

Than Hussein Clark

Despair

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5 & 7 rue de Beaune, Paris

During our interview to prepare this text, Than tried to retrace the conception of an exhibition that had been postponed many times. His project, interrupted by personal or collective tragedies, has had different versions, some of which have been put aside as his explorations have progressed, or else put off for later. Borne up by an inhabited, chaotic stream of words, he waltzes me along the traces of more-or-less well-known characters from the first half of the 20th century: Pierre-Lucien Martin, a Parisian maker of art books during World War II (he is supposed to have had in his possession the first manuscript of Genet's *The Maids*), Philip R. Perkins, an American painter who frequented the gay New-York demi-monde of the 1940s and was a friend of the founders of the magazine *View* (Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler), or else Charles de Beistegui, the ostentatious Franco-Mexican heir, decorator and art collector, who was behind the scandalous *Bal du siècle* of 1951 at the Palazzo Labia in Venice, which he owned. Then came the *A-listers*: Marcel Duchamp, Greta Garbo, Marcel Broodthaers or else Joseph Beuys. Lost in the complexity of a layered conversation, I suddenly realised that I'd been absorbed into a demonstration of "queer gossip": that historic-speculative practice that brings in rumours or gossip to make good the gaps in history and its uncertainties. As a confirmed collector of memorabilia and minority narratives, Than Hussein Clark explores the historic density of queer lives in the 20th century: he seeks out traces and digs up personal stories, wondering how some individual trajectories may, or may not, have coincided.

For *Despair*, he has taken an interest in the filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder and his 1978 film of the same name, adapted from Vladimir Nabokov's novel. In it, Dirk Bogarde plays the owner of a chocolate factory, Hermann Hermann, who organises his disappearance after meeting his doppelgänger. And yet, what runs through this exhibition is the withdrawal from public life of Greta Garbo, the Swedish-American star of the silent screen. In one of the six cabinets presented by the artist, a checkerboard is occupied by a variation on Joseph Beuys's famous declaration: "the silence of Duchamp is overrated"¹. Taken from a 1964 action that criticised the artist's decision to abandon art and devote himself to writing and chess, it has here been adapted to the silence of Greta Garbo, to which no one would attach the same intellectual importance. It is a point of departure so as to think about questions of disappearance, absence, and a productive negativity.

The exhibition is inhabited by photo montages that provide Greta Garbo and Dirk Bogarde with a space to meet each other, on the basis of Polaroids stolen from the Rothschild Bank in London and objects consecrated by Duchamp. We also encounter photographs of the body of the artist's father, dressed up as Captain Hook, made shortly after his passing. The character of *Peter Pan*, haunted by a crocodile and a clock, here can be seen as a figure of human finitude. Each of the cabinets presented by the artist is marked by the influence of the architect and interior designer Emilio Terry, and contains a ready-made: a boat made from metronomes, an architectural model of Broodthaers's famous white room, an original drawing by Philip R. Perkins, or else a painting that belonged to the artist's father.

¹"Das Schweigen von Marcel Duchamp wird überbewertet."

Crève-cœur

In line with a conceptual art to which he had previously paid little attention (too straight), Than Hussein Clark considers the question of a queer ready-made that would be more attentive to its provenance than its function as an object. We might wonder about the gossiping power of objects that convey queer stories: how do they allow us to trace out lineages, or produce embodiments of lives that have preceded us ? In his book “Between You and Me” (2005), the historian Gavin Butt looks at gossip as a queer relational methodology: an action that maintains the process of heritage in an artistic community while deconsecrating the archive as a fixed and stable historical material. In this exhibition, a concern about producing connections while maintaining the irrational power of artworks is central: hence the artist’s love for the irreverence and anachronism of collages. There can also be seen his interest in affective design, haunted by the spectre of functionalism. Behind the doors of the cabinets, skeleton-maids seem to dance or twitch, and the memory of Jean Genet is never far away.

Thomas Conchou, December 2024
Translated by Ian Monk