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UPSTAIRS: THE SEARCHERS BY DAVID PANOS
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Hollybush Gardens is pleased to present a second solo exhibition with David Panos, featuring new digital video works arrayed as a collection of figural fragments where GIF-ed tics, shrouded couplings and fleshly vectors trace a continuum from quotidian gesture to high abstraction.

Performers: Pepa Ubera, Adam Moore
Technical Assistance: Josh Anio Grigg, Rob Heppell
Thanks: Matthew Noel-Tod, Luisa Lorenza Corna, Sopho Medoidze

Jacob Bard-Rosenberg in conversation with David Panos about 'The Searchers'

There is something chattering. Alongside a triptych a small screen displays the rhythmic loop of hands typing, contorting, touching, holding. A movement in which the artifice strains between shuddering and juddering. Machinic GIFs seem to frame an event which may or may not have taken place. Their motions appear to combine an endless neurotic repetition and a totally adrenal pumped and pumping tension, anticipating confrontation.

JBR: How do the heavily stylised triptych of screens in 'The Searchers' relate to the GIF-like loops created out of conventionally-shot street footage?

DP: I think of the three screens as something like the 'unconscious' of these nervous gestures. I'm interested in how video compositing can conjure up impossible or interior spaces, perhaps in a way similar to painting. Perhaps these semi-abstract images can somehow evoke how bodies are shot through with subterranean currents—the strange world of exchange and desire that lies under the surface of reality or physical experience. Of course abstractions don't really 'inhabit' bodies and you can't depict metaphysics, but Paul Klee had this idea about an aesthetic 'interworld', that painting could somehow reveal invisible aspects of reality through poetic distortion. Digital video and especially 3D graphics tend to be the opposite of painting—highly regimented and sat within a very preset Euclidean space. I guess I've been trying to wrestle with how these programs can be misused to produce interesting images—how images of figures can be abstracted by them but retain some of their twitchy aliveness.

JBR: This raises a question about the difference between the control of your media and the situation of total control in contemporary cinematic image making.

DP: Under the new regimes of video making, the software often feels like it controls you. Early analogue video art was a sensuous space of flows and currents, and artists like the Vasulkas were able to build their own video cameras and mixers to allow them to create whole new images—in effect new ways of seeing. Today that kind of utopian or avant-garde idea that video can make surprising new orders of images is dead—it's almost impossible for artists to open up a complex program like Cinema 4D and make it do something else. Those softwares were produced through huge capital investment funding hundreds of developers. But I'm still interested in engaging with digital and 3D video, trying to wrestle with it to try and get it to do something interesting—I guess because the way that it pictures the world says something about the world at the moment—and somehow it feels that one needs to work in relation to the heightened state of commodification and abstraction these programs represent. So I try and misuse the software or do things by hand as much as possible, and rather than programming and rendering I manipulate things in real time.

JBR: So in some way the collective and divided labour that goes into producing the latest cinematic commodities also has a doubled effect: firstly technique is revealed as the opposite of some kind of

freedom, and at the same time this has an effect both on how the cinematic object is treated and how it appears. To be represented objects have to be surrounded by the new 3D capture technology, and at the same time it laminates the images in a reflected glossiness that bespeaks both the technology and the disappearance of the labour that has gone into creating it.

DP: I'm definitely interested in the images produced by the newest image technologies—especially as they go beyond lens-based capture. One of the screens in the triptych uses volumetric capturing—basically 3D scanning for moving image. The 'camera' perspective we experience as the viewer is non-existent, and as we travel into these virtual, impossible perspectives it creates the effect of these hollowed out, corroded bodies. This connects to a recurring motif of 'hollowing out' that appears in the video and sculpture I've been making recently.

And I have a recurring obsession with the hollowing out of reality caused by the new regime of commodities whose production has become cut to the bone, so emptied of their material integrity that they're almost just symbols of themselves. So in my show 'The Dark Pool' (Hollybush Gardens, 2014) I made sculptural assemblages with Ikea tables and shelves, which when you cut them open are hollow and papery. Or in 'Time Crystals' (Pumphouse Gallery, 2017) I worked with clothes made in the image of the past from Primark and H&M that are so low-grade that they can barely stand washing. We are increasingly surrounded by objects, all of which have—through contemporary processes of hyper-rationalisation and production—been slowly emptied of material quality. Yet they have the resemblance of luxury or historical goods. This is a real kind of spectral reality we inhabit.

JBR: I wonder to myself about how the unconscious might haunt us in these days when commodities have become hollow. Might it be like Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious, in which through the photographic still the everyday is brought into a new focus, not in order to see what is behind the veil of semblance, but to see—and reclaim for art—the veiling in a newly-won clarity.

DP: Yes, I see these new technologies as similar, but am interested in how they don't just change impact perception but also movement. The veiled moving figures in 'The Searchers' are a strange by-product of digital video compositing. I was looking to produce highly abstract linear depictions of bodies reduced to fleshy lines, similar to those in the show and I discovered that the best way to create these abstract images was to cover the face and hands of performers when you film them to hide the obvious silhouettes of hands and faces. But asking performers to do this inadvertently produced a very peculiar movement—the strange veiled choreography that you see in the show. I found this footage of the covered performers (which was supposed to be a stepping stone to a more digitally mediated image, and never actually seen) really suggestive— the dancers seem to be seeking out different temporary forms and they have a curious classical or religious quality or sometimes evoke a contemporary state of emergency. Or they just look like absurd ghosts.

JBR: In the last hundred years, when people have talked about ghosts the one thing they don't want to think about is how children consider ghosts, as figures covered in a white sheet, in a stupid tangible way. Ghosts—as traumatic memories—have become more serious and less playful. Ghosts mean dwelling on the unfinished business of the past, or apprehending some shard of history left unredeemed that now revisits us. Not only has no one been allowed to be a child with regard to ghosts, but also ghosts are not for materialists either. All the white sheets are banished. One of the things about Marx when he talks about phantoms—or at least phantasmagorias—is much closer to thinking about, well, pieces of linen and how you clothe someone, and what happens with a coat worked up out of once living, now dead labour that seems more animate than the human who wears it.

DP: Yes, I've been very interested in Marx's phantasmagorias. I reprinted Keston Sutherland's brilliant essay on how Marx uses the term '*Gallerte'* or 'gelatine' to describe abstract labour for a recent show. Sutherland highlights a vitalism in Marx's metaphysics that I'm very drawn to. For the last few years I've been working primarily with dancers and physical performers and trying to somehow make work about the weird fleshy world of objects and how they're shot through with frozen labour. I love how he describes the 'wooden brain' of the table as commodity and how he describes it 'dancing'—I always wanted to make an animatronic dancing table.

JBR: There is also a sort of joyfulness about that. The phantasmagoria isn't just scary but childish. Of course you are haunted by commodities, of course they are terrifying, of course they are worked up out of the suffering and collective labour of a billion bodies working both in concert and yet alienated from each other. People's worked up death is made into value, and they all have unfinished business. But commodities are also funny and they bumble around; you find them in your house and play with them.

DP: Well my last body of work was all about dancing and how fashion commodities are bound up with joy and memory, but this show has come out much bleaker. It's about how bodies are searching out something else in a time of crisis. It's ended up reflecting a sense of lack and longing and general feeling of anxiety in the air. That said I am always drawn to images that are quite bright, colourful and 'pop' and maybe a bit banal—everyday moments of dead time and secret gestures.

JBR: Yes, but they are not so banal. In dealing with tangible everyday things we are close to time and motion studies, but not just in terms of the stupid questions they ask of how people work efficiently. Rather this raises questions of what sort of material should be used so that something slips or doesn't slip—or how things move with each other or against each other—what we end up doing with our bodies or what we end up putting on our bodies. Your view into this is very sympathetic: much art dealing in cut-up bodies appears more violent, whereas the ruins of your abstractions in the stylised triptych seem almost caring.

DP: Well I'm glad you say that. Although this show is quite dark I also have a bit of a problem with a strain of nihilist melancholy that pervades a lot of art at the moment. It gives off a sense of being subsumed by capitalism and modern technology and seeing no way out. I hope my work always has a certain tension or energy that points to another possible world. But I'm not interested in making academic statements with the work about theory or politics. I want it to gesture in a much more intuitive, rhythmic, formal way like music. I had always made music and a few years back started to realise that I needed to make video with the same sense of formal freedom. The big change in my practice was to move from making images using cinematic language to working with simultaneous registers of images on multiple screens that produce rhythmic or affective structures and can propose without text or language.

JBR: The presentation of these works relies on an intervention into the time of the video. If there is a haunting here its power appears in the doubled domain of repetition, which points both backwards towards a past that must be compulsively revisited, and forwards in convulsive anticipatory energy. The presentation of the show troubles cinematic time, in which not only is linear time replaced by cycles, but also new types of simultaneity within the cinematic reality can be established between loops of different velocities.

DP: Film theorists talk about the way 'post-cinematic' contemporary blockbusters are made from images knitted together out of a mixture of live action, green-screen work, and 3D animation. I've been thinking how my recent work tries to explode that—keep each element separate but simultaneous. So I use 'live' images, green-screened compositing and CGI across a show but never brought together into a naturalised image—sort of like a Brechtian approach to post-cinema. The show is somehow an exploded frame of a contemporary film with each layer somehow indicating different levels of lived abstractions, each abstraction peeling back the surface further.

JBR: This raises crucial questions of order, and the notion that abstraction is something that 'comes after' reality, or is applied to reality, rather than being primary to its production.

DP: Yes good point. I think that's why I'm interested in multiple screens visible simultaneously. The linear time of conventional editing is always about unveiling whereas in the show everything is available at the same time on the same level to some extent. This kind of multi-screen, multi-layered approach to me is an attempt at contemporary 'realism' in our times of high abstraction.

That said it's strange to me that so many artworks and games using CGI these days end up echoing a kind of 'naturalist' realist pictorialism from the early 19th Century—because that's what is given in the software engines and in the gaming-post-cinema complex they're trying to reference. Everything is perfectly in perspective and figures and landscapes are designed to be at least pseudo 'realistic'. I guess that's why you hear people talking about the digital sublime or see art that explores the Romanticism of these 'gaming' images.

JBR: But the effort to make a naturalistic picture is—as it was in the 19th century—already not the same as realism. Realism should never just mean realistic representation, but instead the incursion of reality into the work. For the realists of the mid-19th century that meant a preoccupation with motivations and material forces. But today it is even more clear that any type of naturalism in the work can only serve to mask similar preoccupations, allowing work to screen itself off from reality.

DP: In terms of an anti-naturalism I'm also interested in the pictorial space of medieval painting that breaks the laws of perspective or post-war painting that hovered between figuration and abstraction. I

recently returned to Francis Bacon who I was the first artist I was into when I was a teenage goth and who I'd written off as an adolescent obsession. But revisiting Bacon I realised that my work is highly influenced by him, and reflects the same desire to capture human energy in a concentrated, abstracted way. I want to use 'cold' digital abstraction to create a heightened sense of the physical but not in the same way as motion capture which always seems to smooth off and denature movement. So the graph-like image in the centre of the triptych (*Les Fantômes*) in this show twitches with the physicality of a human body in a very subtle but palpable way. It looks like CGI but isn't and has this concentrated human life force rippling through it.

If in this space and time of loops of the exploded unstill still, we find ourselves again stuck in this shuddering and juddering, I can't help but ask what its gesture really is. How does the past it holds gesture towards the future? And what does this mean for our reality and interventions into it.

JBR: The green-screen video is very cold. The ruined 3D version is very tender.

DP: That's funny you say that. People always associate 'dirty' or 'poor' images with warmth and find my green-screen images very cold. But in the green-screened video these bodies are performing a very tender dance—searching out each other, trying to connect, but also trying to become objects, or having to constantly reconfigure themselves and never settling.

JBR: And yet with this you have a certain conceit built into the drapes you use: one that is in a totally reflective drape, and one in a drape that is slightly too close to the colour of the green-screen background. Even within these thin props there seems to be something like a psychological description or diagnosis. And as much as there is an attempt to conjoin two bodies in a mutual darkness, each seems thrown back by its own especially modern stigma. The two figures seem to portray the incompatibility of the two poles established by veiled forms of the world of commodities: one is hidden by a veil that only reflects back to the viewer, disappearing behind what can only be the viewer's own narcissism and their gratification in themselves, which they have mistaken for interest in an object or a person, while the other clumsily shows itself at the very moment that it might want to seem camouflaged against a background that is already designed to disappear. It forces you to recognise the object or person that seems to want to become inconspicuous. And stashed in that incompatibility of how we find ourselves cloaked or clothed is a certain unhappiness. This is not a happy show. Or at least it is a gesturally unsettled and unsettling one.

DP: I was consciously thinking of the theories of gesture that emerged during the crisis years of the early 20th century. The impact of the economic and political on bodies. And I wanted the work to reflect this sense of crisis. But a lot of the melancholy in the show is personal. It's been a hard year. But to be honest I'm not that aligned to those who feel that the current moment is the worst of all possible times. There's a left/liberal hysteria about the current moment (perhaps the same hysteria that is fuelling the rise of right-wing populist ideas) that somehow nothing could be worse than now, that everything is simply terrible. But I feel that this moment is a moment of contestation, which is tough but at least means having arguments about the way the world should be, which seems better than the strange technocratic slumber of the past 25 years. Austerity has been horrifying and I realise that I've been relatively shielded from its effects, but the sight of the post-political elites being ejected from the stage of history is hopeful to me, and people seem to forget that the feeling of the rise of the right has been also met with a much broader audience for the left or more left-wing ideas than have been previously allowed to impact public discussion. That said, I do think we're experiencing the dog-end of a long-term economic decline and this sense of emptying out is producing phantasms and horrors and creating a sense of palpable dread. I started to feel that the images I was making for 'The Searchers' engaged with this.

David Panos (b. 1971 in Athens, Greece) lives and works in London, UK. A selection of solo and group exhibitions include Pumphouse Gallery, Wandsworth, London, 2017 (solo); *Sculpture on Screen. The Very Impress of the Object*, Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon, Portugal [Kirschner & Panos], 2017; *Nemocentric*, Charim Galerie, Vienna, 2016; *Atlas [De Las Ruinas] De Europa*, Centro Centro, Madrid, 2016; *The Dark Pool*, Albert Baronian, Brussels, (solo), 2015; *The Dark Pool,* Galeria Marta Cervera, Madrid, 2015; *Whose Subject Am I?,* Kunstverein Fur Die Rheinlande Und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2015; *The Dark Pool,* Hollybush Gardens, London, (solo), 2014; *A Machine Needs Instructions as a Garden Needs Discipline*, MARCO Vigo, 2014; *Ultimate Substance*, B3 Biennale des bewegten Blides, Nassauischer Kunstverein, Wiesbaden, (Kirschner & Panos solo), 2013; *Ultimate Substance*, CentrePasquArt, Biel, (Kirschner & Panos solo), 2013; *Ultimate Substance*, Extra City, Antwerp, (Kirschner & Panos solo), 2013; *The Magic of the State*, Lisson Gallery, London, 2013; *HELL AS*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2013.