

In 1956 Louis Armstrong recorded the song *Mack the Knife* to reasonable success, reaching Number 20 on the charts. Two years later, Bobby Darin recorded the song and with some reluctance - afraid of its prospects - released it as a single. The song, much to his surprise reached Number 1 on the US and UK charts, and became an instant hit. In the following years, several others would do their own versions of the song - Fitzgerald, Sinatra, Sting, The Brian Setzer Orchestra, and Michael Bublé. No one, however, would challenge the dominance of Darin's '58 version. It became definitive.

In the 1980s, McDonald's seized upon the nostalgia of the song and used it as the seed of a large advertising campaign. Along with the song they created a promotional mascot, cheekily named Mac Tonight, alluding to both the Number 1 hit as well as their massively successful Big Mac burger. The company, wanting to market themselves as not just a quick lunch destination, attempted to make the burger into a kind of classier dinner option, aided by American nostalgia for a past era, one with dapper suits, Wayfarer sunglasses, and pearly whites. Lo and behold Mac Tonight appeared as a well-dressed crooner with a massive crescent moon for a head, donning a pair of signature shades. The campaign was short lived.

Long before any of these American releases, however, was the original song: *Die Moritat von Mackie Messer*, the opening song of Bertolt Brecht's, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, or as it is known in English - *The Threepenny Opera*. The song was a murder ballad introducing its blood thirsty anti-hero, Mackie, to audiences by listing his litany of crimes. The traditional murder ballad, a sub-genre of the typical ballad, creates an arc where the murder is recounted, the escape explained, and the indictment completed with the murderer eventually in jail or dead. Brecht's production had a larger target for its indictment, the aristocracy. The play was a case study in class struggle and hypocrisy set to music which captured the atmosphere of Germany just before the war. But leave it to America to exploit such a historically laden song in order to sell hamburgers.

The last few years has seen a resurrection of Mac Tonight, albeit in different garb and committing different crimes. Now he leads the alt-right and Neo-Nazi crowds as a hate symbol, parading through videos, images, and memes often found on both 4chan and 8chan, two of the most popular and unregulated internet message boards. Both sites are nearly endless infernos of racism, misogyny, and violence. A sea of faceless users fomenting America's criminal intentions outside of the light. When the Neo-Nazi rallies can't happen with real bodies, they happen here. And so the murder ballad's presence returns, perhaps with different protagonists.

In his first exhibition with the gallery, Ajay Kurian presents new and recent works that can be read as a murder ballad for America in sculptural form.

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