series of paintings shown at Galerie Eva Presenhuber last year, in which various rock 'n' roll figures are depicted wielding guitars, the phallic symbolism inherent. This aspect of Shearer's practice has not escaped the notice of curators – he was coupled with Guzmán in *Double Album*, a 2008 exhibition at the New Museum, New York, that looked specifically at music and male identity.





A frequent motif in Guzmán's work is the skull, found in *El Gráfico*, a series of ink-on-paper works from 2008 (and exhibited in 2009 at London's Stephen Friedman Gallery). It is a symbol that has passed from the gothic connotations of *vanitas* into rock iconography; decisive for Guzmán's practice, however, is that the skull is also representative of his Mexican identity, given its heavy presence in the country's folk symbolism, dating back to indigenous culture and still very evident in Day of the Dead celebrations. Likewise, a mask resembling the face paint worn by rock band Kiss, hung within the *Cloud Serpent* sculpture (part of the *Everything Is Temporary* series exhibited at Harris Lieberman Gallery in New York in 2009), could be read both as an artefact of pop culture and a nod towards the masks of *lucha libre*, or free wrestling (and the obsessive fandom of that culture). Guzmán mixes these two reference points, tellingly without a sense of hierarchy: he posits the influence of pop culture (Michael Jackson and Travis Bickle have also made appearances in his work) as being akin to that of national identity, where the artist is as much a construction of music and movies as of geography.

This dual representation of the self is showcased in Guzmán's 2008 film *The Secret of Evil*, in which two men, a poet and an activist, are overwhelmed by supernatural, zombielike creatures while in conversation about Mexico's social problems. A homage to the horror genre, it simultaneously riffs heavily on the Mexican veneration of the dead and the extreme gang violence that raises the country's mortality rates. 'Experiencing their work', wrote curator Richard Flood at the time of his pairing of Shearer and Guzmán at the New Museum, 'one immediately sees a parallel adoption of 1970s and 1980s pop icons and bands as surrogates and personal avatars'.

Slater Bradley uses surrogates more literally still, repeatedly employing a friend in his videoworks, Benjamin Brock, who – in a manner similar to Shearer's relationship to Leif Garrett – resembles Bradley. In the *Doppelgänger Trilogy* (2001–4) Bradley investigates his own identity construction through the history of his music fandom, but he universalises this fabricating and seems to imply a transgenerational relevance by having his 'doppelgänger' play the starring roles of Ian Curtis of Joy Division,



Michael Jackson and Nirvana's Kurt Cobain in the restaging of three concerts. There's an easy eroticisation at play in this idolisation of celebrity figures; however, it's not just any icons Bradley is eulogising. They, like the artists profiled here, attempted within their work to extend or freeze their adolescent state, though admittedly Jackson's tabloid-documented obsession with staying 'forever young' and Curtis's and Cobain's suicides are extreme examples. The late novelist and critic Fred Pfeil offered an indicative example, prior to Cobain's death, of how the whole of the singer's persona resembled a fight against maturity, praising Cobain's 'ability to hold on to its insistent bored anger while individually and collectively refusing to be a man'. In an interview for *ArtReview* in 2007, Bradley told writer Tyler Coburn that he sees all these iconic characters as operating within 'Slaterland', seemingly hinting that they are being internalised – bored anger included – into his own subjectivity.

David Blandy, too, invests his practice with a psychoanalytical stance, each work actively investigating his identity. In *The White and Black Minstrel Show* (2007) Blandy performed Syl Johnson's *Is It Because I'm Black* (1968) with white makeup applied to his face and black makeup surrounding his mouth. In the run-up to a two-person exhibition at Stoke-on-Trent's AirSpace Gallery in February, the artist told me: "My work is taking the standpoint of the coloniser. I'm asking what it is to be black, and conversely what it is to be white. It's an absolute identification with the person who sees me as the enemy." Blandy's practice is about struggling to find an identity in the world, when his own – that of white middle-class male – has served as an oppressive benchmark for defining 'the other'. Syl Johnson was identified as the other – with the societal restraints that, as he sang it, "hold me back... putting the foot on me" – because he wasn't the colour of those who held the power. Blandy's escape is to forge an identity, completely unironically, through various

*In Guzmán's work,
the influence of
popular culture is
akin to that of
national identity*

protagonists taken from popular culture, among them Ryu from the *Street Fighter* computer game (1987-) and Luke Skywalker of *Star Wars* (1977-83). These are teenage tropes of an outsider (Ryu operating in the city's underbelly and Skywalker a member of the Rebel Alliance in George Lucas's original trilogy of films), and Blandy inhabits them to distance his privileged position. (It is perhaps telling, by way of comparison, that in his 2010 film *The Child of the Atom*, which takes the more traditional method of tracing one's identity through family ties – in a meditation on the fact that the artist's grandfather would probably have died in a Japanese prison camp were it not for the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the resulting surrender by the Japanese – the artist felt comfortable including his young daughter. Her presence, and the adult responsibility she confers on her father, imbues Blandy's persona with more gravity than his previous work, with its appropriation of pop role models, would necessarily have invited.)

Such role models act as a replacement for the traditional construct of male identity – father, fighter – in society. While the use of adolescent motifs may arguably find some of its roots in the slacker art coming out of America during the mid-1990s – the drug references to be found in Pettibon's practice or the youthful exuberance of Jack Pierson's work when he turned to landscape photography – the persona that Blandy and others inhabit is not one widely recognisable among existing stereotypes of the male, or even more specifically, the male artist. The latter largely fell into queer-identity subdivisions (Warhol, Dalí and suchlike) or the macho mentality of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and, later, on this side of the Pond, the YBAs, with their arguable reflection of an anti-feminist, 'laddish' viewpoint. It is in these postwar milieux that Scottish academic David Hopkins, in his book *Dada's Boys* (2008), identifies 'an attitude of boisterous camaraderie among young men, predominantly but by no means





exclusively of working-class origins, who seemed stuck in late adolescence'. If anything, this postponement of adulthood has intensified in the past decade. Whereas the sniggering machismo of Koons and his immediate successors mimicked that of the late-teen discovering sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, the 'eternal adolescence' strand of male artists post-2000 construct their personae through an even earlier (in terms of personal development) set of motifs, garnered from comics, cartoons, games and music.

More important, this appetite for manufacturing personality through pop culture is simply a reflection of a 'real' world in which the free market sustains permanent adolescence through endless access to the iconography. In collating thousands of images via the Internet for his c-print collages, Shearer is reflecting the globalised nature of, and the ease of access to, the motif of his own construction. In Bradley's *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* (2009) Benjamin Brock walks silently through the crowds on New York's Fifth Avenue. Brock, dressed all in black, plays the alienated youth effectively, referencing Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and M. Ageyev's *Novel with Cocaine* (1934). Yet while supposedly at odds with the luxury capitalism that surrounds him, this angry young man is obviously fashionable, his clothes sleek and slimming; debasing, with pervasive irony, the idea that the artist's use of these motifs – and the same can be said of Blandly, Guzmán and Shearer – is anything other than an inevitability of consumerism. •

David Blandly is in a two-person exhibition, with Antti Laitinen, at AirSpace, Stoke-on-Trent, 19 February – 26 March; Slater Bradley is exhibiting at the Whitney Museum of American Art until 23 January; Daniel Guzmán has a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Oaxaca, in April; and Steven Shearer is to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale of Art, 4 June – 27 November

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

- Steven Shearer, *Kaleidoscope II*, 2006–7, digital c-print, 184 x 205 cm (framed), edition of 3 + 1 AP, 3 of 3. Courtesy Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich
- Daniel Guzmán, *Choyas Heladas* (from the *El Gráfico* series), 2009, carbon paper and ink on paper 122 x 122 cm (unframed), 130 x 130 x 5 cm (framed). Photo: Stephen White. © the artist. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London
- Slater Bradley, *Doppelgänger Trilogy* (*Recorded Yesterday*, 2004, *Phantom Release*, 2003, *Factory Archives*, 2001), 2001–4, 3 projections from digital sources, dimensions variable, edition 3 of 3
- Steven Shearer, *Geometric Healing*, 2010 (installation view). Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography. © the artist. Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich
- David Blandly, *The White and Black Minstrel Show*, 2007. Photo: Claire Barrett. Courtesy the artist
- David Blandly, *Duels and Dualities: Battle of the Soul*, 2010. Courtesy the artist
- David Blandly, *Child of the Atom*, 2010. Photo: Claire Barrett. Courtesy the artist
- Slater Bradley, *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*, 2009, projection from a digital source, HD, 4-channel surround sound, edition 1 of 3. Courtesy Max Wigram Gallery, London