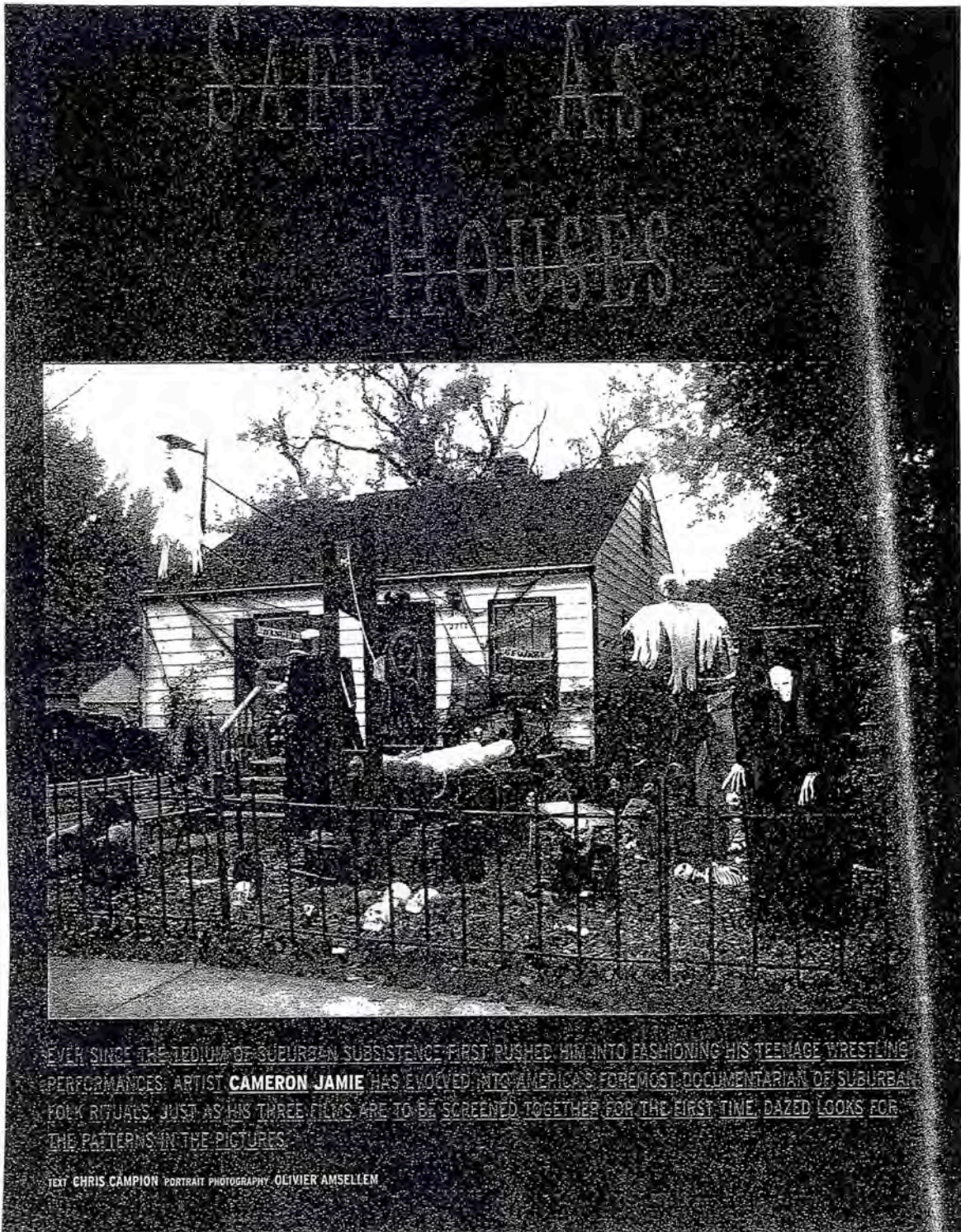


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

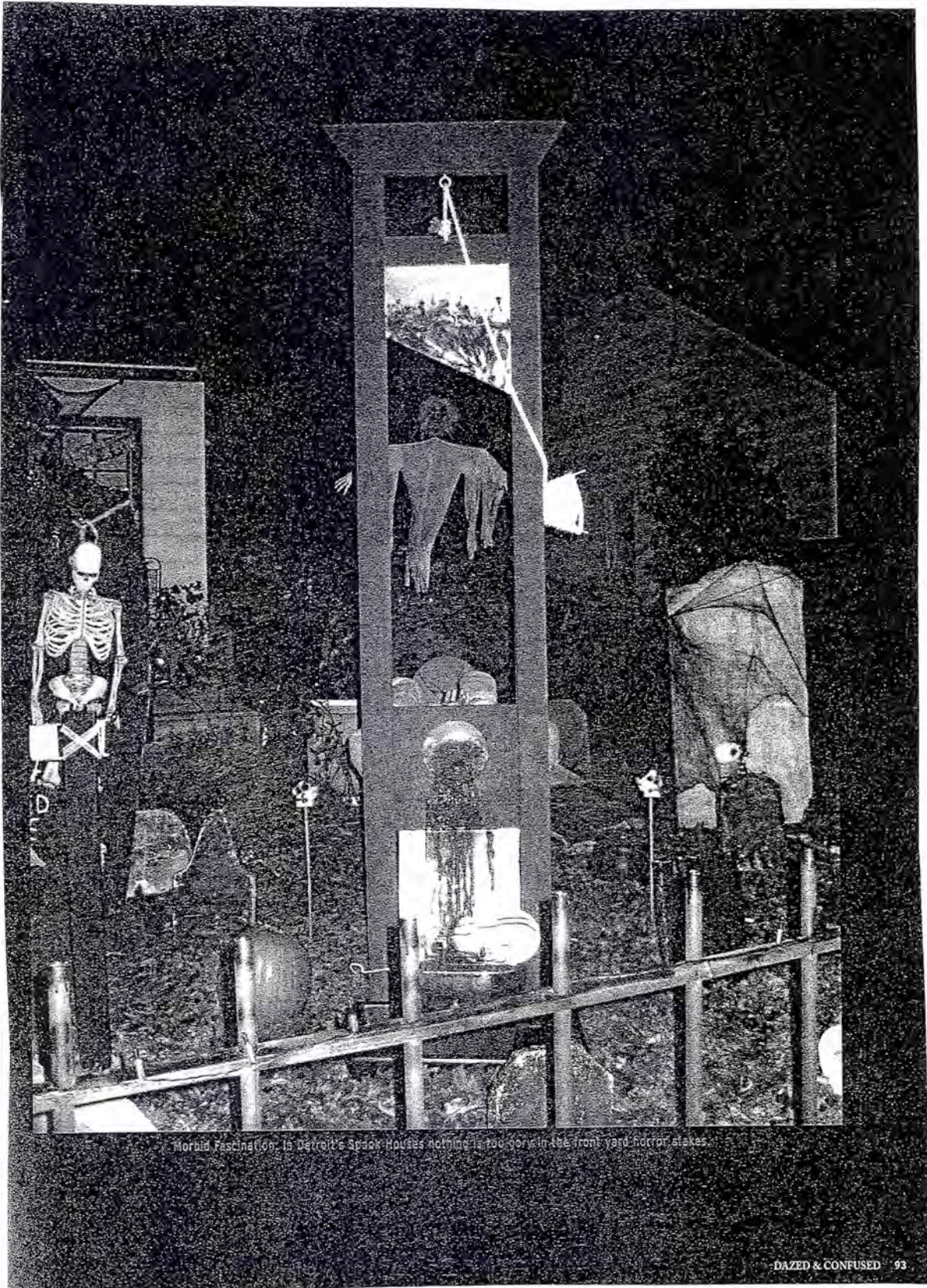
Campion, Chris, "Safe As Houses," Dazed & Confused, December 2003, p.92-98



EVEN SINCE THE TEDIUM OF SUBURBAN SUBSISTENCE FIRST PUSHED HIM INTO FASHIONING HIS TEENAGE WRESTLING PERFORMANCES, ARTIST **CAMERON JAMIE** HAS EVOLVED INTO AMERICA'S FOREMOST DOCUMENTARIAN OF SUBURBAN FOLK RITUALS. JUST AS HIS THREE FILMS ARE TO BE SCREENED TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME, DAZED LOOKS FOR THE PATTERNS IN THE PICTURES.

TEXT CHRIS CAMPION PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY OLIVIER AMSELLEM

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Morbid Fascination: In Detroit's Spook Houses nothing is too far from the front yard horror stakes.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Word on the street: (above) Artist and filmmaker Cameron Jamie in Paris.

American artist Cameron Jamie's trilogy of films – *BB*, *Spook House* and *Krankly Klaus* – sketches a topography of violence and trauma across the dead zones of suburban America and beyond. In these films, the family home becomes the locus from which all horror originates, emanates and ultimately returns. The feral teenage stars of *BB* (2000) – which documented the phenomenon of backyard wrestling long before it became a staple of tabloid TV – turn the dusty wasteland behind a suburban tract house into a makeshift gladiatorial arena in which to vent unaccountable rage. Taking on characters inspired by their favourite TV wrestlers, they clamber up onto roofs then launch themselves into space to body-slam opponents lying prone on the ground below.

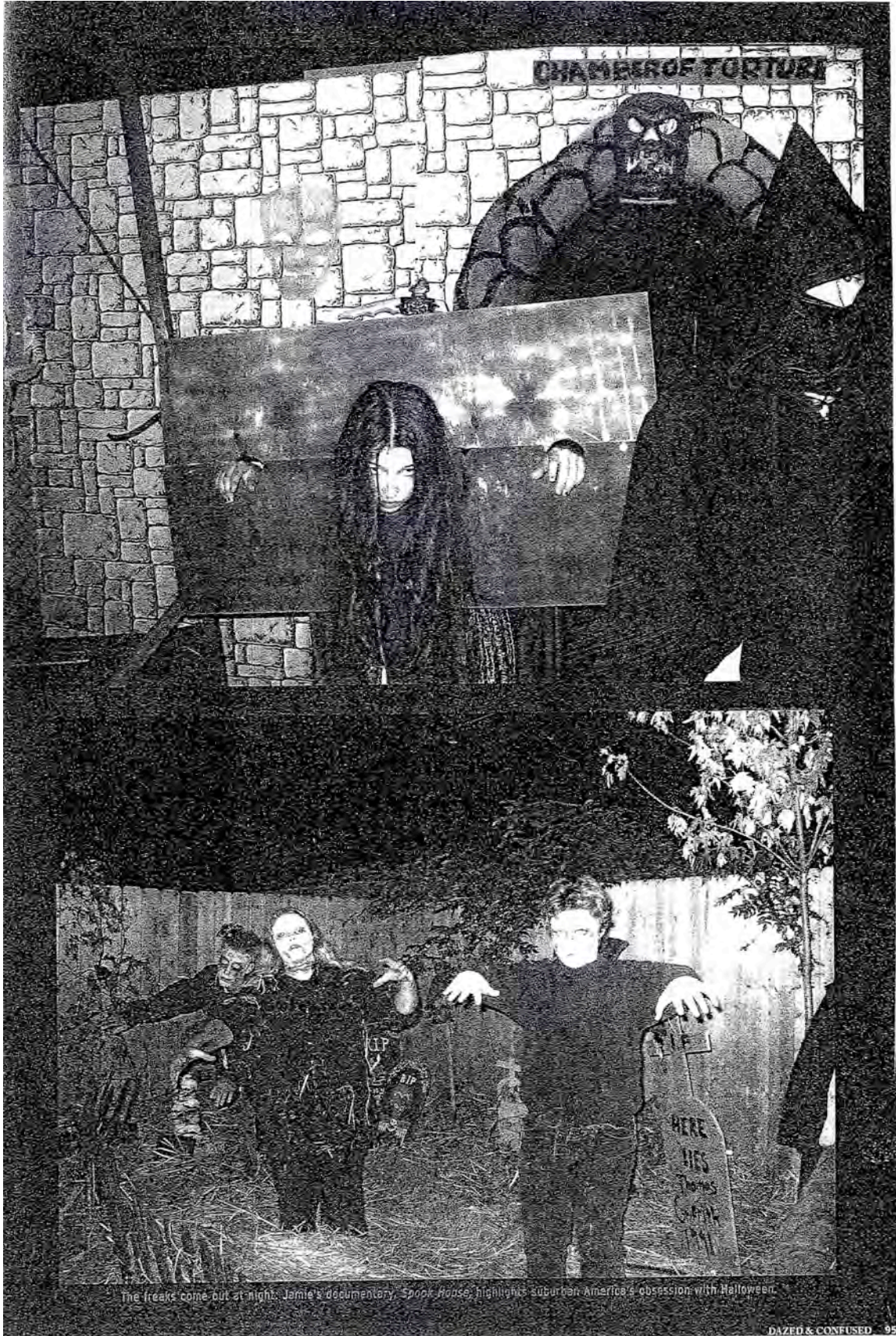
The traditional goodwill of public holidays, a time at which the family comes together, becomes perverted within both *Spook House* and *Krankly Klaus* (both 2003) into an opportunity for the ritual exorcism of domestic tragedy. The home literally becomes a house of horror in *Spook House*, which records the lurid psychodramas played within neighbourhood houses adorned in grotesque fashion during Halloween. Gardens become graveyards infested with skulls and bones and haunted by the teenage undead. Kitchens become mausoleums and living rooms are transformed into torture chambers in which the family take turns to play inquisitor and sacrificial victim.

*Krankly Klaus* sheds light on a 400-year-old Christmas ritual that takes place on December 6 every year in cities and mountain towns across Austria. On that night, the Krampus, a fearsome tribe of mythical beasts whose ogre-ish faces are matted with fur and capped by a barbed bouquet of rams' horns on their heads, shadow St Nicolas on his rounds delivering gifts. Punishment is meted out to those he deems to have been bad, the Krampus burst into houses and terrorise the inhabitants; the large bells on their backs jangling as they stomp around in a mock rage. It feels like some primal hazing ritual, in which God (in the form of St Nick) and the Devil (or Krampus) use children and adults as unwilling pawns for their cruel sport.

Jamie is circumspect about revealing exactly what draws him time and time again to these subjects concerned with the dark corners of domestic life, preferring to contextualise his work as a critique of wider cultural phenomena rather than dwelling on the inference that personal circumstances may have inspired it. But he does cite the extreme social and cultural isolation of his upbringing as a formative and continuing influence on the direction in which his work has taken him. He grew up in a small town outside Los Angeles set within the endless expanse of the San Fernando Valley. "There were areas of the Valley that you just never went to," he says, "either because they were dangerous or you just had no reason to be there. Going to LA was a big, big deal; it was like crossing this border that you generally never crossed."

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Beast of burden: trudging home after a long day of "krampus-ing" Austria's Christmas Krampus (illustration dates back 400 years)

DAZED & CONFUSED

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Klaus and paws: Saint Nicholas surrounded by Krampus.

He has described growing-up in the Valley as like living in a "very small and dead world" that felt as alien to him as he felt to it. A form of escape came through a job in a local used record store where the cover images of the vinyl albums in the racks seemed to offer the opportunity of travel to mysterious new worlds that would lift him out of the black iron prison of his own existence. One particular album, discarded in the store's 10¢ bargain bin, absolutely captivated him. *The Weird World of Blowfly*, the debut by potty-mouthed 1970s proto-rapper Blowfly, featured its eponymous hero on the cover in his makeshift superhero costume – black leotard, white y-fronts and knee-high socks – standing on a garbage can holding a rubber chicken aloft like a trophy kill, while two semi-naked women with large afros reach up to touch him as if in thrall to their deity. His scrawny body casts an eerie shadow on the wall behind. "There was just this weird mystery in the grain," says Jamie. "And I thought, what the hell is this? Is it a superhero, comedy or horror?"

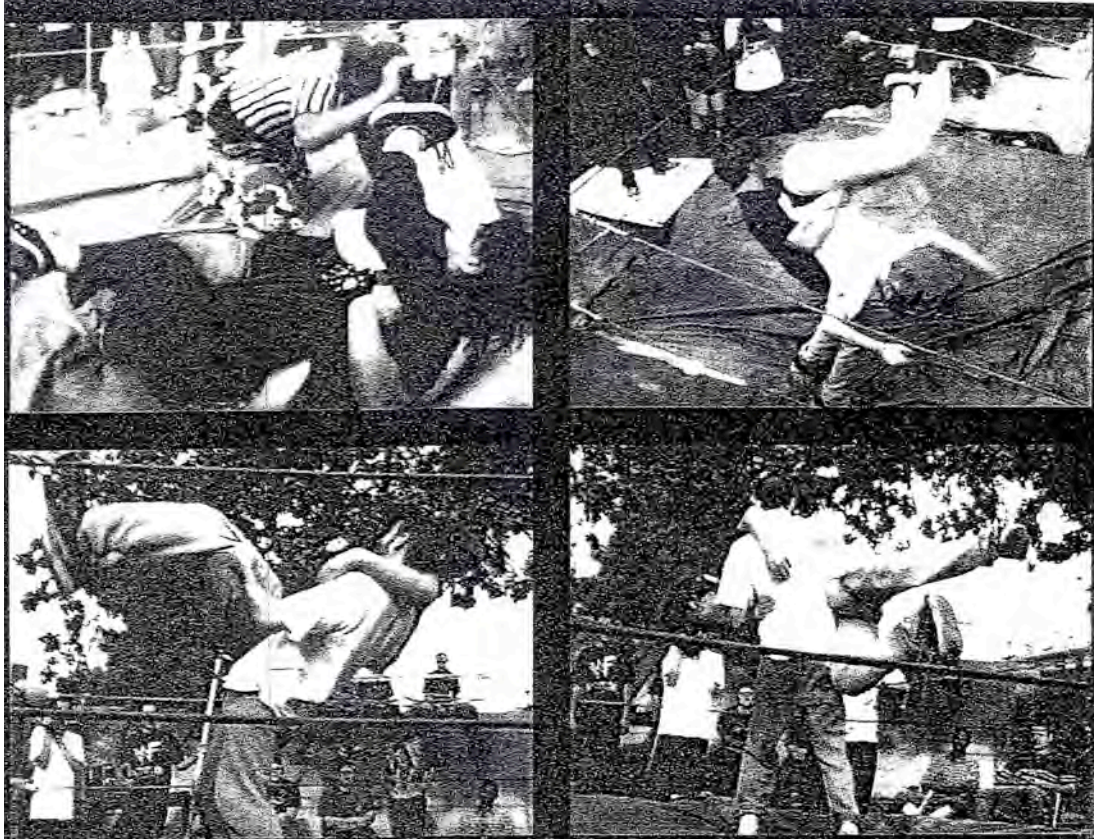
Heavily-inspired by the dime-store theatrics of black musicians like George Clinton, Sun Ra and Blowfly who fashioned fantastic costumes and props out of rudimentary materials, Jamie decided to adopt his own alien identity. He brought back a specially-commissioned wrestling mask from a trip to Mexico City in 1992, fashioned after a likeness of his face – the result is more disfigurement than facsimile, with a spooky similarity to the Krampus' monstrous visage. His costume was simply a pair of long-johns under which he wore a bulbous plastic novelty arse that would occasionally pop out of the "back door" of his pants. "I didn't really have a name," he says. "But at one point my mother used to say 'you're filthy', so I called myself Filthy Cameron."

A fan of pro-wrestling since childhood, he began to stage his own wrestling bouts as performance pieces in other people's apartments, drawing a pool of opponents from people he came across in the street. One was a Michael Jackson impersonator he used to see on Hollywood Boulevard who never seemed to let his mask slip. Their fight was captured in a 1996 video, "The New Life"; another, "Baguette", features a fight with a thuggish French ex-con. Jaime considered his desire to conduct a survey of the backyard wrestling scene in the San Fernando Valley over a number of years in the late-90s – videotaped fights and interviewed the participants – as the logical extension of his performance work.

Each of the three films in the trilogy has emerged out of a similar long-term fascination with specific cultural rituals in which the creation of the films, the artifact summarising his obsession, almost seems like an afterthought. He seems more driven by the compulsion to document each one in extensive detail. *Spook House* came out of a yearly mission to photograph Halloween houses

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Smackdown. Scenes from Jamie's first film, *BB*, documenting the suburban teen wrestling scene on his home turf of California's San Fernando Valley.

across the US. The most extreme examples were found in Detroit – "people in Michigan are just so angry, it's in the blood of the locals" – so he shot the film there. *Kranky Klaus* was filmed off-the-hoop on a last minute trip to the Kufstein region of northern Austria in the winter of 2001. Jamie trailed the Krampus with a video camera as they rampaged through a mountain village.

The initial idea for *BB* was to edit a long-form film out of the 50 hours of footage he had collected, but he abandoned the project at the last minute fearing that the material didn't have the required distance from his subjects. Instead, he decided to cut a 20-minute film together from black and white footage shot of a single fight using two handheld Super 8 cameras. "I started thinking about my roots," says Jamie, "and what it was within those images on the record sleeves that made you look and wonder, 'What is this?' And so it became more about the poetics of the violence; this teenage vaudeville coming to life and speaking."

Critic Gary Indiana pointed out this aspect of *BB* in a 2001 article for *Art Forum*, describing it as akin to an ethnographic recording of some naive folkloric tribal dance. But the films don't play like straight documentaries and, as Jamie reveals, they were constructed like slasher flicks. The violence is carefully foreshadowed to maximise its impact and plays out through multiple viewpoints that vacillate between aggressor and victim. "I wanted to make my version of *Silent Night, Deadly Night* or *Black Christmas*," he says, "but without the cliché overtones of the horror film genre. I was more interested in the psychological trauma."

The world that each film describes also feels entirely insular, operating within its own specific set of rules and conventions like a myth or fairy tale. The title of *BB* was inspired by Sun Ra, whom Jamie met and befriended while working in the record store. Ra likened the satellite towns scattered around the San Fernando Valley outside Los Angeles to the little lead pellets fired out of BB guns. Jamie extended the analogy and began to think of these projectiles as separate and distinct worlds connected through a vast suburban solar system. "During the years that I was making *BB*, I was going to all these suburbs that you heard so much about. But when you got there they were just these horrible places because there was nothing there. It was like exploring little planets. I guess in a way, that's what I'm really interested in: this idea of exploring what lies on the other side of the border that's always separating us from the world."

In this way he also connects with the creative impulse of the black artists who initially inspired him; in particular, Sun Ra who created an entire solar myth around the idea that the black diaspora in America should flee the oppression of urban ghettos for a utopian world in outer space. Jamie's work is driven by the impulse to flee the confines of the suburban ghetto. "We are all the creators of our own little planets," he says. "These are my planets, this is my world, and I'm following a path through realms of the unknown."

**BB / SPOOK HOUSE AND KRANKY KLAUS WILL BE SCREENED WITH A LIVE SOUNDTRACK BY THE MELVINS IN VENUES ACROSS THE UK BETWEEN NOVEMBER 17 AND 29. SEE [WWW.ARTANGEL.ORG.UK](http://WWW.ARTANGEL.ORG.UK) FOR DATES AND INFO. SPECIAL THANKS TO EUROSTAR [WWW.EUROSTAR.COM](http://WWW.EUROSTAR.COM).**