



FEDERICO SOLMI *evil utopias*

ANDREA BLANCH: *Your work consistently criticizes the failure of modern society and the leaders who are undeservingly held up on a pedestal. Is there any aspect of government and leadership that you find to be more effective and genuine rather than dishonest and greedy?*

FEDERICO SOLMI: Well, I think it's very difficult to find authentic leadership throughout human history. The moment you want to become a political leader, you become a certain kind of person. It's hypocritical, because power is ruthless; it's cynical. So it's kind of hard for me to find, even in the most utopian and idealistic leader, one that doesn't have to deal with horrible decision-making. Because in the end, a political leader, from my understanding, is protecting the interest of just one group of people, a nation. They have to make ruthless decisions against other countries, against other interests. One of my typical examples is the figure of George Washington. Today he's considered the greatest hero of American history. He did incredible things for American society and American people, but he did horrible things towards the Natives. He was called the "Town Destroyer" by the Lakota Native Americans. It's shocking to see how such a celebrated hero is seen as an incredible, idealistic leader. Meanwhile, on the other side of history, he is seen as a murderer. In my Utopia, I want to see a mythical leader from 360 degrees. I want to see how it was for the American, the Native, and for others.

ANDREA: *Are there any heroes left in the world that you can satirize?*

FEDERICO: Oh, there are plenty. I'm sure I can find a dark side in many, even the people remembered as the most incredible. I have a hard time with Abraham Lincoln, you know. I didn't want to put him into the mix, because I genuinely like his history, but I know he had some dark sides, too.

ANDREA: *One of the reasons why I think your art is so successful is because you use satire—and use it well. What brought you to this device?*

FEDERICO: I was always interested in being an artist, but I didn't want to just be an artist who creates patterns, or makes objects to feed the aristocracy or a self-referential art world that doesn't look at what's happening in society. I became a writer simply because I want to speak about society. I found myself getting very into making drawings and paintings, after that I understood that I want to tell a story. I wanted to create a narrative work, and I thought that the best way to make an impact on the viewer would be to use my drawings and paintings in combination with moving image, with video. I want to speak about why we are here, what's going on in society, what's going to happen in the next fifty years if we keep on this course. I'm interested in finance, I'm interested in politics, I'm interested in art, of course; all of these mixtures that I expose myself to helps me to create my vision.

ANDREA: *So how does the structure of satirical critique compare to a more conventional commentary?*

FEDERICO: Oh, I don't think satirical critique was ever really embraced by the art establishment. Artists like Goya and Daumier were challenged. Especially Goya, his later work was never exhibited. I think when you do satirical work, you're criticizing the leading hierarchy of art, politics, business—any power structures in society. Those people in power don't like to be criticized, but to me, the artist has always been interested. They were the ones that were saying, "Listen, all of these fake castles that you build—that you celebrate in business, in literature, in politics—a lot of times it's a bunch of lies." Goya's most celebrated period was not the one where he was making the portrait of the king, but the dark period. People don't want to see their weakness mirrored in a

Portrait by Andrea Blanch. All artwork appears courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York, except *The Freedom Fighter*, 2015, which appears courtesy of Luis De Jesus Los Angeles.

painting. They like to be disconnected from the problems of society. So in my work, I put what I think about society in their face, and I don't see any other way for me.

ANDREA: *You are putting it in their face, but it has a humor to it, even though it's very serious. Why do you think people have connected to your work?*

FEDERICO: I think they don't want to connect because usually satire is not very elegant or polite. It's always brutal, direct, grotesque, and aggressive. I think my work is connecting better now because I am astute with experience, and of course I'm becoming an older and more mature artist. In the past, it used to be very aggressive, bloody, and stereotypical, because that was my way of doing things when I was younger. Now I think the satire and all of the critique is more polite—but also more efficient, because I understand now that you can be very efficient without being outrageous and obnoxious. You can direct your point without being cut out of events.

ANDREA: *But speaking as your audience, there is—well, you know, I think your work is genius—but there is a grotesque aspect to it. I was mesmerized by all your detail in the work itself and how much effort must have gone into creating it. So, all the things you're describing about satire that don't work, you have in your work, and it works well.*

FEDERICO: No, but what I'm trying to say is that now I am able to basically have much better, and less obnoxious artwork. I used to do that purposely—that was me. I'm very happy that I did it, that I have criticized and been visually overwhelming, obnoxious, violent, and sexy. But if I wasn't able to reach this politeness, I would simply be cut out of many of the events that I'm invited to today. Many times in the past, I was simply crossed out from museum shows, because I was considered, as an artist, 'too much.' And I didn't change because I felt I had to change; I changed because of something connected to my maturity, and I feel so much better that now I can be aggressive, grotesque, satirical, but in a smoother way. I think that is the key of this body of work.

ANDREA: *What kind of impact do you feel it has on your audience, and what kind of reaction or response would you like your audience to walk away with after they see your work?*

FEDERICO: I think if I go back to the beginning of my career, the idea and the goal in making art was to make the audience reflect on the subject that I was choosing. Basically, no matter what theme I choose to investigate,

I want the audience to not trust what is put in their face. Just try to dig and have a deeper approach to everyday life. Nobody questions the nature of politics and the society in which we live. Sometimes my wife says, "Federico, you should settle down and try to see the world as less malicious." But at the same time, I feel like that's my call. I'm here. I'm on a mission. I was on a mission when nobody gave a shit about what I was making, and I think that's what I wanted to do: to destroy myth. To destroy what people believe and take for granted.

ANDREA: *Do you tailor your work to any specific audience?*

FEDERICO: I think my work speaks amazingly to younger audiences because I use a lot of technology. I think today, the older audience has a hard time connecting to my work. I'm using tools that ten-year-olds are familiar with. I'm talking about video game technology and all of these interactive elements in my work that children are growing up with now. At the same time, I wanted to combine traditional media like drawing and painting with technology to make something relevant and lasting. I remember in 2002/2003, when I did the first one-minute narrative video combining game technology, paintings and drawings, I said, "Wow, I just need five of these videos to convince people." It took five years. Each three-minute video was a year of work. Then things started to happen.

ANDREA: *How did you begin producing art? Do you have a specific background or upbringing that contributed to these political and cultural pieces?*

FEDERICO: No, my family were incredibly nice people, but they were completely uneducated. My mother went to elementary school, but nothing beyond that. My father was a butcher, so I grew up in an environment where education and culture was kind of like a crime, like a waste of time. But in Bologna, where I grew up, art and culture were in every church, in every angle of the street. It started to become relevant for me, and I felt like I was living a life that didn't belong to me. When you feel completely cut out from education, you develop this tremendous, unbeatable desire. So I started to study and research with such energy and devotion that it was like I had found God. I pushed this escape from the life I was living with so much intensity that it was so obvious that I had to become an artist. It was like inventing a life.

ANDREA: *So how did you start producing?*

FEDERICO: I think the first three or four years after I came to New York, it was just about observing. The big turning point for me was moving to Dumbo, in Brook-



Federico Solmi, Opposite: *The Almighty of Africa*, 2015; Following spread: Left: *The Savior*, 2015; Right: *The Freedom Fighter*, 2015.





lyn. I was able to rent a studio in 2002 on Jay St. I started to develop my drawings; I started to do open studio, and all these other things, and I started to look at other artists. It took a while to develop a body of work. I was ready to show work when I was 30.

ANDREA: *Were these drawings and paintings?*

FEDERICO: They were mainly drawings. Very neurotic, very busy. It had a very positive effect on me to be in Brooklyn and to be exposed to this first wave of Williamsburg and Dumbo and all of these underground environments. My first show was in a Brooklyn gallery back in 2005. I knew that all of these galleries were doing okay and that they were going to move to Manhattan. So before long my work was in Chelsea. I ended up in the Art Fair, and that was the first week or so that I had visibility. And around the same time, I started exhibiting in Europe, so things started to happen.

ANDREA: *And still not the kind of work you're doing now?*

FEDERICO: The kind of work I'm doing now I started in 2003/2004 when I did my first video animation. The first animation was integrated in a large drawing installation. I placed a monitor inside a sculpture, it was very rudimentary. I remember when I did my first animation, using *Grand Theft Auto*, it was life changing for me. I still wasn't selling anything, and nobody wanted to show my work, but I know there was a big change. I said, "I need five years. I need five videos." And I started to put together some really cool early work, which I still exhibit today.

ANDREA: *So, tell me a little bit about your process.*

FEDERICO: The things that I struggle with the most are not the things that people see. The hardest part is putting together a narrative for a series. I struggled a lot putting this Brotherhood series together, and amazingly, suddenly everything started to come together. Once I have a narrative, I start to sketch the characters by hand, doing drawings. Then, I hire a 3D modeler to create 3D models of each character and we replace the digital texture of each character with hand-painted textures. You end up with a 3D character that is dressed with painted textures. After, I create environments that I make in the video game engine that we shape and create at the studio by modeling with all this software. Then everything is texture mapped with hand-painted drawings. Once we have the environment and the character—which in this case took six months of ten people working—I start to develop individual storyboards for each video-game painting that we're creating.

Federico Solmi, *The Invader*, 2015.

ANDREA: *You had told me that you teach at Yale, but you don't have academic credentials to teach there. I'd like to know how that happened and what you teach.*

FEDERICO: I was invited to Yale to do a series of lectures, so that was the turning point. I was part of this fantastic exhibition that happened in Site Santa Fe Biennale. It was a show with twenty artists, all of the best video artists you can think of today, and a professor at Yale, a young guy named Johannes Deyoung. He got in touch with me, saying, "I put your video in the graduate program at Yale. Would you like to come do a lecture?" And I agreed. I started correspondence with Johannes, and they invited me several times. The last time, they said, "Federico, what do you think about teaching a class?" I'm teaching an interdisciplinary video class; we are basically doing what I do in the studio, using game engines to create narrative and interactive video work. I have to say, America, which I often criticize in my satirical work, is incredibly receptive. When I was 35 years old, I got the Guggenheim Fellowship, which is one of the best academic recommendations you can have in the United States, and I didn't go to college! I didn't have anything! Which means that, despite all of the problems and the crises and violence or whatever, it's still an incredible country, because it allows people to come here with nothing to show except hard work—and they're receptive.

ANDREA: *You've produced an impressive amount of work. What pushes you to work with such vigor and frequency?*

FEDERICO: A true artist, in an older sense of the word, is someone that is always constantly trying to master his ability and never sees a perfect work. He's always looking unconsciously to improve himself, to go deeper, and to use every minute of this life to shape his idea. I always tell my wife, "Listen, I would never retire." She says, "What if we won the lottery?" I say, "I will be old with you, but I want to keep working." To keep sane, you know?

ANDREA: *Your work has evolved dramatically since your ironic *Safe Journey* in 2003. Why did you introduce color?*

FEDERICO: The big turning point was the video called *The Evil Empire*, which was a really explicit work about the abuse of the Catholic Church. In order to portray this awful fictional pope, all the environments in which this character lived were like gold frescoes, and color came with that. So, going back to what we said before, what is grotesque, what is caricature, is when you take an element of a pictorial project and you exaggerate it in an obnoxious and nonrealistic proportion. So this overwhelming color that you see in my work acts like a bombardment to the viewer. Going back to the issue of

chaos, it's sort of transmitting the sense of anxiety—an overwhelming chaos—that represents the big metropolises in the 21st century. I like to overwhelm the viewer, to bombard them sometimes.

ANDREA: *You do a good job of that. [both laugh] So tell me, what ambitious project are you working on now?*

FEDERICO: Right now I'm working on an exhibition that is opening in August in Venezuela in three locations. It's an unusual event. It's a big museum solo show in a nation where politics have taken everything away from their people. Of course, it's a show that won't generate a single dollar, but I'm excited about the challenge. Also, instead of making a catalog, we are making a coloring book based on my drawings. The title for the show is "Counterfeit Heroes," and basically we're going to distribute, free-of-charge, all of these coloring books with each of the characters, like George Washington and Mussolini, so that people can take home a coloring book that shows these mythical political leaders alongside the reality of their politics. Of course there's a problem with censorship that we're trying to figure out, also the event is sponsored by the American Embassy and the Italian Embassy, so I have to be careful about what leaders I pick to feature. I'm also going over some thoughts I have about the next series with my assistant, who's basically my shrink right now. At the moment, I'm very focused on American history, American society and American historical context. We're about to have the election in 2016.

ANDREA: *Do you have anything with Donald Trump?*

FEDERICO: Absolutely. I'm interested in Melania Trump, too. That couple is like a caricature. It's going to be very difficult for me to do a satire on a satirical character. But I've studied American history quite a bit, trying to be educated before making work about it, and I think that the history of this country has always been problematic. Politics has always been the game of the super powerful. Maybe it was an exception with Obama, but he was still a Harvard-educated man. He's one of the few that I really admire, but there is a system that makes it impossible to create your dream and your utopia. I think Obama is a very good example to show that the system is so corrupted that the most idealistic person is completely paralyzed.

ANDREA: *I agree. I'm curious about a couple of things about you. With your lack of formal education, how important do you think art school is for children now?*

FEDERICO: Honestly, I think that the school system in the United States is very perverted, particularly the art education. I think all of the weakness you see in the art comes from art education. To be more specific, most of the students go to grad school for networking. Not even to study, just to build a network. It's depressing that people are willing to pay \$150,000 for networking. Who has \$150,000 to go do an MFA? Our profession is becoming a profession for the elite. Our education is becoming very mild. Everyone is so polite, they're so afraid to speak out. There is no animated conversation about art. It makes me believe that whoever is considered very important today from this bureaucratic structure will be nothing in fifty years. The art world is ruled by art consultants, Wall Street tycoons, and a few galleries. So I feel like we live in a very perverted environment. I don't want to be corrupted by all of that. I never give a damn about what is hip or what is trending. It's not that I don't care, it's that I don't trust them.

ANDREA: *When you came here with nothing, what did you live on? Did you have a second job?*

FEDERICO: Absolutely. I've always been very hard-working. When I first came to New York, I had saved some money in Italy, so for the first two years I had enough money to just observe. Then, I had to do any kind of job. I did everything from modeling to plastering walls. I think it's important to be exposed to the most corrupt of society while in the craziest, most innovative environment. An artist is someone that is able to digest and understand the course of society before many average people are able to. There's got to be some magic about the artist, they cannot just be crazy. I have to think that what pushes me to do all of this is beyond just being crazy, it is like an extreme desire for clarity. I think from an outside point of view, it looks like madness, because there's not much money involved. If you're lucky you can pay expenses. There's this perception that with success, money will follow, but the reality is you barely have the money to do the next series. And things probably are not going to change.

ANDREA: *So what do you do, receive patronage, get commissioned, sell your work?*

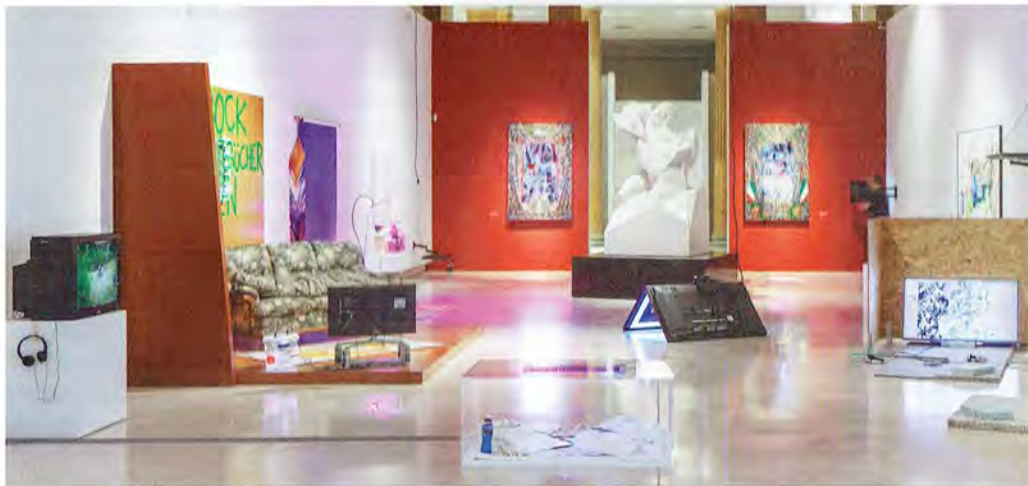
FEDERICO: No, not really. Basically, whatever I sell goes into the next project. We're not talking about making serious money here. It's a labor of love. The big money at the moment is in the most predictable art. That's obvious. If you're not predictable, you just get kicked in the ass. And it's always been like this. You do predictable, luxurious, and well-packaged art, and you get ahead. But I have zero interest in that.



Federico Solmi, Opposite: *The Waltz*, 2015; Following spread: Left: *Madame Royale*, 2015; Right: *Who He Shake the Earth*, 2015.



Around Town: Rome



A photograph of a maritime map sketched by traffickers on a scrap of paper, coupled with a wall text recapitulating the Italian regulations on discarding 'hazardous waste' at sea: *Il viaggio* (The Trip, 2016) won Raffaella Biscotti first prize for the 16th Quadriennale di Roma. As minimal as it is graphic, the work sums up the daily odyssey experienced by refugees crossing the Mediterranean, as well as the artist's legal battle to get permission to sink a marble block in the Strait of Sicily, as a submerged monument to those who lose their lives at sea. The impassive language of bureaucracy marks the distance between art and life.

The 16th Quadriennale, relaunched after an eight-year hiatus, maps the Italian art scene by numbers: ten thematic sections, 11 curators, 99 artists, 150 recent works and one building, the 19th-century Palazzo delle Esposizioni on the Via Nazionale, where the exhibition has been hosted since its inauguration in 1931, when Italy was under Fascist rule. The title of this year's show, 'Other Times, Other Myths', pays homage to the queer writer Pier Vittorio Tondelli, and specifically to his cult book *Un weekend postmoderno* (A Postmodern Weekend, 1990), which blends notes and articles on art with literature, fashion, sex, youth culture, clubbing and fading ideologies. Accordingly, the exhibition layout is not always easy to navigate. Paraphrasing the title of a Pasolini film, 'Orestide Italiana' (An Italian Orestes), curated by Giovanni Frangi, questions national identities and Italian colonialism

through works such as the videos *Malù. The stereotype of the Black Venus in Italy* (2015), by the duo Invernomuto, and Alessandra Ferrini's *Negotiating Amnesia* (2015). Curated by Luigi Fassi, 'Democracy in America' is inspired by the 19th-century historian Alexis De Tocqueville's Italian travelogues; in it, Renato Leotta's series of short films, 'Belvedere' (2016), contemplates the lethargic southern landscape, while the video *Agency-Giochi di potere* (Power Games, 2014), by Adelita Husni-Bey (awarded the prize for best artist under 35), records an experiment around direct democracy that was organized by the artist and interpreted by the students of a Roman high school.

The relationship between art, politics and social space lies at the heart of the show 'De Rerum Rurale', for which Matteo Lucchetti brought together several examples of community-based practices by artists including Biscotti, Danilo Correale, Anna Scalfi Eghenter, Marinella Senatore and Valentina Vetturi. 'Cyphoria', curated by Domenico Quaranta, fills the white cube with a postinternet wave of vitriolic irony with works by Alterazioni Video, Eva & Franco Mattes and Federico Solmi, among others, whose animations *The Father of His Nation* (Giulio Cesare) and *The Great Patriot* (George Washington) (2016), parody populist parades and rhetoric on both sides of the Atlantic.

Q16 also expanded events into almost 30 local spaces and institutions. The first and foremost is MAXXI, hosting (until 29 January) the current edition of its 'Premio MAXXI' prize for Italian artists:

the shortlist includes Riccardo Arena, Ludovica Carbotta, Husni-Bey and the filmmakers Zapruder, who won the contest. In their glittery video installation *Zeus Machine* (2016), a rock band plays frantically while a group of climbers manically ascend a greasy pole over and over again, amid cheers from the public, in a Sisiphean loop of compulsive performativity.

Private foundations now play a significant role in Rome: Fondazione Memmo hosted a performance by Francesco Fonassi, while Fondazione Nomas installed a selection of existing and newly commissioned works from its collection in the archeological area of the Palatine hill, under the bombastic Latin title 'Par tibi, Roma, nihil' (Nothing Compares to You, Rome): my favourite was Piero Golia's ironic sculpture *Loser* (2003), a set of giant letters spelling out the title, aptly deflating all curatorial hubris to 'colonize' the ruins. Also of note is the artist-run space Fondazione Baruchello, which has just opened a new venue in via del Vascello, and Fondazione Giuliani, across the river from Trastevere, where Frutta, T293 and Gavin Brown's galleries are now gathered. The talk of the town, though, was 'Time Is Out of Joint', the exhibition that marked the radical rehang of GNAM (Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna), renamed La Galleria Nazionale; it was curated by its director, Cristiana Collu. Restored, repainted white and bathed in natural light, this Roman Sleeping Beauty has woken up. The non-chronological display mixes works and epochs, while neoclassical sculptures are scattered around rooms like silent visitors. The result is surprising, but it made me wonder if, perhaps, theatricality and evocation are indeed the best ways to stage a national history. The shock of the new runs the risk of erasing Italy's cumbersome past, together with its progression of patriotic war scenes, rural misery, artistic propaganda, consumerist enthusiasms and doped mediascape. The late Spanish writer George Santayana famously stated: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' He would know. He lived in Rome for half of his life.

BARBARA CASAVECCHIA

1
'Jugendzimmer', 2016, curated by Dirk Schönberger, exhibition view at Crone Wien, Vienna

2
'Fieber/Fever', 2016, curated by Kari Rittenbach, exhibition view at Emanuel Layr, Vienna

3
'Cyphoria', 2016, curated by Domenico Quaranta, exhibition view at the 16th Quadriennale, Rome

Review The media age run amok in 'Federico Solmi: The Brotherhood' at Luis De Jesus Gallery



Federico Solmi's "The Brotherhood" mixes painting with video animation. (Luis De Jesus Gallery)

By **Christopher Knight**, Art Critic

JUNE 21, 2016, 6:00 AM

I imagine animating the surging throngs in James Ensor's monumental 1888 masterpiece, "Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889," with its grotesque painted caricatures of mobs populating church and state and engulfed in an alarming aura of surging madness. You'll have some idea of what Federico Solmi's "The Brotherhood" is like.

At Luis De Jesus Gallery, eight LED monitors and a room-size [installation](#) for a suite of five more monitors transform paintings into disturbing video-pageants. The New York-based artist frames the moving imagery with piles of debris painted directly on the screens, heavy on the logos of consumer trash. What is on the televisions is rubbish made remarkable.

"The Brotherhood" is composed of world leaders, past and present: George Washington, Pope [Benedict XVI](#), Montezuma, [Otto von](#) Bismarck, Mussolini, Abraham Lincoln and more — almost all of them men. A few

women do turn up, notably Marie Antoinette and Byzantine Empress Theodora, but they are feminine exceptions to the testosterone-fueled rule.

In the animations the Brotherhood struts down red carpets to [the flash](#) of camera lights, descends imposing flights of stairs and socializes at a magnificent ball on the fashionably gross order of New York's famous Met Gala. The installation work, dubbed "The Ballroom," is set up like a theater, complete with crimson curtains, and our job is to passively gape. Black waiters haul giant champagne bottles and enormous lobsters on silver trays to a cohort of dancing celebrity power, textbook leaders and villains who get increasingly intoxicated as the sumptuous event wears on.

Solmi deftly employs sophisticated 3-D and video-game technology as an armature for his disquieting video work. Wrapping the gussied-up characters and their vulgar scenography in hand-painted pictures that have been digitally fed into his computer, he creates passages that make Heath Ledger's Joker seem sedate. On the soundtrack, organ-grinder music rumbles amid rising tides of cheering.

The hypnotic result is garish, puppet-like figures that seem to float through space, rather like Macy's Thanksgiving parade balloons run amok. At once thrilling and chilling, the monstrous spectacles are a wickedly funny distillation of modern media mayhem.

Luis De Jesus Gallery, 2685 S. La Cienega Blvd., Culver City. Through July 9. Closed Sundays and Mondays. (310) 838-6000, www.luisdejesus.com

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For The Record

JUN. 21, 2016, 10:45 AM

An earlier version of this story misstated the date of James Ensor's "Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889." It was made in 1888.

CRITICS' PICKS

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New York

- Martine Syms
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- "The Freedom Principle"

New York

Federico Solmi

POSTMASTERS

54 Franklin Street

September 8–October 17

In his latest output, Federico Solmi scans hand-painted imagery and applies it to digital three-dimensional models of world leaders. He then imports each into a video-game platform and records their movements as if they were on a movie set. Titled "The Brotherhood" 2015, this series includes "video-paintings" of mostly infamous leaders with works that indict the viewer and society as much as the leaders themselves, as they flamboyantly posture like shallow celebrities. For example, *The Invader (Christopher Columbus – Italy)* (all works 2015), in which the titular figure struts, laughs, and salutes in front of an abstract landscape of shifting colors, resembles a Hollywood screen test.

In group scenes such as *The Waltz*, Solmi emphasizes the pomp and circumstance that accompanies state functions, in this case manifesting in a ballroom dance where leaders from different eras, such as Ramses II and Mussolini, move in close embrace. The scratchy lines of Solmi's distinctive, cartoonish, garishly hued renderings of the leaders and their surroundings thankfully don't resemble the polished, rounded forms of mainstream digital animation, with its cloying, interchangeable characters.

The artist has painted ornamental details on the Plexiglas surface of the works, which covers each video monitor, further intensifying its theatricality. In *The Brotherhood Triptych*, Napoleon, Mussolini, and Marie Antoinette among others arrive depart on a spaceship amid a cheering throng of spectators, evoking the idea that such leaders are mainly entertainers wielding unearned power. The audio tracks of individual works, including distorted national anthems and carousel music, combine to heighten the forced pageantry to comedic levels. Solmi has also painted the walls a deep reddish orange, so as to mimic the manufactured splendor of government-sponsored events—propaganda to maintain the status quo.



Federico Solmi, *The Invader*, 2015, acrylic, gold leaf, mixed media with LCD screen and video, 24 x 16".

— Chris Bors

ART WORLD

At Postmasters, Federico Solmi Lets Tyrants Show Off

Blake Gopnik, Tuesday, October 6, 2015



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THE DAILY PIC (#1405): For a while now, the works of Federico Solmi have offered expressionist trips through the grim underbelly of human history. My only problem has been that his pieces haven't been quite grim enough – they've been more Ralph Steadman-comic than Art Spiegelman-cautionary.

I can't say that of Solmi's latest show at Postmasters gallery in New York. Using crude gaming software, Solmi brings together some of history's greatest tyrants and creeps – Idi Amin, Genghis Khan, Marie Antoinette – and has them strut their stuff on the red carpet and the dance floor. (Click on my image to see a GIF.) More than anything, Solmi captures the garish pomp and obscene self-display that despots almost always prefer.

Bad taste is not, of course, the worst of their crimes. But it doesn't hurt the aesthetic cause to be able to point out a correlation between outsized ugliness and hideous souls.

I know that correlation is not causation. But Solmi lets us pretend that it is.

For a full survey of past Daily Pics visit blakegopnik.com/archive.

#blake gopnik #exhibitions #galleries #new media



Blake Gopnik



Federico Solmi's Twisted Take on the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

ARTSY EDITORIAL
JUN 2ND, 2015 6:32 PM



Federico Solmi, American Circus (Installation view), 2014, 3 video paintings, acrylic paint on plexiglass, gold and silver leaf, video loop, time varies, 18 x 24 inches (each)

In keeping with the internet age, CONNERSMITH, has recently launched a new online exhibition series on its website. For its inaugural presentation, the gallery features three mixed media video works by Federico Solmi, who is known for using art as a platform for his satirical, at times seathing, commentary on contemporary society. In these recent pieces, he focuses on an event that lends itself all too well to criticism: the 2016 U.S. presidential race.



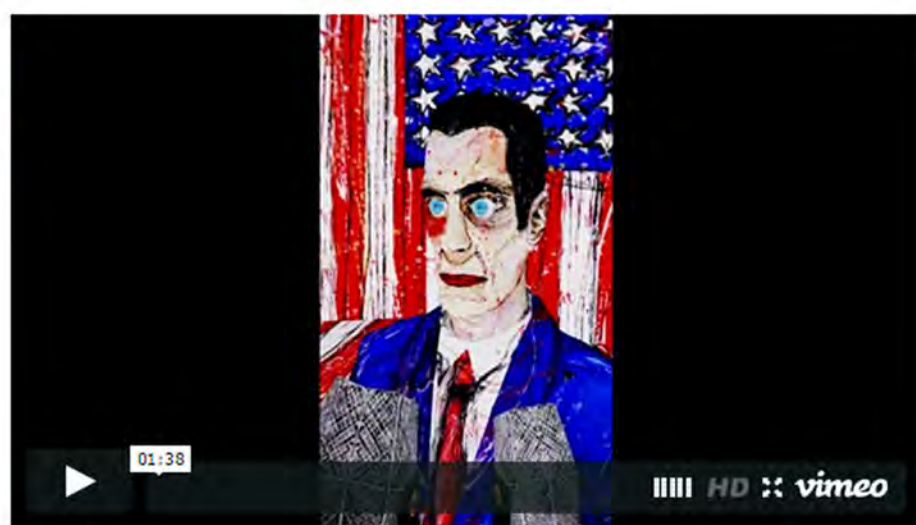
Federico Solmi
American Circus - The Next President of the United States of America, 2014
CONNERSMITH



Each one of the videos is centered upon a political archetype, as indicated by Solmi's titles: *The Next President of the United States of America*, *The Last President of the United States of America*, and *Dick Richman Wall Street Tycoon* (all 2014). Rendered with a combination of video game animation technology, acrylic paint, and gold and silver leaf on Plexiglas (these are objects as much as videos), the figures move in the stiff, staccato manner typical of video game characters. They stand against a background filled with an American flag, and before a bank of microphones, nodding their heads to acknowledge the cheers of an unseen crowd. Their faces are ghoulish-like, complete with waxy-looking skin, dark bags under eyes that practically pop out of their heads, and curious crimson splatters that resemble splattered blood. The bright reds, whites, and blues that comprise the scene glow and pulse continuously.



Federico Solmi
American Circus - Dick Richman Wall Street Tycoon, 2014
 CONNERSMITH.



Though each figure is shown as if preparing to give a speech, only the *The Last President of the United States of America* actually talks. In composing his short address, Solmi takes stock of what he sees as the subtext of presidential messaging, distills it down to its essence, and then foregrounds it—with frightening results. “My fellow Americans, we are the best country in the world,” says the candidate. “We are spreading freedom and liberty across our empire, and we will continue to rule the world thanks to our invincible military. Our currency is gaining strength. Our appetite for supremacy and authority endures, and because of this, the rest of the world is on their knees. God bless America.” My fellow Americans: get ready for 2016.



Federico Solmi
American Circus - The Last President of the United States of America, 2014
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—Karen Kedmey

"Federico Solmi: American Circus" is on view at CONNERSMITH., Washington, D.C., May 18 – Jun. 15, 2015.

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Can an L.A. Art Fair Be Loved?



Courtesy Flickr
Federico Solmi's "Douche Bag City" at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles's booth

By Doug Harvey, ARTINFO Los Angeles

Published: February 1, 2011

LOS ANGELES— "Art fairs aren't fair," criminally underrated Los Angeles painter Karen Carson quipped to me last Saturday, halfway through the city's annualesque descent into art-world multitasking known as Art Los Angeles Contemporary. Her remark, made in the midst — of all places — of a new show of Chuck Arnoldi's unrepentant 1980s abstractions at Rosamund Felsen Gallery, begged the obvious question, "But are they art?" As someone who tends to avoid even regular openings because of the kinesthetic and pheromonal interference generated by herds of desperate careerists, I was surprised to survive the weekend with a firm answer: Maybe.

With exponentially frantic circles of activity expanding around last weekend's fair to cap off the official "L.A. Arts Month," the *horror vacui* of art events — extravaganza displays, special gallery programming across a dozen or so art scenes, unique performance events, fundraising auctions, video screenings, cocktail parties, and anti-censorship protests — takes on an almost transcendental sublimity, like surrendering to the overwhelming intricacy of a Persian rug or Bach cantata. Almost.

The trick seems to be staying slightly drunk for the entire month, or at least that's what I surmise from the more positive reports I've encountered. According to my own research, it's a useful strategy for squelching the more hysterical vibrations generated by an airplane hangar chock-full of post-boom denial. Admittedly, I had to focus on the actual Art Los Angeles Contemporary weekend due to a touchy case of the gout, but preliminary findings are hopeful.

Just in its second year, and with a major venue shift (from Hollywood's high-end dead mall Pacific Design Center to the cavernous Bergamot Station-adjacent Barker Hangar at Santa Monica Airport), the fair has generated unusually good buzz, especially for L.A., where regular attempts to galvanize the idiosyncratic local art juju into the boilerplate structure of other major art fairs have been falling flat for decades. Much of that is due to its range of participants, which, while including some well-established galleries like ACE Gallery, China Art Objects, and Suzanne Vielmetter, emphasizes artist-run spaces, quirky upstarts, and fly-by-night pop-ups — or at least the ones that can afford the rent.

What really set the fair apart (and may give it the edge over Art Platform Los Angeles, yet another fair, scheduled to coincide this fall with the Getty's massive, citywide "Pacific Standard Time" spectacle) is its conspicuous incorporation of consistently compelling live programming, with an emphasis on performance. Opening night featured dozens of Marnie Weber's ragtag monsters mingling with bemused (and slightly drunk) VIPs, courtesy of Emi Fontana's West of Rome enterprise.

The weekend was studded with inspired musical performances by the cutting-edge likes of Chris Johanson's Sun Foot, Lucky Dragons, Nowcloud, and Emily Lacy, while more unclassifiable performances curated by Chinatown collective Human Resources were showcased in a specially built amphitheater. There were even some cool interviews and panel discussions, which is normally an oxymoron. It almost seemed like the L.A. art scene might be animated by a coherent groundswell of DIY creative activity. If they could just get rid of all these people in cubicles trying to sell decorative artifacts for ridiculous sums of money, they might be on to something.

Federico Solmi

Apocalypse already

"Welcome to Douche Bag City, a hopeless place where the greedy villains of society are imprisoned for their atrocities committed against the community." — Introduction, *Douche Bag City*

Federico Solmi is no stranger to controversy. Take, for instance, his crucifix piece titled *The Evil Empire*, which was confiscated from the Arte Fiera international exhibition in Bologna in 2009. The cross, which bears an image of a smiling papal figure sporting an exposed erection, prompted an Italian judge to slap Solmi with obscenity and "religious offense" charges, which were eventually dropped.

For *The Dissolve*, Solmi — an Italian-born artist and 2009 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellow (for video and audio) — presents an equally contentious work, albeit one that points its finger not at religion but at corporate greed and our complicity in its continued existence and growth.

Presented as a first-person-shooter video game on 15 custom-framed LCD screens, *Douche Bag City* introduces viewers to Dick Richman, "an insatiable and corrupt Wall Street employee," according to one of Solmi's 15 looped animations. "There is definitely a lot of rage in this work and a deep feeling of social injustice throughout all 15 episodes of the video installation," Solmi told *Pasatiempo*. "The Bernard Madoff case and the current economic crisis have definitely had a huge impact on me and the development of this project."

Dick Richman is the product of a vicious system; he is the inevitable consequence of a culture and a social construct in decay. "At its early stages," Solmi said, "*Douche Bag City* was conceived to be a satire of the world economic crises and a parody of Wall Street greed. But, unexpectedly, the irony and the sarcasm turned darker. I think that at one point during my research of the causes that triggered the financial crash, I felt totally helpless and I went into a mood of resignation. I began to think that it is impossible to fight against the obscure forces and powerful figures that are controlling our society. And so *Douche Bag City* evolved into a dystopian and frightening vision of how an ultramodern metropolis can transform once the economic system crashes, with no possibility of recovery. Life becomes total mayhem."

Solmi's drawings were mounted and animated in 3-D environments by the artist's longtime collaborator, Russell Lowe, a New Zealand-born artist and professor of digital media at New South Wales University in Sydney, Australia. "When I began my career, I was exploring



Federico Solmi: *Douche Bag City* (still), 2010

mainly traditional media, such as drawings and paintings," Solmi explained. "Soon I realized that I was searching for ... media that allowed me more freedom. I put together my first video animation with Lowe called *Rocco Never Dies* in 2004 after I came across an R-rated video game titled *Grand Theft Auto*. The game stunned me for its revolutionary content. Immediately I thought of building an animated video that incorporated drawings." (*Rocco Never Dies* is a satirical 2-D-drawing animation based on the 1998 XXX-rated film of the same name.)

It took approximately 12 months to complete the drawings and paintings and to prepare the 3-D environment for *Douche Bag City*, and two more months to complete editing, according to Solmi. But why frame Dick Richman in a video game? "I realized that using a modification of a video-game platform and combining it with the hand-drawn and hand-painted textures would bring an enormous amount of new narrative possibilities to the work," Solmi said.

Using the digital technology and interactive aspects of game design, Solmi was able to introduce a live-action element to the creative process. It allowed him to direct and film each scene using different computers linked together. Numerous individuals then operated the computers in real time, each controlling a character or element within each scene under Solmi's guidance — like orchestrating an elaborate digital puppet show. Solmi was instantaneously able to manipulate the characters and their environments.

It seems fitting that audiences will see *Douche Bag City* in its entirety for the first time during SITE Santa Fe's Eighth International Biennial,

just weeks after BP CEO Tony Hayward told reporters he just wanted his life back. Solmi explores communal hopelessness and toys with the idea of revenge fantasy within the framework of corporate-culture enslavement — two themes that play heavy on the minds of many Americans these days.

In "Evil Always Prevails," the last episode of *Douche Bag City*, Dick Richman the corporate sleazebag is triumphant. "I have to admit," Solmi said, "that on some occasions I had some fun in beating, hurting, and killing Dick Richman. But toward the end I was taken again by a mood of resignation." Solmi felt a deep sense of failure because, even in his imaginary world, he wasn't able to twist the reality of corporate lies and cheating. The most noticeable difference between Solmi's latest projects and his previous work, he explained, is that the optimistic attitude and search for a blissful ending have completely disappeared. "The apocalyptic scenario of *Douche Bag City* is a metaphor of our unstable present," Solmi said. "The sense of tragedy that can be felt in my work comes from my inability to embrace a culture made of false myths and moral codes."

— Rob DeWalt

the dissolve
SITE SANTA FE

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

SANTA FE REPORT

EVERYTHING MOVES, ALL THE TIME

SITE Santa Fe's eighth biennial focuses on animation, offering insight into the medium's development and diversity.

BY LEAH OLLMAN



ANIMATION IS A LAWLESS realm, a domain of wonder and subversion. The law of gravity doesn't apply within its frames, nor do conventions of scale, logic or continuity. The same could be said of painting, drawing, collage and all sorts of print media, but because animation unfolds in time, its flaunting of the rules is all the more devious and delicious. Curators Daniel Belasco and Sarah Lewis avoided characterizing "The Dissolve," SITE Santa Fe's Eighth International Biennial, as an animation show, wanting, no doubt, to thwart reflexive associations with Disney, Pixar, or Spike & Mike, but also because that particular umbrella could hardly shelter the practices of all 27 artists in the show. Some, like Cindy Sherman, have made only a single animated film (*Doll Clothes*, 1975). George Griffin, who's been reinventing the field for decades (designating his early work

"anti-cartoons"), recalled in a round-table discussion among the show's artists printed in the catalogue that he and his friends have argued about how to define animation since the '70s. "We never really satisfactorily answered that question. I think the concept of Frankenstein is more like it—make something spring to life that wasn't alive before, and that still works for me."

That works well enough for the biennial, too, which explores the age-old impulse to animate (think Pygmalion) more than it surveys a medium. The show traces this central idea largely through works from the past decade, but also dips into the '90s, '80s, and '70s, and even further back, to acknowledge animation's role in pioneering cinema at the turn of the 20th century.

If the exhibition's structure feels familiar, like that of a conventional theme show, its physical form is fresh and seductive. Translucent scrims (made of spun polypropylene but resembling fibrous rice paper) in deep olive and cobalt articulate the space, transforming what is essentially a mini-multiplex of

Left to right, Lotte Reiniger's *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, 1926; Oscar Muñoz's *Re/trato*, 2003; and Robin Rhode's *Kid Candle*, 2009, all video projections. Photo Eric Swanson. All photos this article in "The Dissolve" at SITE Santa Fe.

screens into a textured, sensual environment. The installation's comfortable feel helps compensate for the show's implicit challenge: to see everything just once (pieces ranged from one minute to one hour) requires roughly five hours. David Adjaye's exhibition design offers a mix of viewing conditions, ranging from personal screens with headphones to group-friendly, home-theater-sized projections served by overhead speakers. The price of such variety and openness, however, is slight sound bleed throughout.

The show is dynamic by default: everything moves, all the time. This intense visuality is blissfully uninterrupted by labels or wall texts; visitors receive a pamphlet with a map identifying the works. Both generous and demanding, "The Dissolve" serves as something of a jolt to viewers inured to the fundamental

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

SITE Santa Fe Biennial,
through Jan. 2, 2011.

AN ADVENTURE TO EXPERIENCE, "THE DISSOLVE" FOLLOWS A THREAD THAT LINKS DIGITAL AND MANUAL, PRESENT AND PAST. THE SHOW ABOUNDS IN WIT AND POIGNANCY.

magic of moving pictures. While much of the work involves digital manipulation of one sort or another, all of the artists share a commitment to the hand, infusing movement and change into drawn, painted or sculpted imagery. This emphasis on the hand directs attention to the material nature of a medium already widely prized for its narrative potential.

BELASCO AND LEWIS, who came to the job after helping Robert Storr to organize SITE's fifth biennial in 2004-05, narrowed their focus to representational imagery,² assembling artists from the U.S., South Africa, Japan, Iran, France, Germany, Austria, Colombia, the Netherlands and Italy. (Six of them—Maria Lassnig, Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, Raymond Pettibon, Cindy Sherman and Kara Walker—are veterans of Storr's show.) Closely related territory has been



explored in several other exhibitions in recent years,³ and Belasco and Lewis don't contribute much to the scholarly dialogue, but the gathering of so much work grounded in the fundamentals of storytelling and markmaking is refreshing, nourishing, even reassuring.

Inventive, hybridized form is a com-

mon denominator throughout. Nearly everything holds some visual intrigue, even if several works amount to little more than exercises in style—Thomas Demand's staged, stop-motion recreation of the look and sound of rain (2008), for instance, or Laleh Khorramian's evolving hallucinatory montage loosely themed around water (2010). Voice, the storyteller's primary instrument, matters at least as much as visuals

in many of the most memorable pieces. Brent Green tells the tale of *Paulina Hollers* (2006) with the same raw urgency that motivates his desperate, tortured characters. Mary Reid Kelley's *You Make Me Iliad* (2010) strikes a marvelously odd tone, fusing the formality of ancient recitative poetry with spunky,

irreverent humor. One of the biennial's two commissioned works (the second, by Bill T. Jones and Openended Group, is discussed below), the 7-minute video is set during World War I and takes its visual cues from early German cinema and Dada theater. Live action sequences are interspersed with stop-motion animation. The live footage alone offers the illusion of three dimensions: the characters' faces are painted a flat, pale gray, their features outlined in black, and their eyes cupped to appear as blankly open, black dashes. The narrator (played by the artist), a young German officer in occupied Belgium, is composing an epic, à la Homer, but finds his story lacking in female presence: "One must consider, when writing fiction, the literati's Heroine addiction." He interviews a local prostitute (also Reid Kelley), who describes herself as "a Whore for Metaphor" and astounds the naive chronicler with her eloquence and ambition. History, as usual, is being written by the victor, but then rewritten

by Reid Kelley with a darkly comic sensibility, generous in punning wordplay and winking anachronisms.

Maria Lassnig Kantate (1992) also amuses with its disjunctive tone, at once bitter and sweet. Lassnig appears live, singing the story of her life, while the traumas, pains, frustrations and delights she describes play out in cartoonish form beside her. Moving through a multitude of costumes, she shape-shifts between matron, moll and macho as her folksy, sing-song oratorio describes the tempestuous household of her childhood, the teasing by her peers, the infidelity of her mates. All the while, she relates, the "large talent" she was endowed with (in place of beauty, which presumably would have made her life easier) carried her along. Hilarious and heartfelt, *Kantate* is an anthem to personal endurance and, ultimately, an ode to art's redemptive power.

PARODY FINDS FERTILE ground among artists who subvert animation's familiar, mainstream idioms. Robert Pruitt takes on the comic superhero in his scath-

ingly funny vignettes of the travails of *Black Stuntman* (Volumes 1 and 2), 2004. In simple, hand-drawn pencil sketches, Pruitt stages brief episodes in which the hero's actions or ambitions are thwarted, undermined or otherwise cancelled out by his status as an African-American in a predominantly white culture. The theme song and Pruitt's voice-over skewer classic racial stereotypes. Each short segment issues a pungent burst of satiric humor.

Federico Solmi borrows the format of animated, first-person video games in his *Douche Bag City* (2010), a set of short sequences presented on 15 small, ornately framed screens, hung salon-style. An agitated, blood-spattered world ruled by corruption and greed, Solmi's urban dystopia is as violent visually as it is criminally. The player/watcher assumes the role

of ruthless corporate scammer Dick Richman ("product of a vicious system"), who must fight for his life in this hell-on-earth. Martha Colburn's *Myth Labs* (2008), too, injects a dose of chaos and confusion into American complacency. A worthy heir to Hannah Höch, Colburn cuts, paints and pastes together a rapid-fire history lesson starring Native Americans, pilgrims, founding fathers,



Right, two stills from Federico Solmi's *Douche Bag City*, 2010. 15 video animations with custom-made frames. Courtesy LMAK Projects, New York; ADN Gallery, Barcelona; and Jerome Zoppo Contemporary, Milan.

Above right, Christine Rebet: *The Black Cabinet*, 2007, two-channel installation, 35mm film transferred to DVD, approx. 3 minutes. Courtesy Galerie Kamel Mennoun, Paris.

Opposite top, two stills from Mary Reid Kelley's *You Make Me Mad*, 2010, HD video, approx. 7 1/4 minutes.

Opposite bottom, Martha Colburn: *Myth Labs*, 2008, 16mm film transferred to DVD, approx. 7 3/4 minutes. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York.



Jesus, Moses and a cast of thousands. She interweaves her critique of the country's "discovery" story with references to its pervasive drug culture. Everyone lights up in this not-quite-civilized wilderness encompassing past and present.

Offsetting these pokes at the socio-cultural status quo are a handful of more soft-spoken works. Joshua Mosley combines puppetry, delicate watercolors and a score rich in strings to tell the story of stunted love between a man who spends his days polishing a monument to the past and a woman working in the high-tech field of fiber optics. In Avish Khebrezadeh's *Edgar* (2010), lyrical narrative fragments are projected onto a stage in the artist's painting of an ornate, empty theater. Christine Rebet's *The Black Cabinet* (2007), a two-channel installation, is bathed in an ennui that even the hand grenades tossed into one scene cannot shatter. Paul Chan's *4th Light* (2006) is the meditative heart of the show, a silent, 14-minute procession of silhouetted bodies flailing downward, with telephone booths, hammers, basketball hoops and cardboard boxes floating slowly upward. Projected above eye level, the piece suggests the view from a high window, its frame a net ensnaring unearthly visions, fears and deadly realities.

Both Oscar Muñoz and Berni Searle evoke the erosion of memory with figurative imagery that evaporates or decomposes. Time itself is the animator here, the engine of both creative and destructive transformation. William Kentridge, esthetic godfather to so much in "The Dissolve," is represented by *History of the Main Complaint* (1996). As in his other "drawings for projection," the exquisite mutation of forms—an X-ray, a cat, a telephone—achieved

Fleischer Studios produced its "Out of the Inkwell" series, represented here by "Big Chief" Ko-Ko (1924), a short episode dense with visual puns and clever back-and-forth action between the real and the represented.

The negotiation of this divide is ripe for physical humor. Kentridge manages it satisfyingly in a series of film sketches (not shown in the Biennial) in homage to Georges Méliès, the turn-of-the-20th-century inventor of stop-motion special

of the 1870s and '80s dissected movement into its constituent parts, which could then be sequenced to simulate the natural flow of motion. Griffin's hand-cranked, wall-mounted viewer animates still images of running figures. A Muybridge photograph in the center of the circle serves as sun to a panoply of orbiting characters—a sketchy linear human, a red cartoonish blob, a spoked wheel with feet.

Each artist in the show is represented by a single work, allowing the inclusion of those not known for their ventures into animation, such as Sherman or Dziga Vertov, but also meaning that scant attention is given to seminal figures like Robert Breer, whose experiments date back to the 1940s. He is represented here by a work from 1986. SITE Santa Fe's commission of Bill T. Jones and Openended Group to produce a stereoscopic version of an existing, digitally recorded dance piece feels tangential, squeezed unaccountably through the eye of the curatorial needle.

In spite of both thin spots and some flab, "The Dissolve" is an adventure to experience. The show follows a fascinating thread linking digital and manual, present and past; it abounds in wit and poignancy. Griffin articulates best what artists like himself are up to: "a kind of cathartic wrestling match with the 19th Century, whose pre-cinema toys and gadgets have always inspired animators, and with practices like painting, quick sketch scribbling, stop motion cinematography."⁴ Such "concrete animation," as he called it, does indeed feel real and vital. ○



Joshua Mosley: *A Vue*, 2004, video animation, 7 1/2 minutes. Courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago.

through stop-motion animation attests to the continuity between the personal and political, between internal and external histories. The storylines in Jacco Olivier's *Almost* (2009) and Ezra Johnson's *What Visions Burn* (2006) are thinner, but both pieces are compelling as narratives of their own painterly becoming.

FROM THE START, animators were tickled by the tricks of their trade and incorporated that self-reflexive delight into their work. In *The Enchanted Drawing* (1900), made by the Edison Manufacturing Company during animation's first decade (and, like the other historical works in the show, screened among more recent pieces), a quick-sketch artist draws a man's head, a wine bottle and a goblet. The drawn face registers dismay as the artist is seen plucking the bottle and glass from the page and pouring himself a drink. In the 1½-minute skit, a static image comes to life, enabling two- and three-dimensional characters to interact with one another. A generation later,

effects. Robin Rhode does the same in his slight *Kid Candle* (2009), in which a boy puts a match to a candle drawn on the wall beside him, and blows on the flickering flame. Such quotations, references and echoes across time crop up throughout the show. Hiraki Sawa's 3-minute video *Airliner* (2003) mimics the effects of that old hand-held animating device, the flipbook. Kara Walker's pair of shadow-puppet narratives (2009) are shown near *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926), Lotte Reiniger's lovely stop-motion, shadow-puppet interpretation of *The Arabian Nights*, regarded as the oldest surviving feature-length animated film.

George Griffin's 2007 digital remake of his 1976 *Viewmaster* pays whimsical tribute to one of the key originators of motion picture technology, Eadweard Muybridge, whose photographic studies

1 George Griffin in "Artists' Roundtable Discussion," *The Dissolve*, SITE Santa Fe, 2010, p. 165. 2 "The Abstract Dissolve," a separate, one-day showcase of abstract moving-image work, was held during the biennial's opening weekend. 3 *The Drawing Center*, New York, and the UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, held animation exhibitions in 2006, as did Parasol Unit in London in 2007, and the San Diego Museum of Art in 2008. 4 From his "Concrete Animation" lecture delivered at the 2007 Pervasive Animation Symposium at Tate Modern. An abstract is available on the artist's website, www.geogriffin.com.

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