

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Needham, Alex, "kill to get the money: Death metal, Satanism and salt – meet the art world's favourite Bank(s)," i-D, September 2006

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If money were no object...

features

188 *kill to get the money* Satanism, salt and sunnO))) – Banks Violette's art enshrines black metal's finest for posterity. i-D gets up the guts and goes to meet him. Photography Wolfgang Tillmans Text Alex Needham

kill to get the money.

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The Friday before 06/06/06 and it seems like the apocalypse has come early. In a back street in Bethnal Green, East London, an infernal grinding and growling sound is rattling the shutters of not only the Maureen Paley Gallery, from whence it comes, but the church next door too. Slip past the crowds of art fans, hipsters and goths outside the gallery and lift the curtain guarding the inner sanctum (something you shouldn't strictly be doing, since this is a sealed ritual and only the participants are permitted) and you find its source. Three men in black robes and hoods stand amid puffs of dry ice squeezing groaning feedback from guitar and a vintage keyboard. Someone called Atilla lies in a sealed coffin, howling. This is ambient doom legends sunnO))) (pronounced 'sun'). They're making a noise so loud that it makes your knees tremble and the bone in your nose vibrate; meanwhile, cracks are appearing in the gallery ceiling.

None of the throng outside will see the gig, but there's a monument to it in the gallery upstairs. sunnO)))'s amplifiers, guitars and keyboard have all been cast in salt and placed in the bright white space. A smashed coffin lies in front and close-up drawings of guitars are mounted on one wall. This is all the work of 32-year-old New Yorker Banks Violette. From eight years of age, Banks has been a devout fan of thrash metal bands like Testament and Overkill (his father's friend painted their album covers), and through his art he's elevated the more extreme aspects of black metal into the context of installation. 2005's show, at the Whitney Museum in New York, was a re-creation of a burnt church, again cast in salt, with music by Snorre Ruch, who went to prison thanks to his part in the spate of murder, grave desecrations and church burning that took place in the Norwegian black metal scene in the early '90s. 2002's Arroyo Grande 22.7.95, a mixed media

minority for whom that experience is so compelling that the fulcrum never switches back over and disbelief stays suspended and you start acting out that theatre," he says, sipping a beer. "So you have these instances where that fulcrum is switched so wildly over that that activates this huge thing, and it may end tragically like a church burning or a murder, but that's almost beside the point. The violence is simply the proof positive that these things have some degree of efficacy. So it was nice to do something about this where it was a sealed ritual. People had to believe in it in a different way, in an active way, and I didn't have to rely on a lot of murders or something." He chuckles. "But it's still the same thing."

Though his work is nearly always beautiful, Violette's very concerned that this doesn't mean that it's redemptive in any way. The surface beauty, he says, "is just a trick. It's a devil's advocate position. It's the trigger to be like, 'look, if you're finding this beautiful, if you're finding arson beautiful, if you're finding death beautiful, then there is some trigger in there'. It's a mechanism for identification – nine times out of ten, that person in the same set of circumstances would behave in exactly the same way as the person that they were offering a critical commentary on. It's the idea that you're just as tainted, and you're just as insane, and you're just as fucked up as everybody else. So everybody relax - it's all going to be fine. That's an aspect of redemption, sure, but it's not redemption in a 'ten hail Marys and you're off the hook' kind of thing. Redemption is a moral resolution which is a really horrible idea. That's the exact opposite of what I want."

His next work involves collaborations with Darkthrone and Celtic Frost, two of the original black metal bands, who Violette insists are "super mellow, incredibly creative and incredibly sweet."

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installation including a huge painting of skulls and sculptures of drum stands and giant fang-like objects, was inspired by the grisly murder of a woman by three teenage boys who wanted to publicise their metal band. Compared to these works, the sunnO))) piece seems positively celebratory by contrast, but Violette says that it's all celebratory. "I was involved with subcultures when I was a kid so I identify with people who are drawn to these outrageous symbols," he explains, sitting in his hotel bar three evenings after the sunnO))) performance. "It can be a 'fuck you' but all you're doing is assuaging your own sense of alienation and finding a common point with another person. Even if it's a kid with a swastika on his shirt who's saying 'hey I'm really lonely and I want to find another person with a swastika', there's something paradoxically affirmative about that."

Make no mistake – Violette is firmly on the metal kids' side, because he is one. While sunnO))) played, he bounced around outside battered on various substances (at one point, his friend had to hold him up) before going into the room where the gig was happening, crouching through the dry ice and enjoying "one of the best musical experiences I've had". Hyper-intelligent and fast-talking, he's a one-time tattoo artist who was thrown out of the family home at 16 because of "stupid stuff" that involved the taking of a lot of crystal meth. It was metal that awakened his artistic impulses. "People ask 'where do you stand in terms of appropriation?', but my relationship with metal far, far precedes any relationship with the art world." His refusal to let the sunnO))) show be seen by the audience, sprang partly from his total love of – and attendant protectiveness towards – metal culture. "sunnO))) play off the rhetoric of heavy metal to such an extent that they weren't playing to a sympathetic audience," he says, "and I didn't want it to be a circus for people who don't understand. I also wanted to have this thing take place that was a failure, a total frustration, and then the documentation was the sculptures upstairs, like this weird ghostly remnant of the entire thing."

The rituals of music are profoundly important to Violette and he enshrines their power in his work. "There can be a point where you walk into something, the suspension of disbelief kicks in and there's a tiny, tiny

Are they Satanists?

"Not really," says Violette, slightly warily. "Well, it depends what you mean." Are you a Satanist?

Violette laughs, then elaborates, "that's a whole other conversation", then says even more quickly than usual, as if to blind me with science, "You can give an incredibly dodgy argument... OK, Satan translates as adversary, right? If you superimpose that over [German 19th Century philosopher] Hegel then put the adversarial position in the middle of a Hegelian dialectic then Satanism is the metaphor behind all history as long as you believe in dialectical materials of historical shifts, which I don't. So that leaves you back at ground zero. But you could make an argument for that. Which would be abusing etymology, the Hebrew language, Hegel and the whole of Western philosophy all in one lump sum... but sure, yeah, maybe."

Evidence, if you were looking for it, might be found on his tattoos, which Violette cheerfully describes as "mostly Satanic themed". The centrepiece is an enormous death's head in a Nazi helmet right at the top of his breastbone (he raises his T-shirt to give me a look). Straight after the interview, Violette will go to Soho for another tattoo done to his own design. "It's an eye between two keys," he says, showing me a pencil sketch, "and then it's got a banner dripping that says 'Nihil' and then I have a pentagram with a keyhole in the centre of it. It says 6/6/6 and there's a keyhole for Satan."

He's metal alright, and it's which gives his art its total sense of conviction, as powerful as the sunnO))) sounds that rearranged the foundations of the Maureen Paley Gallery (music which Violette says is sculpture in itself, since it "transcends the audible and exists as a physiological phenomenon – when you walk into that space you get a sense of space shifting"). As for whether he's of the devil's party? Well, when we parted, he shook me by the left hand, warmly inviting me for a drink post-tattoo – but then I did impart the fact that my birthday was the 6th of June.

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