LEGENDS

JEFF GIBSON
JULY 11 - AUGUST 17, 1997

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art
Hugo, 1937, screenprint, image 70 x 100 cm.
Peking, 1997, screenprint, image 70 x 100 cm.
Karloff, 1997, screenprint, image 70 x 100 cm.
Constantinople, 1997, screenprint, image 70 x 100 cm.
Franz, 1997, screenprint, image 70 x 100 cm.
Batavia, 1997, screenprint, image 70 x 100 cm.
JEFF GIBSON’S TASTE IN MEN

Taste is the basis for all that one has—people and things—and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others.

The public is not the realm of the subject, but of others, of all that is other to—and in—the subject itself.

Jeff Gibson’s six large screenprints appeal at first glance to a Pop sensibility. The alternating images of heads paired with objects, and pairs of objects, floating against generic, striped backgrounds, are crisp and colourful. The Mills and Boon guy with the Karloff vodka bottle near the centre of the array are reminders of Pop’s media-derived commercial imagery. But none of the rest of the heads or objects is recognizably iconic in the same way. Twisting Pop familiarity, Gibson’s perverse logos are recalcitrant: what is that spiky thing? What do the juxtapositions mean? The tension between this recalcitrance and the direct style of presentation asks for a different kind of attention than one of Warhol’s soup cans, to use perhaps the most iconic example. Associations emerge gradually, within and between Gibson’s images, which are circuitous, funny, sometimes fragile. Warhol accounted for his soup can pictures in the most basic terms of taste, saying he ate the same soup for lunch every day for twenty years. Gibson is concerned with taste as well, but for him, after Pop, taste is not a question of habituation and repetition, but something a little more tendentious, a little more gothic.

‘Taste is more than just a marker of subjectivity: “The ten albums you want on a desert island, your last meal before execution; terminal scenarios. In these projections of the most desperate conditions imaginable, taste will be what you have when you have nothing else left.”’

Terminal scenarios aside, how does one deal with the everyday problem of how to have taste in a media-saturated society? How do you make a distinction that is your

own, personal, when the categories of private and public are irrevocably intertwined. The intimacy between the world of making and maintaining a subjectivity and that of signifying information is gothic in the sense that it renders both processes uncanny, so that subjectivity and the objects and images that go to make it seem at once familiar and remote (at least as far away as the television screen). And the objects and images seem just as alive as the subjectivities they make. Warhol’s response to the problem of taste was to turn transparent to the light of the media, to like everything. In these screenprints, Gibson obtusely, and in a characteristically off-beat way, plays the dandy, the aristocrat of consumption.

Taste structures subjectivity and is tied to consumption: subjectivity is, to some uncertain degree, a commodity. That’s one of the reasons it can be so uncomfortable. (As the dandy knows, off-the-rack never fits as well.) What is at issue in this exhibition is a taste in men, choices among—and distances from—available models of masculinity. So, first, there is Hugo, the pretty boy and the stag’s antlers. This may suggest some European hunting lodge, an anachronistic men’s club—the public sphere? the art world?—and if it’s not perfectly clear what kind of trophy is being sought, Gibson destabilizes an exclusive version of masculine self-presentation by referring it to a desire which might be either homosocial or homosexual. The boy and the antlers are related by similarity, they are both targets, aspirations, or objects of desire. In the next image, Peking, the feather and the file seem at first to stand for terms in a conventional set of related oppositions: nature and culture, decorative and functional, soft and hard, feminine and masculine. And where Hugo conjures a mythical Europe, the equally anachronistic “Peking” for Beijing, juxtaposes that myth with a nostalgia for the “Orient.” It’s a familiar enough gesture to map a certain version of masculinity and an associated set of values onto a hard split between Europe and the Orient. But here they are already “Europe” and the “Orient,” and if the flamboyant feather is also a quill, an ancient piece of information technology, then the set of oppositions is complicated, if not disallowed. (This may be Gibson’s sly contribution to the debate over Australia’s status in relation to Asia.)

This pattern runs through the six screenprints. Heads are related to objects by similarities. In Karloff, the pretension to suave of the cheesy leading man is matched, if also undercut, by the cheap booze. The jovial, generic “German” of Franz appears with some kind of fastener (or perhaps one of those shelf supports you click into wall-mounted units), which seems to confirm a national stereotype about a rationalist drive to order. The images of paired objects are organized by apparent oppositions, and the skewering of these oppositions provides a commentary on the preceding images of heads. Constantinople repeats the nostalgic exoticism of Peking (as does Batavia), but this time it is the soft cloth, that plays culture to the hard sea anemone’s nature. Except that if the cloth suggests a cravat that the Karloff guy might have worn, it’s as easily seen as a napkin, and sea anemones are not only soft on the inside, but food, at which point they slide from natural to cultural. Food is the bottom line of taste: “In childhood, you start with the realization that grilled cheese sandwiches are better cut on the diagonal, and advance
from there. Candy bars and breakfast cereals are primers in the grammar of distinction." But it's a long way from grilled cheese to sashimi, and even if there's a Teriyaki Boy take-away on the corner, it's not clear that you could get there on the back of the Karloff guy's particular brand of manly sophistication. And in Batavia, the leech/bolt, soft/hard, nature/culture opposition is mapped onto nostalgia for a colonial past (given by the title): Imagine confident Europeans, engineering types like "Franz," wading through tropical rivers on their way to build something; boots full of leeches. There's a European-derived version of masculinity here, which the fastener and bolt suggest is grounded in fixing things together, in adhesion. But the tropics—where, in a different and perhaps equally idealized account, European ways fall apart—have a little mechanism of their own that sticks quite well.

In the screenprints, then, Gibson examines the discursive underpinnings of some received versions of masculinity. It might be said that he doesn't like a certain Eurocentric, basically colonialist kind of man, though he takes a dandy's bitchy pleasure in describing him. Still, taste that is defined in the negative, as "I don't like," however wittily dressed in the dandy's bon mots, tends to be protective of that "I," to withdraw it, as if into some private realm. This withdrawal is in a sense a negation of the public sphere in which your encounters with other people's taste, "unexpected, unmapped, and uncomfortable," are scary (as are theirs with your own). "Other people's taste is scary because it brings home the terror in the very notion of 'other people.'" (Roland Barthes has said that likes and dislikes mean only one thing: "my body is not yours.") At the other end of the room, however, in the galaxy-of-stars installation pointedly entitled Say My Name, Gibson meets this terror head on. Here, he all but abandons the dandy in favour of the fan.

In Say My Name, the names of fifty-four of Gibson's favourite male movie stars are printed upside-down and back-to-front on big, colour-coded stickers (six categories of nine actors each), arranged in a broken grid. '80s hunks are pink, 'gos hunks are gold, new mavericks are orange, cult hipsters are lilac, straight comics are green, and bent comics are blue. The point of the almost pastel colours seems to have little to do with "accurately" classifying the actors (otherwise, bent comics should obviously have been green). Rather, the stickers suggest some interior decorator's paint chart, and open onto the coding of choice and taste. The gaps in the grid, too, hint at a secret, a missing key. And nothing is resolved or revealed by the stickers alone. It's only when you move around the mirrors on the floor that the names on the stickers appear the right way round. In this way, Say My Name crosses Minimalism's interest in making spectators aware of their own movement (think of Morris' mirrored cubes), with the accidental phenomenology of Hollywood Boulevard. For when you bend to read Gibson's chosen names, who do you see? Whose name is in question?

Of course, there are many possible reactions to Gibson's choices. "Ray Liotta? Has he seen Turbulence?" In this case, the "baffled" response is not to what is preferred, but to "the mysterious landscape in which ... preference takes place." Or: "John Cusack? Saw him in that John Sayles baseball movie. He was so
cute. And then there's *The Grifters.*" Here is a double identification, not only with Gibson, but with the object of his taste. Either way, you might be looking at your own reflection all the while. To agree or disagree with Gibson's taste, to get it or be confused by it, in that mirror, is to open up to other people. Subjectivity is revealed in its gothic relation to mass-mediated processes of identification: not just yours, or Gibson's, it migrates between the two of you and whoever else, maybe John Cusack; even Ray Liotta.

The role of the mirrors is crucial. Like their Minimalist forebears, Gibson's mirrors refer away from themselves to the spectators and the architectural conditions of aesthetic experience. Unlike their antecedents, however, Gibson's mirrors suggest that neither physical architecture nor aesthetics keeps very much out. Rather, these mirrors let in, and let you into, a situation like that of someone walking down Hollywood Boulevard, stopping or at least slowing from time to time to look either at the stars' names embedded in the sidewalk, or their own reflection merging with the other shoppers' in the windows of the stores where they also look for something to buy. In this respect, the mirrors work like the television screen that brings Cusack or Liotta into your living room; they blur the architectural and ideological distinction between inside and outside, private and public.

Whether or not it has ever been valid, the distinction between private and public is fundamental to a dominant, spatialized version of modern subjectivity—and, historically, masculine subjectivity—in which the private individual (whose individuality is secured "inside") goes "out" into the public to act. This is the masculinity that the Gibson of the screenprints doesn't like.

In Gibson's version of contemporary subjectivity, the public comes right into our homes, and our heads, via the media. It's difficult to separate subjectivity from the informational architecture it occupies. Individuality is no longer secured in private (if at all), and there is no particular place to go and be public: "The 'public sphere' cannot simply be a street or square, someplace where I go to become an object or instead heroically to reassert my subjectivity, some other place out into which I go to 'intervene' or 'act.'" The greatest strength of Gibson's exhibition is to connect the problematic status of the category of the public to the equally vexed question of taste, which is often retained as a last bastion of interiority. The negotiation of Gibson's taste in men requires acknowledging "the terror in the very notion of 'other people.'" But the real terror is that they were there all the time, "inside" you, murmuring *whose body is this?*

*If it is anywhere, the public is 'in' me, but it is all that is not me in me, not reducible to or containable within 'me,' all that tears me from myself, opens me to the ways I differ from myself and exposes me to that alterity in others.*

Frazer Ward

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DICAMBIO

GEONARDO
СГОЛЕВ СЫГЫН
MISSISSIPPI BUNCE

SAHANGA MAGA
Preceding 4 pages: from *Say my name*, 1997, acrylic ink on self-adhesive paper.
Installation: 54 circular stickers, each 68 cm diameter; 4 circular mirrors, each 160 cm diameter.
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