

# Matt Copson

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Portrait by Aidan Zamiri

*A few weeks before giving birth to my son I had an insane dream, one that maybe only a single mother could have... My newborn was a real monster, coming out from my legs looking completely inhuman. His body consisted of three perfect slices of bresaola—that Italian cold meat—instead of my sweet baby boy. Only after I decided to squeeze a splash of fresh lemon juice on top of the meat did my beloved infant regain his human appearance at last.*

In British artist Matt Copson's recent trilogy of laser animations exhibited respectively at High Art in Paris in 2020 and C L E A R I N G in Brussels and Art Basel Statements in 2021, the protagonist is a baby but unlike one that we're used to. Throughout the works this baby grows in differing ways to embody the very world we live in, namely its irreconcilable contradiction of beauty and atrocity. The baby is a cognizant artwork and one that appears to be having a fight with its creator—often too big to be contained by the exhibition space or too warlike when literally combating the laser machines which form him.

*"Welcome to existence / I'm sorry it's a shit show"*

In *Coming Of Age*, the baby, in his Robert Gober-esque crib, sings his first words: earth, fire, choke, end. The only world he has been taught to know. The incredibly high pitched voice belongs to a boy soprano on the cusp of adulthood, operatically singing the words of Copson set to music by American pop musician Caroline Polachek. The uncanny sounds transform the gallery space into a sanctuary, a temple dedicated to the existential conflict of this illuminated baby figure.

When a baby comes into your life it brings love alongside chaos and tyranny. A series of daily tortures for a person that doesn't know what real wars are made of. Perhaps there is a sense of mourning too because, in a way, you will never know what peace is anymore. You and your child's lives are at stake now. After seeing the first iteration of the trilogy, I told Matt Copson about a book which remained on my bedside ever since I was pregnant called *Diary of a Baby*, by Daniel N. Stern, recommended by Stéphanie Moisdon. This milestone text about the developing human psyche written in 1990 by the acclaimed Swiss psychiatrist follows the journey of baby Joey discovering the world step by step until he turns four years old. Each first perception, sensation and discovery is analyzed and depicted with such grace and lyricism that one starts to understand genesis in a wholly dif-

ferent way. Copson later told me he was struck by the third chapter called *Storm 7.20 am*, wherein Stern explains how baby Joey perceives hunger: "A storm threatens. The light turns metallic. The march of clouds across the sky breaks apart. Pieces of sky fly off in different directions. The wind picks up force, in silence. There are rushing sounds, but no motion. The wind and its sound have separated. Each chases after its lost partner in fits and starts. The world is disintegrating. Something is about to happen."

*"Progress is fake / The Void wants cake"*

In *Age Of Coming*, the "putto", a naked baby flickering in every color successively, is facing a storm, first literally then internally. This piece is all about hunger: the baby swallows a chair, then a gun, then a plane and grows larger and larger until disintegrating into abstraction... into a work of art. Copson talks about this shift: "The baby wants it all: every color possible, to grow and grow and this is impossible. The laser projector is a mechanical device and the growing density of information eventually means that it can no longer even depict an image and becomes a barrage of spinning broken lines. The struggle towards something impossible creates something I find very beautiful."

This baby should one day meet the eponymous character from *Baby Anger* (2020) by French director duo Caroline Poggi and Jonathan Vinel. This short film commissioned by the Prada Foundation depicts a 3D animated baby girl raging against the world with a series of one liners: "We know now that newborns are guilty, guilty of existing" or "I wish for the end of humanity." And "Every day I vomit from rage." Matt Copson's baby is far removed from the Thunberg-ian existential and political rage of Poggi and Vinel's and closer to the notion of creation and destruction becoming one. Copson notes: "The baby has a pencil, a magical device that can make any image real but all the knowledge he's been given is so unsatisfactory that he uses it as a match and burns everything down instead." I think too of American artist Anna Craycroft's *The Agency of the Orphan* (2008), which looked at the popularity of the orphan archetype in contemporary culture as a state that is both that of a child and an adult and explored that contradiction in a wide array of forms. Copson's baby and Craycroft's orphans perfectly symbolize the stereotypes around the artist figure—childlike in their creativity, adult in their career and presenting both vulnerability and strength.

*"Strange situation / Earthly castration / Strange situation / Entertaining damnation"*

Even though there is no chronology in the works, one cannot fail to remark that in the most recently exhibited piece *Of Coming Age* the baby is extremely quiet, balancing gently on a swing. He is his own lullaby. The images around the baby of crashing waves and burnt skies are extreme but he seems at peace, both inside and outside. Nothing can happen anymore.

*"I see my home far at sea / Should I feel more melancholy?"*



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