***Look at Us***

**John Calcutt**

Commissioned by Castlefield Gallery to coincide with Hardeep Pandhal’s exhibition, *A Joyous Thing with Maggots at the Centre*, 26 Sept – 23 Nov 2014

Look at us, Lord and Lady Muck perched upon our thrones of shit. Which one of us will tell the Emperor that which we can all plainly see? That he is not finely robed in stunning attire. That he is, in fact, stark bollock naked. Who will betray this secret that is no secret? Who will risk this transgression? Why such reluctance? Do we dread that the unveiling of the secret will release the stench of our thrones into everyone’s nostrils? Do we fear, at some inarticulate level, that preservation of this public secret is precisely that which allows us our share of the Emperor’s power?

Once we were in nature as water in water, and fire in fire: Long time past. Then, before time, we were as the animals, lacking self-possession. There was no self: there was no object. To emerge from this state of complete immersion in the world - to become a subject for oneself and for others - one must produce objects. One must, in fact, intervene in the continuum of existence, interrupting its seamless totality. Only by such interruption can I be separated from you, here distanced from there, gold distinguished from shit, the sacred divorced from the profane. Such interruptions are violent cuts, cuts that allow meaning and power to spill forth. The cut: site of our first insuperable ambivalence. The cut is a violation, a loss, a severing. But equally: “Pleasure is always achieved by cutting. What pleasure wants is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the dissolve which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss.”[[1]](#endnote-1) It is the pleasure we derive from loss that diverts us from redemption and the easing of our pain.

Why such a protracted preamble? Well… Hardeep Pandhal’s work, I suggest, addresses itself at various levels to such questions: to how we strive to establish and maintain the precarious differentiation between Sameness and Otherness, and yet how easily they nonetheless collapse into one another. These works challenge fixity, undermine stability and elicit doubt in relation to certainty. “I think this whole thing about being British Asian is kind of a bit weird as well. ‘Cos like it’s the truth, but, you know, it doesn’t need to be the truth” (*Jojoboys*). Truths are provisional. They arise from pacts and agreements between interested parties. Truths are manifestations of power. Power has many forms: it may be coercive, or it may be consensual. Our admiration for the Emperor’s new clothes demonstrates the problem of confronting the naked truth.

Let us consider Hardeep Pandhal’s videos. They appear casual and ad hoc: more or less impromptu. In the case of *Profane Illumination* they even make direct reference to their seemingly provisional status. Speaking to an unseen cameraman the artist says, “I’ll probably like edit this bit so it’s more linear”, and “I think that might work... all that stuff I just recorded.” By such means, process becomes inseparable from product, and becoming from being (the videos appear to be simultaneously “made” and “being made”). The frequent use of ellipsis, occlusion, indeterminacy and marginalia that also characterise the artist’s videos and drawings (the verbal ums and ahs, the narrative non-sequiturs, the incomplete statements, the cryptic inscriptions in the prints and drawings, the occasional drowning of the narrator’s voice by noise pollution, etc.) also discourage us from thinking of them as definitive, resolved statements. They are fragmented, oblique and inconclusive, yet we willingly give ourselves over to them because we demand our own seduction by delusion. Like docile rabbits tormented by a child we choose to endure rather than escape. We want to be caught, basically.

In *Profane Illumination* the artist discusses the initiation ceremonies of some undisclosed society. “In that Other time all the ‘landscapes’ or aspects of the natural world, the moon and you know the mountains and all that stuff, they were people basically.” In other words, nature had not yet been differentiated from the human. Such differentiation depends upon an increasing ‘mastery’ of nature by humans. We move from dependence upon nature to control over it. This is like Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic in which each party is dependent upon the other for its identity: without the Slave (the Sikh subaltern, for example) the Master (the British Major General, for example) cannot be Master, and vice versa. In order to become Self, Self demands the Other. But the Other must remain a challenge to Self, otherwise the dialectical friction fails. When nature submits to human mastery, the dialectical system of difference upon which meaning is founded falters. Everything starts to slip and slide: “male” and “female” become interchangeable; the relative positions of “dominant” and “subordinate” become harder to maintain; “centre” and “margins” realign. Those poor fucking rabbits: flipped and dangled and tweaked and twisted - they are no longer treated as sentient creatures, but as toys: no longer part of the natural world, but merely things. And they seem to offer no complaint or resistance (*Jojoboys*).

Psychoanalytical orthodoxy asserts that the mother is the primary site of Otherness: (M)other. It is also claimed that the eruption of Otherness into consciousness as a result of the child’s inevitable loss of the mother’s body marks the emergence of language (a signifying system utterly predicated upon the structuring of difference and lack, and the attribution of positive value to absence). Hardeep Pandhal collaborates with his mother on some of his pieces. She makes the knitted faces stitched into his sweaters, that of the Sikh martyr Baba Deep Singh in the case of this exhibition – the holy warrior responsible for rebuilding the Harmandir Sahib after it was desecrated and destroyed by the Afghans in 1757, and who continued fighting despite being decapitated in a later battle with the Afghans. But mother and son are divided by language: he speaks little Punjabi, while she speaks little English. This is but one instance in Pandhal’s work of the “de-naturalisation” of those conventional relations between identity, difference and domination upon which social reality is structured. At such moment the policing of these ubiquitous differences becomes difficult, perhaps impossible, resulting in situations where “observer melts into the observed in confusing ways, subject and object keep changing places in unpredictable rhythms, language becomes manifestly treacherous, both sharpening and disarming the critical faculty through hazy ambiguities”.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In *Profane Illumination* the camera occasionally homes in on the screen of a laptop computer where a film is playing. There is a certain contrived and deliberate manner in this careful chaperoning of our attention, and it demands that we prepare ourselves for something of heightened significance, something symbolic perhaps. We are thus directed twice to *Scarface*, first to its original 1932 version (directed by Howard Hawks), and then to Brian de Palma’s 1983 remake starring Al Pacino. In both excerpts the same scene has been chosen: Scarface/Tony looks in wonder at an illuminated advertising display that reads, “The World Is Yours”. The world, according to this strapline, is no longer mysterious, challenging, alien and unknowable: it is submissive, reduced to an object, a thing: a potential possession. In the 1983 version of the film this marketing slogan appears emblazoned on an airship, an advertising blimp.

Notes on temporal discontinuities in Pandahl’s work. *Scarface* in 1932. *Scarface* in 1983. The artist as a child. The artist as an adult. The artist with beard. The artist without beard. The artist with short hair. The artist with medium length hair. “I’m not as good as I used to be.” Reflect on time as the medium through which the continuity and stability of identity are established. Now/Then. There/Gone. Self/Other. “Je est un autre” (Rimbaud).

The camera frantically zooms in and out (*Profane Illumination*), and pans wildly from side to side. Zoom In. There’s no logic, no sense, no apparent purpose. Zoom Out. It’s mad, erratic, uncontrolled, haphazard, producing a slightly nauseating effect. Zoom In. The camera veers all over the shop like a mad woman’s shit, but at the centre of all this manic careering Zoom Out sits the Harmandir Sahib (the so-called Golden Temple at Amritsar), attracting and repelling our gaze by turns. Zoom In. Fort/Da: Gone/There. Little Ernst, as Freud recounts, derived a masochistic pleasure from repeatedly throwing away small objects: “Gone!” Such infantile pleasure also arises from the bodily expulsion of faeces (“Gone!”), or from the discomfort of withholding them. Such hoarding of faeces, Freud suggested, leads to an unconscious connection between shit and gold. The Golden Temple: The Temple of Shit.

The sacred, according to Georges Bataille, is that which is “wholly other”, and one may thus “note the elementary *subjective* identity between types of excrement (sperm, menstrual blood, urine, faecal matter) and everything that can be seen as sacred, divine or marvellous”.[[3]](#endnote-3) In some senses, then, Hardeep Pandhal is a desecrator, a despoiler. As a child he defaced the written stories of his classmates by scrawling obscenities on them (*Jojoboys*). As an adult he disorganises the carefully tended structures of difference that allow us to sit on our thrones of shit with apparent disregard for their foul stench. Yet he is not a rebel without a cause. He is a fellow traveler with the anthropologist Michael Taussig, whose book *Defacement*: *Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* asks, “what happens when something precious is despoiled. It begins with the notion that such activity is attractive in its very repulsion, and that it creates something sacred even in the most secular of societies and circumstances.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

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1. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1975. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. 104-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, University of Minnesota Press, 1985, p. 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Publisher’s promotional material for Taussig’s book.

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    [↑](#endnote-ref-4)