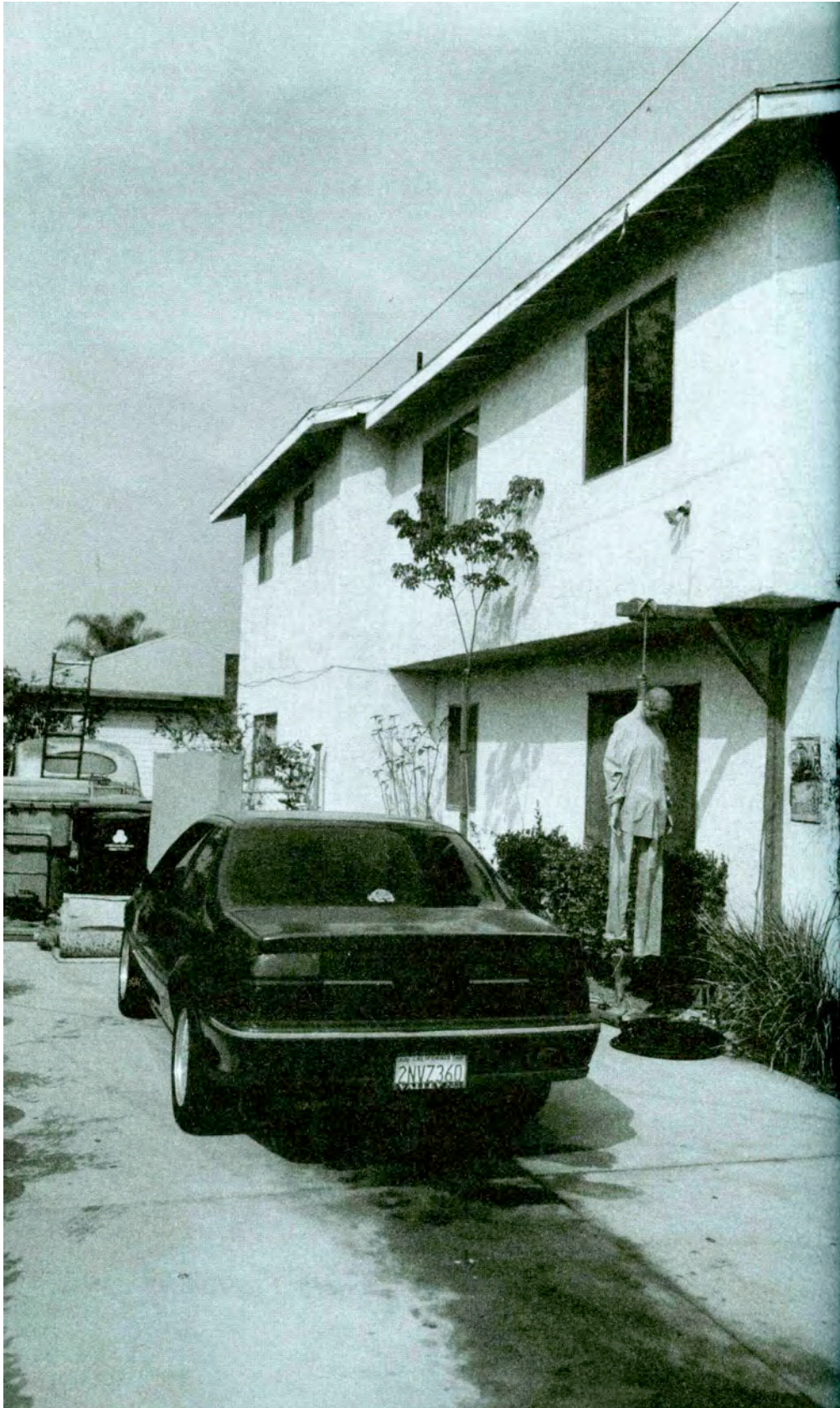


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Carels, Edwin, "Suburban Attractions", Afterall, Summer 2008, p.65-73



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Study for the film *Spook House* (San Fernando Valley, California), 1990–2002, black-and-white photograph, 36.8 x 24.1cm

## Suburban Attractions – Edwin Carels

'Pardon my French' is a common English phrase used to excuse obscene language. The phrase has found widespread use on broadcast television and in family films, where potentially offensive words are followed by the expression in order to emphasise their meaning and simultaneously dodge censorship or rating guidelines. Some believe 'Pardon my French' originated in the nineteenth century; others trace it back to World War I; still others say it was popularised by 1950s intellectuals who were well-versed in French. Whatever the origin, it reflects the Anglo-Saxon association of the French with vulgarity, also evident in terms such as 'French pox' (for genital herpes), 'French-sick' (for syphilis) or 'French novels' (for sexually explicit).

The sense of media literacy and centuries-old traces (even scars), the awareness of motifs and influences that travel from one country to another and from one century to the next, and the acknowledgement of what is generally considered too vulgar to even be mentioned are all recurring elements in work of Cameron Jamie, an American artist who has lived in Paris for the past seven years. For instance, his *Neotoma Tape* (1983–95) is a compilation of public-access television recordings, including excerpts of New-Age aerobics classes, interviews with obsessed fans of heavy-metal music or bands such as Sonic Youth and The Go-Go's, segments of parents discussing paganism and Satanism, talk shows with porn stars and born-again Christians and footage of teenage brothers vomiting in shopping malls. Jamie likes to direct our attention towards the weirdest (but in his opinion the most genuine) obsessions and fantasies that surface in everyday life – in the case of *Neotoma Tape* those that are unleashed in the suburban broadcasts of public-access television. Other films by Jamie focus on specific areas of interest, all of a similar kind: *BB* (1998–2000) captures California teenagers engaging in *lucha libre* matches in their backyards; *Spook House* (2002–03) shows how the suburbs of Detroit are transformed into a ghostly arena for bizarre Halloween characters and morbid special effects. Jamie portrays these amateur spectacles without comment or contextualisation – they suddenly emerge, as if stumbled upon while channel-surfing.

Jamie makes no apology for confronting his audience with demonstrations of the grotesque, popular versions of staged horror, extremely loud music and persistent investigations into what is commonly considered bad taste. Over the last two decades, he has developed a body of work that could be misunderstood as a caricature of the darker, more repressed and all too crude aspects of American daily life – those that exist on the fringes of its society such as spook houses, amateur wrestling parties or hot-dog eating contests. Instead, what fascinates Jamie is the ordinariness of these activities, which go largely unnoticed as cultural manifestations. Rather than criticising them, he takes the role of a bemused eyewitness, an outsider overcome by a strong fascination for the contemporary folklore that he encounters. It comes as no surprise that he is usually characterised as an outsider himself. For example, there are hardly any texts about Jamie's work that do not refer to the San Fernando Valley, the suburbs of Los Angeles where he grew up. This depressing place at the margins of Hollywood – where both the Walt Disney corporation and the porn industry once thrived – obviously speaks to the imagination. Jamie himself acknowledges its particularly alienating atmosphere in his *Goat* (2000–ongoing) performances, in which he creates his own urban legend

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by dressing up as a vampire and inviting a friend to shadow his journeys back home. Jamie does not record these walks; rather, the witness's oral testimony is translated into drawings by Jamie or, to add an extra layer of mystification, by someone else.

These ghostly impressions or afterimages are now all the more meaningful, as Jamie's point of departure is currently Paris. Retracing his formative years from this distanced point of view, the performances become a kind of pilgrimage. In interviews, he has explained that one reason for his move to France was to escape the attention of the art world, of being 'off centre' – as he acknowledges, contemporary Paris gives the impression of not having a very lively art scene if you are not very familiar with it.<sup>1</sup> This shift in perspective is an important one, since it dismisses the common readings of his work and opens up a different understanding of his key thematic concerns. The work moves from an anecdotal register to one of abstraction; extending outwards from the biographical, it becomes a generic representation of popular phenomena and



cultural interaction. Jamie is interested in feeling the pulse of deeper drives, or kinds of human activity that appear in different time zones and in different historical eras. By instrumentalising his biography, he becomes a mediator who summons up age-old powers and desires. The work is not about his own experiences, but about what an audience experiences when confronted with these rituals, when deeply immersed in suburban activities.

<sup>1</sup> All the quotes by Jamie are taken from interviews that took place during the preparation for the 2008 edition of the International Film Festival of Rotterdam, in which Jamie featured as the 'artist in focus'. They were published in *De Volkskrant IFFR*, 17 January 2008. The author is the curator of the 'Exploding Cinema' section of the festival.

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Jamie's film *Kranky Klaus* (2002–03) is a documentation of a traditional Austrian version of Santa Claus, who visits local households and public recreational areas accompanied by masked, horned and remarkably aggressive sidekicks. It signals how Jamie approaches contemporary European folk culture with the same interest and intensity that he employs when researching his native country for overlooked popular practices that tie in with ancient rituals. Jamie is not interested in recycling fragments of Americana, but in pointing to practices that can reveal ancient rituals or pagan rites. History permeates daily life, even its strangest manifestations, and this often leads to seemingly absurd confluences. Reportedly, Jamie's memories of the extra-crunchy 'Joan of Arc-style' French fries that are served at a diner in the San Fernando Valley triggered the idea of his film *JO* (2004) – a surreal combination of documentary footage of the French nationalist celebration of Joan of Arc in Paris, combined with a historical re-enactment of the martyr's death in Orléans and an annual hot-dog eating contest in



*The Neotoma Tape*,  
1984–95, video,  
58min, stills

Coney Island, New York on the Fourth of July. The migration of concepts and low-culture practices is pushed further when the film shows that the repeat winner in Coney Island was, from 2001 to 2006, actually Japanese.<sup>2</sup> Cameron Jamie then approached Keiji Haino, an experimental musician from Japan, to score the film.

Jamie further developed this provocative confrontation of different realms for his participation in the 2008 International Film Festival of Rotterdam (IFFR 08) as 'artist in focus'. After the first substantial retrospective of his drawings and sculptures at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis in 2006 and at the MIT List Visual Arts Center,

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.nathansfamous.com/nathans/contest/index.php> (last accessed on 4 March 2008).

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Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2007, this invitation provided an opportunity to offer an overview of Jamie's filmic works. In recent years, he has gained notoriety by presenting his trilogy *BB / Spookhouse / Kranky Klaus* with live music by the sludge-metal band The Melvins and inviting Keiji Haino to perform live each time *JO* is screened. For IFFR 08 both Haino and The Melvins improvised soundscapes in response to a combination of all his films, projected simultaneously in a constant barrage of double imagery mixed live into a video-beamed large-screen extravaganza, layering image upon image. This wildly phantasmagoric concert was the climax of Jamie's presence at the festival, which also included an exhibition of recent drawings and a series of screenings of all his works on film and video, from the early performance documentations *The New Life* (1996) and *La Baguette* (1997) to *Upland BB Fighting Follies* (1999), a selection of preliminary study materials for *BB*, and screenings of the trilogy and *JO* with recorded soundtracks instead of live music accompaniment.<sup>3</sup>

Jamie refrains from showing his films in gallery spaces, much as he refuses to confirm to the 'video artist' label. The image size and acoustics of the cinema are too dear to him to accept anything less. But he also claims to not entirely fit into the category of filmmaker – or, for that matter, into any other. His films, lacking narrative or even compositional climax, are neither short fictions, nor documentaries, diaries or visual essays. They are obsessive observations by an artist fascinated by dangerously intense moments. Jamie never went to film school or received any other technical training, and his films are often based on hand-held footage of an event, which he then edits, enhances with music and presents in specific contexts. As he says, his screenings are like a traveling circus – which will cease when The Melvins or Haino are no longer around.

This type of overwhelming audiovisual experience ties in with the earliest forms of cinema, before narrative became the norm in film. In a 1986 text, the film historian Tom Gunning developed the term 'cinema of attractions' from a comparison Sergei Eisenstein made in his early film theory between the 'peak moments' of a variety or circus show and the attention-grabbing scenes he argues a film should consist of. As film theorist Wanda Strauven says,

*the definition of Gunning's phrase, like Eisenstein's montage of attractions, implicates a direct, somewhat aggressive, address of the spectator; it goes beyond (or even against) a simple process of appealing to the taste of the public. According to Eisenstein, an attraction was supposed to produce 'emotional shocks'.<sup>4</sup>*

Eisenstein, Strauven points out, adopts this from the tradition of the French Grand Guignol theatre, with its special effects and horror content. But the films Gunning considers come from long before Eisenstein's 1920s avant-garde works – they were made in the first decade of cinema (i.e. from 1895 to 1905), when a direct address of the public was the norm and physical violence was a regular feature. Filmed vaudeville acts, slapstick performance, magical tricks and other forms of 'spectacular' content were the initial attractions that lured people into film parlours. This is not the cinema of realist illusionism, where the viewer is an invisible voyeur, but cinema as an obvious construct, a spectacle that acknowledges and even confronts the spectator, sometimes by directly addressing him through the camera lens. In Gunning's words, 'theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasising the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe. The cinema of attractions spends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality.'<sup>5</sup> Jamie likewise does not care for character development. He solicits the spectator's attention in a similar way to the early filmmakers, directly inciting visual curiosity and providing pleasure through a spectacle that aims for visceral reactions. In his ambition to offer a very particular event to his audience, he also screens rare films from the past as yet another form of spectacle, another type of attraction. (If Jamie is not a standard filmmaker, he is even less a typical film fan.) For IFFR 08,

3 The exhibition '3Radicals (Paul Sharits, Robert Breer, Cameron Jamie)' at TENT in Rotterdam (2008) included a slightly condensed version of Jamie's exhibition 'Carved Ink', originally at Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris (2007).

4 Wanda Strauven, 'Introduction to an Attractive Concept', in W. Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006, p.18.

5 Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attraction(s): Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', in W. Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, *op. cit.*, p.384.

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he made a selection of his favourite titles that he brought together under the title 'Cinematic Nuggets', which was accompanied by the following statement:

*For my personal selection of films, I decided to focus primarily on certain film genres and themes that most film audiences have rarely seen. Many of these odd cinematic nuggets and gems which I have excavated for my program have fallen through the cracks of film culture. The most serious film buffs would probably never in a million years think of these films with much merit. But to me, these films defy and transcend beyond their own typical definition of film genres and labels which I believe needed to be reconsidered. It's a small taste of American surrealism — just please make sure that you chew it slowly.<sup>6</sup>*

In his selection, Jamie combined features such as John Milius's *Red Dawn* (1984), John Coney's *Sun Ra — Space Is the Place* (1974), Timothy Carey's *The World's Greatest*



*BE*, 1998—2000,  
black-and-white  
Super 8 film  
transferred to 35mm  
film, soundtrack by  
The Melvins, 18min  
20sec, stills

*Sinner* (1962) and Chester N. Turner's *Black Devil Doll from Hell* (1984) with episodes from the television series *The Little Rascals* and *Gumby* and documentaries such as *The Cramps: Live at Napa State Mental Hospital* (1978). 'Cinematic Nuggets' is another example of Jamie's interest in assembling collections, which has led him to amass a large archive of footage from public-access television in a storage site somewhere in Los Angeles — as distilled in *Neotoma Tape* — and an archive of photographs, press clippings

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from the IFFR festival leaflet.

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and other printed material related to his interests. Beyond the obvious private enjoyment afforded by building up a collection, it also acts as a commentary on collective behaviour, or results in a statement about the society or the specific milieu that would generate such artefacts (and which often disregards them once they are in circulation). The types of spectacles that society creates but does not give their proper due – because of the darker, symptomatic aspects that inhabit them, be they violence, sex, fear or destruction – are the phenomena that Jamie focuses our attention upon. His research into these types of activities and artefacts has caused his practice to be compared to that of an anthropologist.<sup>7</sup> However, Jamie's translation of his 'research' into visual presentations makes clear that he is less focused on retracing the motivations behind certain patterns of human behaviour than on their external formal manifestations. In his exhibitions and films, these documents and artefacts are displayed as prominently as the work made by Jamie himself, hinting at the fact that they are something other than mere

The Melvins live film performance of *BB/Spook House/Kranky Klaus* at the Forum, London, 2003



'study' material. Rather than working as illustrations of a particular reality, they serve as obscure references as well as objects of reverence. The equation of his own work with that of anonymous amateurs (or professionals, as in the case of the drawings he commissions from street artists) destabilises the status of all works presented, positing them between craftsmanship and high art, between information and experience.

In this respect, Jamie's work represents a continuation from that of Eugène Atget, in whose photographs Walter Benjamin says Paris appears 'vacant like a crime scene'.<sup>8</sup>

*Kranky Klaus*, 2002–2003, colour video, soundtrack by The Melvins, 25min, stills

7 See Philippe Vergne, 'An Archeology of Violence', in Kathy Halbreich and P. Vergne (eds.), *Cameron Jamie* (exh. cat.), Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007.

8 Quoted by Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992, p.35.

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This violence remains latent in Atget's images, but is straightforwardly represented in Jamie's. (His films could be considered variations on Antonin Artaud's 'theatre of cruelty'. Jamie's recent drawings, which are the basis for an oncoming film, are close to the graphic style of the French dramaturge.) But despite this difference, both Atget and Jamie investigate the topography of violence, and their work radiates a feeling of terror and fear that is always present in any social context for those who care to see it. Atget, who, like Jamie, did not want to belong to any contemporary art circle, used a simple methodology, but the impact of his work is both oblique and complex. No matter how strong the admiration for his precise and often strangely atmospheric photographs was, Atget always adhered to his claim that he produced mere '*documents pour artistes*', as the sign on the door to his Paris studio read. Because of their desolate, melancholic mood (Atget's pictures hardly ever include people), his images were admired by



Benjamin, Man Ray and Berenice Abbott. As a series of albums, his apparently objective observations provoke a strong sensation of alienation and ambivalence about the everyday, and the cumulative effect renders the work disturbing, with the mundane containing a suggestive, mythical quality. Just as Jamie's images start from the ordinary in order to reveal eruptions of the extraordinary, Atget's photographs, starting from the document, construct a different dimension, a parallel universe.

In her book *Atget's Seven Albums* (1992), Molly Nesbit points out how the term 'document' expresses in Atget an alternative order of cultural difference, 'function[ing] in a part of visual culture that had few aspirations to greatness or avant-garde revolution;

50, 2004, colour and black-and-white video, soundtrack by Keiji Haino, 42min, stills

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it issued from the depths of bourgeois culture, it was the 'aesthetic other'. Any study of Atget's work has to come to terms with its various degrees of baseness, both bourgeois and *populaire*.<sup>9</sup> Atget did not adhere to any dominant style in photography, nor did he respect any class distinctions. He approached every location or event with the same detached interest, treating the vulgar and the dirty as on the same level as the aristocratic and elegant. His photographs show the surfaces of things exactly as what they are: covers for a hidden life, emanations of what is not directly visible. His camera turns every scene into a theatre of the ominous, of obscured sentiments. In one of his albums, *Métiers, boutiques et étalages de Paris* (1912), Atget included photographs of cabarets from the boulevard de Clichy, one of which depicts the Cabaret de l'Enfer. At the end of the nineteenth century, eccentric and macabre entertainment halls joined the more mainstream spectacles of the Moulin Rouge and the Folies Bergère on the boulevard. With names like the Chat Noir, the Cabaret du Néant, the Cabaret du Ciel and the Cabaret de l'Enfer, they offered ghost shows and other morbid optical illusions, submerging the visitor in a completely artificial realm, where fears and desires were staged as spectacle. For an exhibition in De Vleeshal, the Netherlands in 2003, Cameron Jamie designed a similar scenography, an environment where visitors had to walk along a darkened path through an artificial hilltop; they were only able to discover the drawings on the other side of the hill with the aid of a small lamp.<sup>10</sup>

✽

'Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle,' reads the cover of *Exquisite Mayhem* – a book of photographs of female and male wrestlers that Jamie co-edited with Mike Kelley in 2001.<sup>11</sup> One of Jamie's most remarkable efforts in collecting and compiling neglected segments of cultural heritage, the book includes an essay reprinted from Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957), in which Barthes writes:

*The virtue of all-in wrestling is that it is the spectacle of excess. Here we find a grandiloquence which must have been that of ancient theatres. [...] True wrestling, wrongly called amateur wrestling, is performed in second-rate halls, where the public spontaneously attunes itself to the spectacular nature of the contest, like the audience of a suburban cinema. [...] The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so: it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees.*<sup>12</sup>

Seeing without thinking. This kind of confusion must have overcome Jamie's audience after the live amalgamation of all his films onto one large-scale video screen, with sound improvised by The Melvins and Keiji Haino – a grotesque theatre of excess, a momentary unleashing of all the darker fears and desires that lie behind the surface, the walls and fences of ordinary houses. In Jamie's work the suburban is a gateway into the collective unconscious. His area of investigation is the ritualisation of the uncivilised in both the old and new continents, where the vernacular becomes spectacular, where moral categories lose their grip and a fascination prevails for the strange beauty that emanates from such cruel attractions – the primary character of the spectacle.

9 *Ibid.*, p.9.

10 'Maps and Composite Actions', De Vleeshal, Middelburg, The Netherlands, 2003.

11 Cameron Jamie and Mike Kelley (eds.), *Exquisite Mayhem: The Spectacular and Erotic Photography of Theo Ehret*, Cologne: Taschen, 2001. This sentence is a quote from Roland Barthes, 'The World of Wrestling' (trans. Annette Lavers), reprinted within *Exquisite Mayhem*.

12 R. Barthes, 'The World of Wrestling', in C. Jamie and M. Kelley (eds.), *Exquisite Mayhem*, *op. cit.*, p.9.

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Janus, Elizabeth, "The Other Who is Oneself: Cameron Jamie", Afterall, Summer 2008, p.74-80



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*Bathysphere*, 2005,  
ink on paper mounted  
on wood panel,  
56 × 50.8cm paper,  
170.2 × 61cm panel

The Other Who Is Oneself: Cameron Jamie  
– Elizabeth Janus

Cameron Jamie's art has been described as a form of 'backyard anthropology'.<sup>1</sup> His attraction to quirky pageants, ceremonies, contests and other commemorative or group activities is transformed into multi-media performances, films, drawings and object installations that are fascinating visual records of what makes a given culture tick. Favouring certain aspects of lowbrow and popular culture, such as amateur and professional wrestling on the American West Coast or European Christmas traditions, he actively cultivates peculiar situations that are indicative of deeply rooted beliefs or the hierarchies and meanings of collective behaviour. Jamie, however, is no amateur social scientist doing fieldwork with the required clinical objectivity; nor does he mock or judge with any sense of superiority. In fact, one has the impression that he often identifies, or at least sympathises, with his subjects, willingly acting as a witness to and sometime instigator of the strange pantomimes that are as revealing about his own predilections as they are about the society from which they come.

*The notions of 'distancing', exoticism, representation of the other, and difference are inflected, reworked, readjusted as a function of criteria no longer geographical or cultural but methodological and even epistemological in nature: to make foreign what appears familiar; to study the rituals and sacred sites of contemporary institutions with the minute attention of an 'exotic' ethnographer, and using his methods, to become observers observing those others who are ourselves — and at the limit, this other who is oneself...*

– Jean Jamin<sup>2</sup>

As an American living in France, Jamie already wears the mantle of outsider, one who is able to observe cultural specificities while remaining at a comfortable distance. His expatriate status also gives him a nuanced take on his own country, one that allows him to make unexpected and even paradoxical cross-cultural connections. For example, in a collection of studies, sketches and found materials (what he calls 'ephemera') for *Spook House* (2002) – a 25-minute film about a practice common in the Detroit area of constructing frightening lawn environments as part of Halloween festivities – Jamie has accumulated a plethora of visual materials and photographs (of vampires, jack-o-lanterns, ghosts, skeletons, witches) that document the holiday's origins in Europe as a pagan celebration, its evolution into a Christian *fête*, its adoption and transformation into the popular American secular holiday known today and its exportation as a commercial venture back to Europe.

Jamie sometimes seeks out relatively marginal cultural phenomena as fuel for his imagination. In fact, one might consider him to be someone who works in the interstices of fine- and folk-art traditions – in this grey area between high and low unexpected, often incongruous connections can be made; put another way, Jamie stretches the boundaries distinguishing fine art from kitsch and tries to blur the differences between the artist and the anonymous craftsperson. For example, in a series of works from 2001 roughly

<sup>1</sup> Ralph Rugoff, 'Backyard Anthropology', in Günther Holley-Schuster (ed.), *Cameron Jamie*, Cologne and Graz: Hatje Cantz Verlag and Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, 2006, pp.66–72.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Jamin quoted in James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988, pp.143–44.

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grouped under the title *Kranky Klaus* (also the title of a 25-minute film that is screened with a live accompaniment by the band The Melvins), his inspiration is an Austrian pre-Christmas procession (similar to the Mummers annual parade in Philadelphia or the Mardi Gras festivities in New Orleans). In early December a group of young men dressed in Krampus costumes – grotesque wooden masks and yeti-like furry suits – walk through mountain villages terrorising locals. Like Halloween, the Krampus festival has its origins in pre-Christian Europe, but with time the Krampus – part demon, part incubus – and its evil magic were co-opted by the Church, introducing into the procession a counterpoise in the form of a white-bearded religious figure wearing a bishop's mitre meant to be Saint Nicholas (who eventually evolved into the secular Santa Claus, Saint Nick or Father Christmas that we know today). The large elaborate masks that they wear are impressive and terrifying, with deformed but intricately carved facial features and multiple horns and fangs. In their supposed apotropaic or ritualistic function, they recall the African, Asian, Native American and Oceanic masks and sculptures which inspired European artists in the early part of the twentieth century. But while his modernist predecessors looked to so-called 'primitive' cultures as a foil to European academicism, Jamie focuses his attention closer to home: the Eurocentric rituals and collective behaviour that have persisted despite the developed world's 'enlightened' status.

*Self-Portrait*, 1992,  
spandex fabric, vinyl  
fabric, imitation  
fur, thread, laces,  
fabricated by Dr Sty,  
Mexico City,  
32.4 × 29.2 × 30.5cm

[During the 1920s] 'Art', spelled with a capital A, had already succumbed to Dada's heavy artillery. 'Culture', having barely survived this post-War barrage, was now resolutely lower-case, a principle of relative order in which the sublime and the vulgar were treated as symbols of equal significance.

– James Clifford<sup>3</sup>

Growing up in a Southern California working-class suburb during the 1970s and 80s – decades that were marked by a 'correction' to the turbulently liberal 1960s, and then by the Ronald Reagan administration's 'voodoo economics' and its kowtowing to Christian extremists – it is not surprising that some of Jamie's early forays into art centred around countercultural phenomena such as Goth culture, monster magazines, underground comic books and graphic novels and alternative music (he is an avid collector of all three). During the 1990s these interests, along with all types of wrestling in their theatricality and artifice, inspired his first artistic projects. In 1996, for example, he organised a series of clandestine wrestling matches, dressing up for them in a funky jumpsuit with a prosthetic bum and wearing a cheesy portrait mask designed by a Mexican artisan called Dr Sty. The only remnants of these fights are the mask and a short videotape or film, which, according to professional wrestling conventions, look just as choreographed as they are improvised. In one battle – titled 'The New Life' – Jamie's opponent is a Michael Jackson impersonator; their simulated, seemingly violent encounter in what appears to be someone's living room has a farcical edge that is part theatre of the absurd and part *commedia dell'arte*.

*What we mean by 'Art Brut' is works executed by those who are untouched by cultural art and for whom mimicry (in subject, choice of materials, execution, means of transposition, etc.) has ... little or no importance; who instead draw inspiration from deep within themselves rather than from the clichés of classical or fashionable art. We are witness, then, to an artistic operation that is pure, raw, and reinvented at every step by the authentic impulses of its maker.*

– Jean Dubuffet<sup>4</sup>

According to biographical accounts, Cameron Jamie intermittently attended California Institute of the Arts, an art school founded in the early 1960s by Walt Disney, between 1991 and 1994. During this time he grew averse to conventional art-school doctrine, preferring to seek out the art of the self-trained or the outsider. In one group of paintings on paper from 1993, Jamie has a comic-book illustrator called Sketch use his likeness

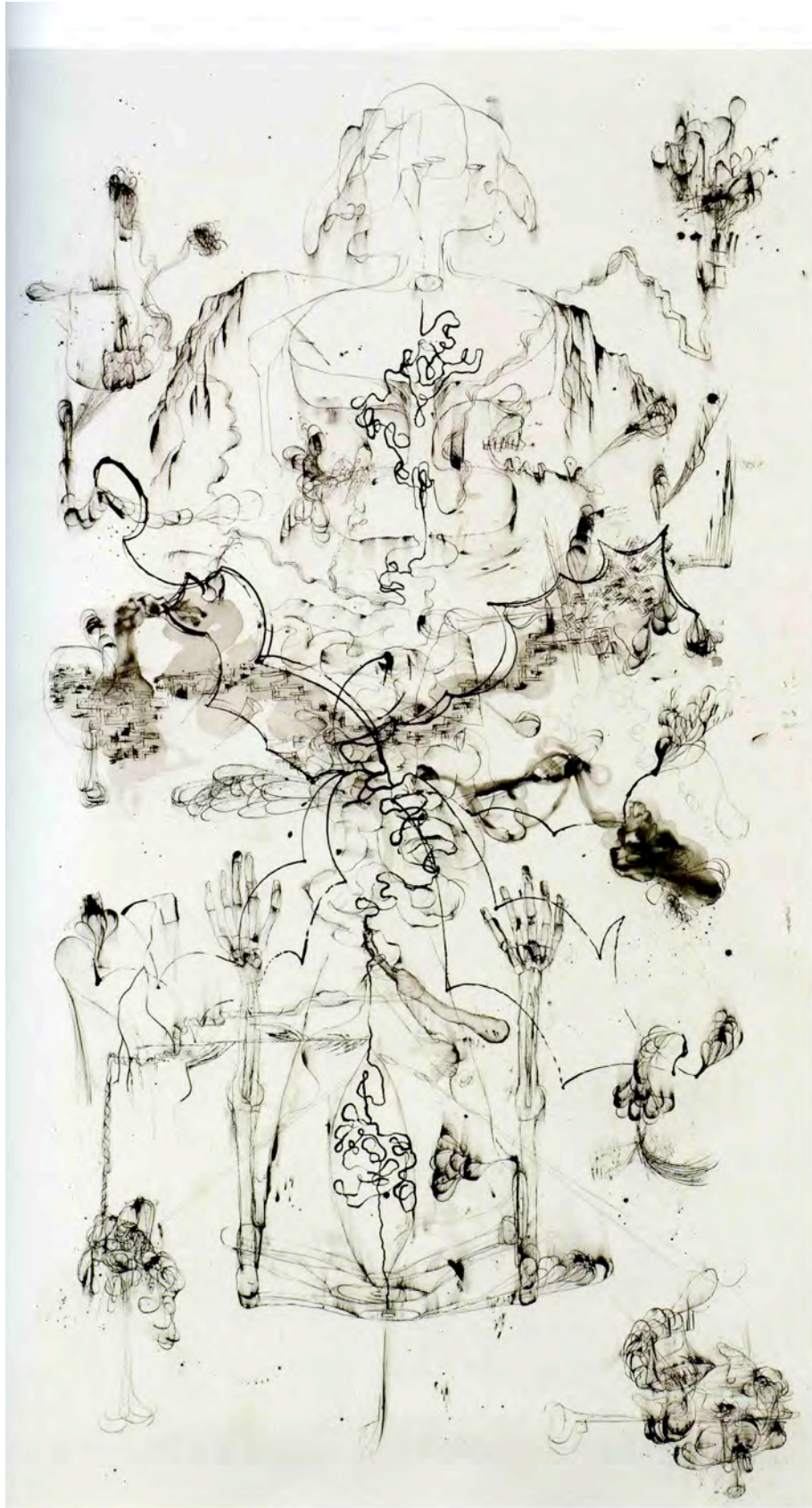
<sup>3</sup> James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Surrealism', *The Predicament of Culture*, op. cit., p.129.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Dubuffet, *L'Art brut préféré aux arts culturels*, Paris: Galerie Rene Drouin, 1949. Author's translation. Also published in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art Theory: 1900–1990*, Oxford: Blackwells, 1992, p.594.

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*La Mémoire interne,*  
2007, ink on Arches  
paper, wood, glass,  
208 x 114cm

for that of the main hero. Sketch depicts Jamie as an Arnold Schwarzenegger-like action hero whose hair and face bear an uncanny resemblance to Jamie's own, but whose head is attached to an excessively muscular body wearing only brown briefs and boots (*Self-Portrait with Muscles*). In two other paintings from this series, Sketch initially imagines Jamie as a kind of Terminator (in *My Skeleton Battle*) intent on slaying a band of animated skeletons; later (in *Curse of the Coconut Head*), Sketch goes off on a wild riff making Jamie's character part of a chaotic *mélange* of ghoulish figures, disembodied heads and fire sacrifices that are painted in fluorescent shades of yellow, green and red. Not surprisingly, these works resemble both in style and technique the exaggerated, fantastic images found in standard comic books – an aesthetic that Jamie actively cultivates. From a conceptual viewpoint, the project is similar to two series by the West Coast Conceptual art pioneer John Baldessari (a professor at CalArts during the 1970s): *Commissioned Paintings* (1969), for which he commissioned various street artists to paint 'portraits' of his hand pointing to ordinary objects from snapshots, and *Police Drawing* (1971), for which he asked a police sketch artist to draw his likeness after a brief, impromptu appearance.<sup>5</sup>

*My drawings are not drawings...*  
– Antonin Artaud<sup>6</sup>

Cameron Jamie's drawings fall roughly into three categories: sketches and studies for larger projects; ink drawings; and mixed media or paintings on paper. The sketches or preparatory drawings – in watercolour, gouache and ink – have a loose, gestural feel and often include writing (notes, lists, texts) as clues to Jamie's thought process. In the ink-based works he melds figurative and anthropomorphic elements with splashes and smears of black ink, or with an all-over scribbling and obsessive scrawling that seems both coherent and out of control. The paintings on paper generally quote or appropriate fragments from his films, performances or photographs and, like the ink drawings, when exhibited they are attached to huge boards that lean against the walls. Jamie, like Artaud, asks us to look beyond technical mastery and draughtsmanship, and to read in the materials, smudges, lines and strokes what is 'inside' or behind the impulse, which Artaud characterised as 'chiselled from the brain or from the hair of emotion'.<sup>7</sup> For example, in an exhibition in Paris last fall dedicated to his drawings, he included works of varying sizes (from 32.5 by 25 centimetres to the more monumental 208 by 114 centimetres) with titles, in either French or English, which alternate between the enigmatic and the visceral. *La Mémoire interne*, for example, or *Gutter Howl* – both from 2007 – have the formal gritty and hallucinatory strangeness typical of Surrealist games such as the exquisite corpse or the cathartic release of the unconscious found in automatic writing. Another, *Little Eva* (also from 2007), pairs a disturbing rendering of what looks like a baby's head with the oversized legs of a spider; the ensemble is surrounded by small orb-like shapes that resemble sperm and which are partially covered by thick black curlicues.

For Cameron Jamie ideas and process are more important than the aesthetic merits of the final product. In making choices that go against the grain of artistic conventions, he prefers forms closer to caricature and the grotesque that collapse the space between naturalistic representation and the uncanny. The remnants of Jamie's actions, whether a mask, a film or a painting, function in a similar way to what psychoanalysis calls 'transitional objects'. They are images associated with contemporary rituals that act as intermediaries between psychic and external reality; thus, the magical quality long associated with image-making is given a fresh look and a new, updated context.

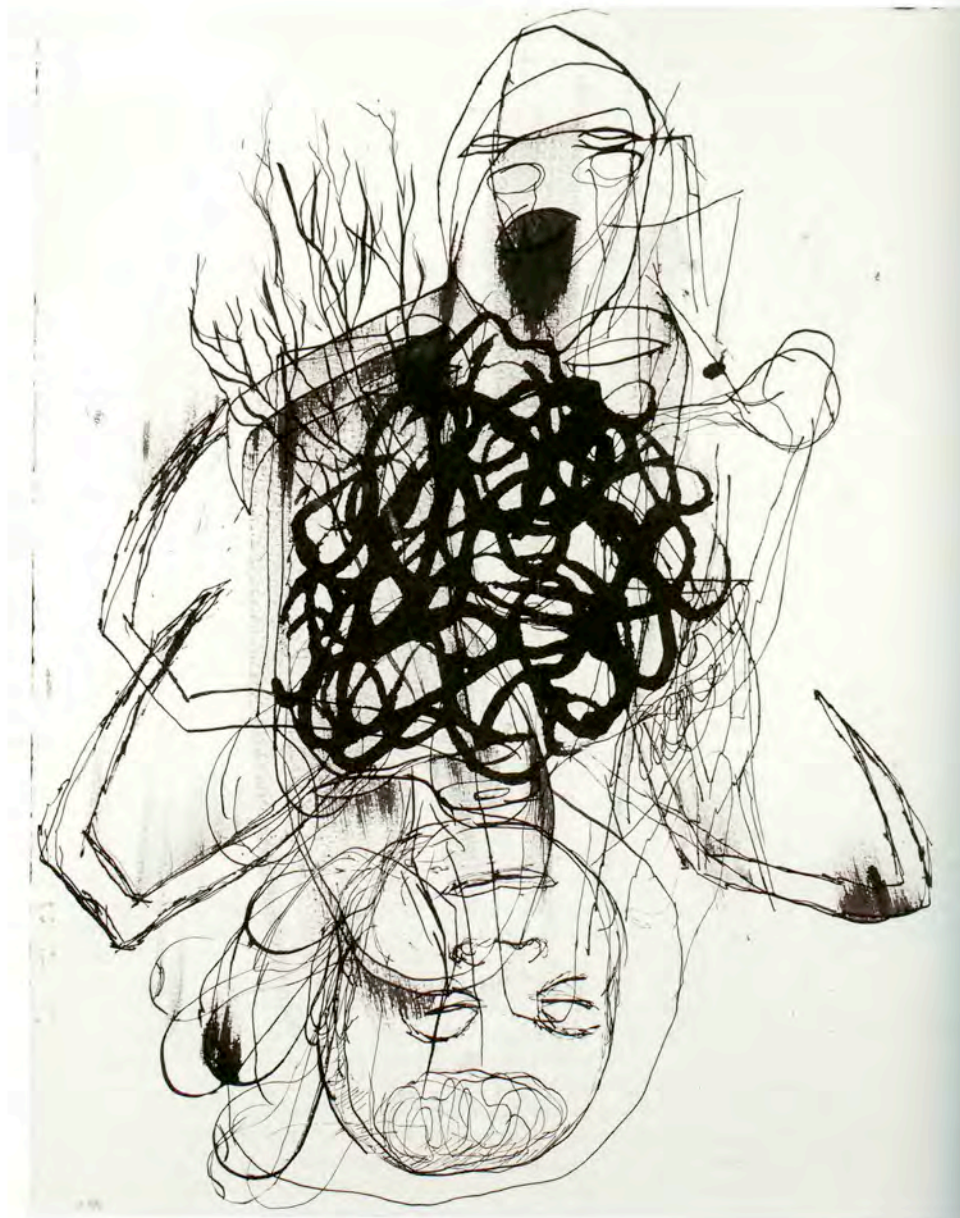
<sup>5</sup> See Mike Kelley, 'Legend Tripping', in G. Holler-Schuster (ed.), *Cameron Jamie, op. cit.*, p.23–33.

<sup>6</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Works on Paper*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1996, p.61. Author's translation.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



GLADSTONE GALLERY



*Little Eva, 2007,*  
ink on Arches paper,  
32.5 × 25cm