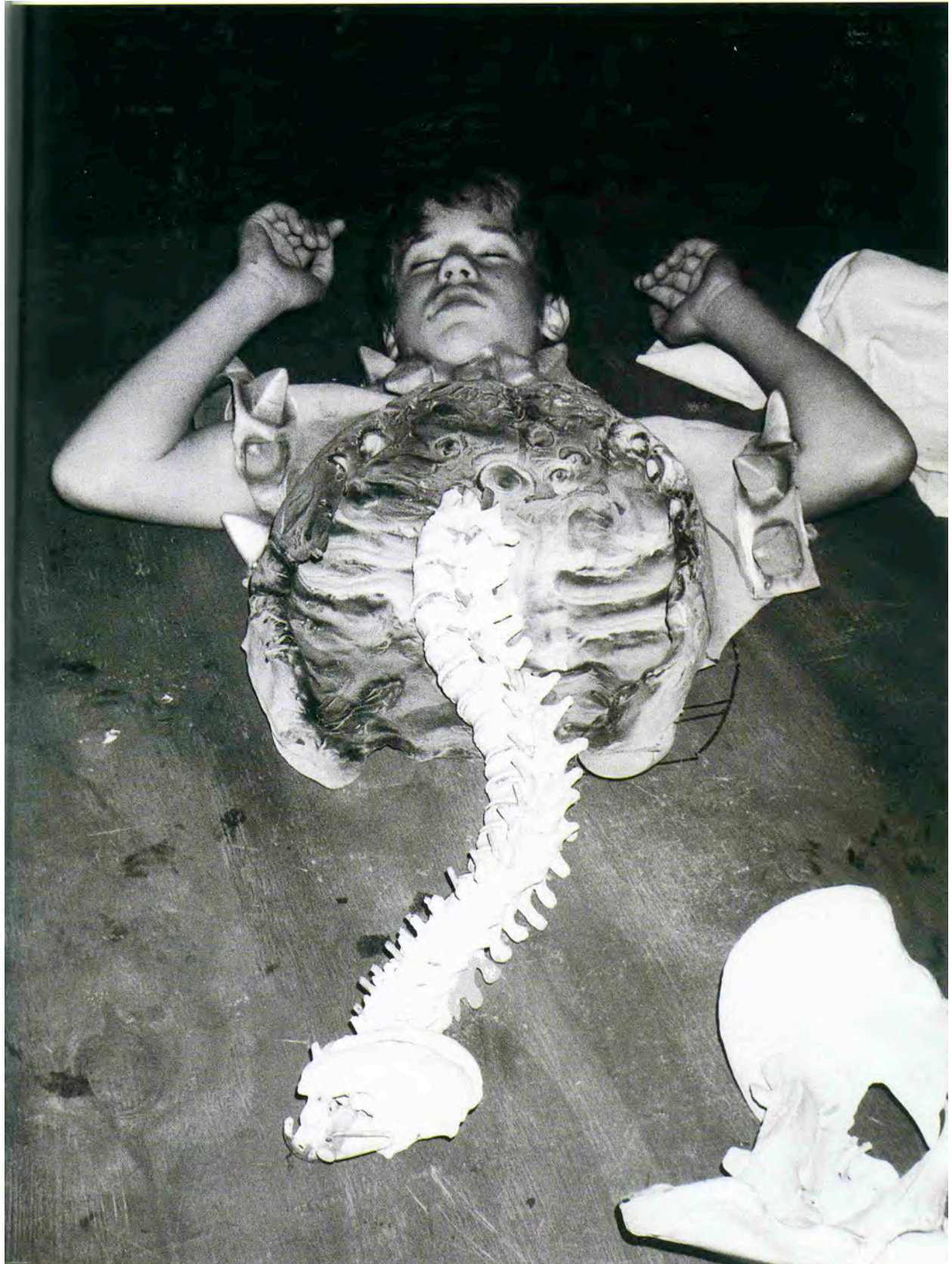


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Hoffmann, Jens, "Cameron Jamie: Comparative Anatomy," FlashArt, March/April 2003, p.64-70



GLADSTONE GALLERY



GLADSTONE GALLERY



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# CAMERON JAMIE

COMPARATIVE ANATOMY

Jens Hoffmann



BB, 2000. Stills from b/w super 8 film.  
Soundtrack by the Melvins.  
Courtesy Christine König, Vienna/Chantal Crousel, Paris.

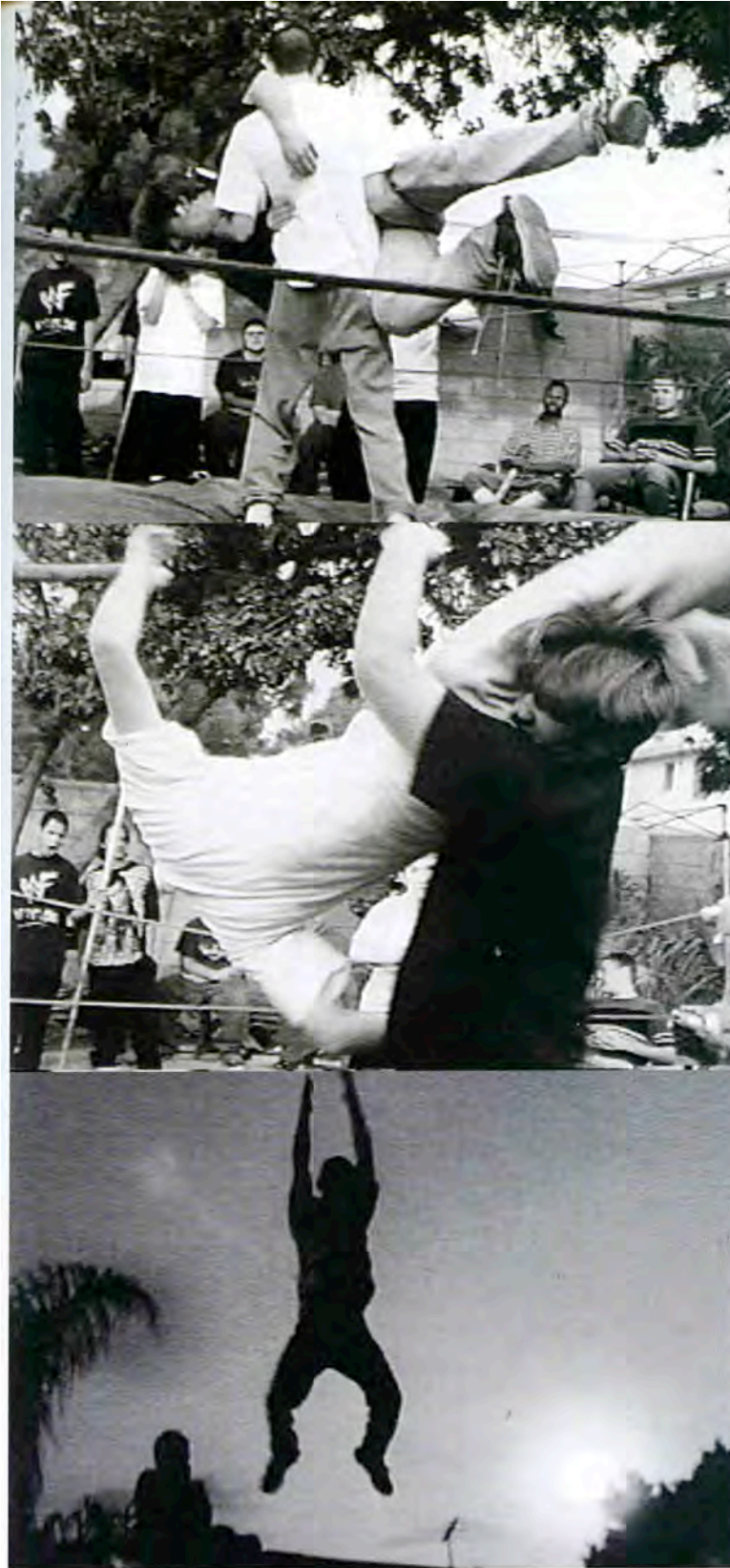
**JENS HOFFMANN:** *Tell me a little about the San Fernando Valley where you grew up and from where you draw most of the material for your work. It has been portrayed in so many novels and movies as a deeply uncultured version of American suburbia and as the ultimate annihilation of the American dream. You seem to have a different notion about the Valley. What defines it from your point of view?*

**Cameron Jamie:** For me growing up there I always felt as if I was living inside a very small and dead world. The San Fernando Valley always felt as if it just sits, and never moves or breathes. I think that my curiosity to explore and document happened naturally at a very early age, and came out of an interest in trying to understand people and certain types of ritualized practices produced by people in the local neighborhoods. I suppose the mixture of how the Valley has been portrayed in the media of Hollywood movies and novels with its reputation of having kooky architecture, earthquakes, IQ-challenged teenagers who talk funny, the capital of the porn industry, the Rodney King beatings, and the Manson family, to name a few things have all contributed in building this very mythic image of the Valley to the outside world. But these cultural myths make it feel like a place that doesn't really exist, like a dead wonderland. I think the San Fernando Valley is actually very cultured in many ways because most suburban cultures tend to absorb the influence of the outside world to create interesting and odd phenomena which often stay trapped in the sphere of suburbia.

**JH:** *What you say is that suburban cultures, and here we are talking about the San Fernando Valley in particular, appropriate mainstream culture and generate new sub-cultures. How would you relate that to the aspects you have been investigating, like the backyard wrestling or the spook houses?*

**CJ:** My interest in the spook house and the backyard wrestling phenomenons resulted in bodies of works made for different reasons that much later related to each other. I think both of those works showed these outlets for people to express fantasies and ideas about themselves that at the same time commented on many social and cultural issues

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



about America. I consider the performance videos that I made in the early '90s of myself fighting people inside their homes to be very much an extension of the backyard wrestling film, *BB* (2000). After I made *BB*, I realized it made sense to show the spook house photos (1987-) because it showed two completely different types of ritualized social theatrics in America that people rarely or never acknowledged before as social forms of theater. Outside the realm of sports, music, film, and television, "theater" doesn't really exist for lower and middle-class America.

**JH:** *What you said in relation to how suburbia is absorbing the mainstream and generating something new and slightly odd, could that be said about what the United States has done on a larger scale with European culture over the last centuries?*

**CJ:** Yes. American culture started with the seeds from when Europe brought culture to America, which over the course of the last few centuries America has either drastically appropriated or killed off. Now everything comes from the States back to Europe, which has gradually caught many of the same consumer-driven and cultural diseases from America with no cure in sight. We just grow and dump our disposable culture into theirs. The origins and customs of what we know in America as "Halloween" came originally from Northern Europe to America, and the holiday has very recently been introduced for the first time back to Europe from America in the form of kitsch Halloween paraphernalia with no cultural meaning. American Halloween culture has actually been very successful in Europe and they have even adopted the custom of going from door to door to trick or treat for candy! Backyard wrestling has also just started up in a few German suburbs and I have seen some of the video documentation. If you think it's odd seeing kids in America imitating pro wrestlers, wait till you've seen German teenagers imitating American teenage backyard wrestlers. I love that kind of trickle-down influence.

**JH:** *I have seen German teenagers doing backyard wrestling and it is pretty bizarre. I fear people in Europe do not have that connection to professional wrestling even though it is shown on TV. I did it in the living room of my grandmother when I was about twelve years old with a friend after watching WWF. But the intensity was different to what I know from LA and I also think your film represents something more diversified.*

**CJ:** I was trying to capture something mysterious that made the viewer feel lost and disoriented by what he or she was seeing. As if you were observing and witnessing something very primitive behind the mask of a society that is always trying to hide itself. It was very important to show the middle-class utopian suburbs in America as a third-world hell. *BB* was also a very biographical work that said so much about my own upbringing.

MARCH APRIL 2003 **Flash Art** 69

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Untitled from the series "Spook House", 1987-. B/W photographs, 50 x 60 cm. Courtesy Christine König, Vienna/Chantal Crousel, Paris.

**JH:** For a while you have been living in Paris, one of the supposed capitals of high culture. How do you look at the issues you are dealing with in your work with this new geographical but also cultural distance?

**CJ:** The geographical and cultural distance has always felt the same whether I lived in Europe or United States. However, you realize how everything is even more intense and culturally ass-backwards in America when you really see it from the outside. People in Europe often cannot believe some of the things that I've shown in my work because generally it is the first time that Europeans have ever seen those types of things. There are also many obscure phenomena in Europe that I have been researching for a while that are just as strange. But geography has never affected the methodology and practice of how I've been making my work. You also have to understand that the cultural and social documentary works are not the only works I've made. Those works function as sidebar to understand my other bodies of works as one universe.

**JH:** Tell me about your drawings and the other works you have been doing that are not necessarily related to the cultural and social documentary pieces. I am interested in what you said about the universe.

**CJ:** The drawings have always been rendered automatically and it's like wrestling or fighting one on one with the paper to express something that can't necessarily be expressed in my other works. All of my projects, whether documentary, fiction, or whatever, are all somehow linked and connected like little planets to one another. Some artists create worlds that they want to exist. Inside my world everything seems to be dead and brought back to life in a zombie-like state. Maybe the drawings express metaphors about returning or resurrecting the "dead" things that have been buried.

**JH:** Your work seems so unique that I have to ask you what artists do you actually feel close to thematically and formally? Is there anybody that you like in particular and share thoughts and ideas with?

**CJ:** To be honest, I have never had any interest or felt close to what goes on in the contemporary art world with artists. From the very beginning, I have always been looking at things that are outside of the art and popular media world. The art being championed, especially now, has become kind of like bad TV. Contemporary art has just never been stimulating enough for me. Ancient and primitive art forms are the things that I have always looked at that still appeal to me. People in the past have also completely missed the references of my work when they have attempted to make links or associations. The references have always been so way off and wrong! (laughs) Try looking at Blowfly's first album cover called, *The Weird World of Blowfly*. That picture alone on the cover says it all. I'll never forget when I was a teenager I saw Screaming Jay Hawkins perform with him coming out of a coffin holding a shotgun and a human skull during his entrance to the stage. I'm not kidding. I still think about that performance and seeing that changed my life and reinforced my position that I had to be an artist. Jeffrey Vallance is an extraordinary visual artist who I feel closest to in terms of sharing many dialogues and thoughts. His thought-provoking works have still continued to fascinate me and the art world has not yet caught up with the depth of his career. Harrell Lee Littrel is another artist who comes to mind whose artworks are extremely odd and interesting. It's hard to see Harrell's works because he works outside of the gallery and museum system and you have to personally track him down on the streets in order to see anything. It wouldn't do justice to describe what he does... you have to experience it to believe it.

**JH:** In conclusion one could say that there are in fact two areas in your work: the more metaphorical you just spoke about and the more documentary oriented with the films and the photographs. How would you bring this all together in a show? How could you maybe create a situation in which the audience could also experience all of this as real and step out of the area of representation?

**CJ:** I am more interested in experimenting with the performative aspects of the film experience. I have shown *BB* on two occasions with the Melvins performing the soundtrack live with the film projected in a theater. This type of situation really pushed the film to another level of experience that affected people on many emotional levels far more than the darkened gallery setting, which is what I have always hated. I have not yet had a proper situation in an exhibition to show both the documentary works and the other projects as one. To mix up the many different bodies of works would create a dialogue that would make sense and play off of each other quite logically. One of the reasons why I even make the social documentary works is also to show what has always inspired and influenced me to make my other artworks. I think this is important to see because people do not really know the roots of where my work is coming from. ■

*Jens Hoffmann is a critic and curator based in Berlin.*

**Cameron Jamie** was born in Los Angeles in 1969. He lives and works in Paris.

Selected solo shows: 2003: Christine König, Vienna; 2002: Chantal Crousel, Paris; 2001: Centre National de l'Estampe et de l'Art Imprime, Chatou (France); 2000: Centrum für Gegenwartskunst, Linz; 1999: Praz-Delavallade, Paris. Selected group shows: 2003: "How Latitudes Become Forms," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; "The Fourth Sex," Pitti Discovery, Florence; "M\_ARS: Art and War" Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz (Austria); 2002: "Video-Zone," The Center for Contemporary Art, Tel-Aviv; 2001: "Casino 2001," S.M.A.K./Stedelijk Museum, Gent; 2000: "Let's Entertain," Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris/Kunstverein Wolfsburg (Germany).