



OTO GILLEN, CHURCH STREET, JUNE 6, 2016 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LOMEX, NEW YORK

Once familiar, as much real as it is fictitious, New York City mutated into an inscrutable and strange urban-scape in the aftermath of recent political trauma. Picking up the scent of an empire in decline, a new generation of artists living and working in the city articulate the crisis through mundane ruins and mystic visions.

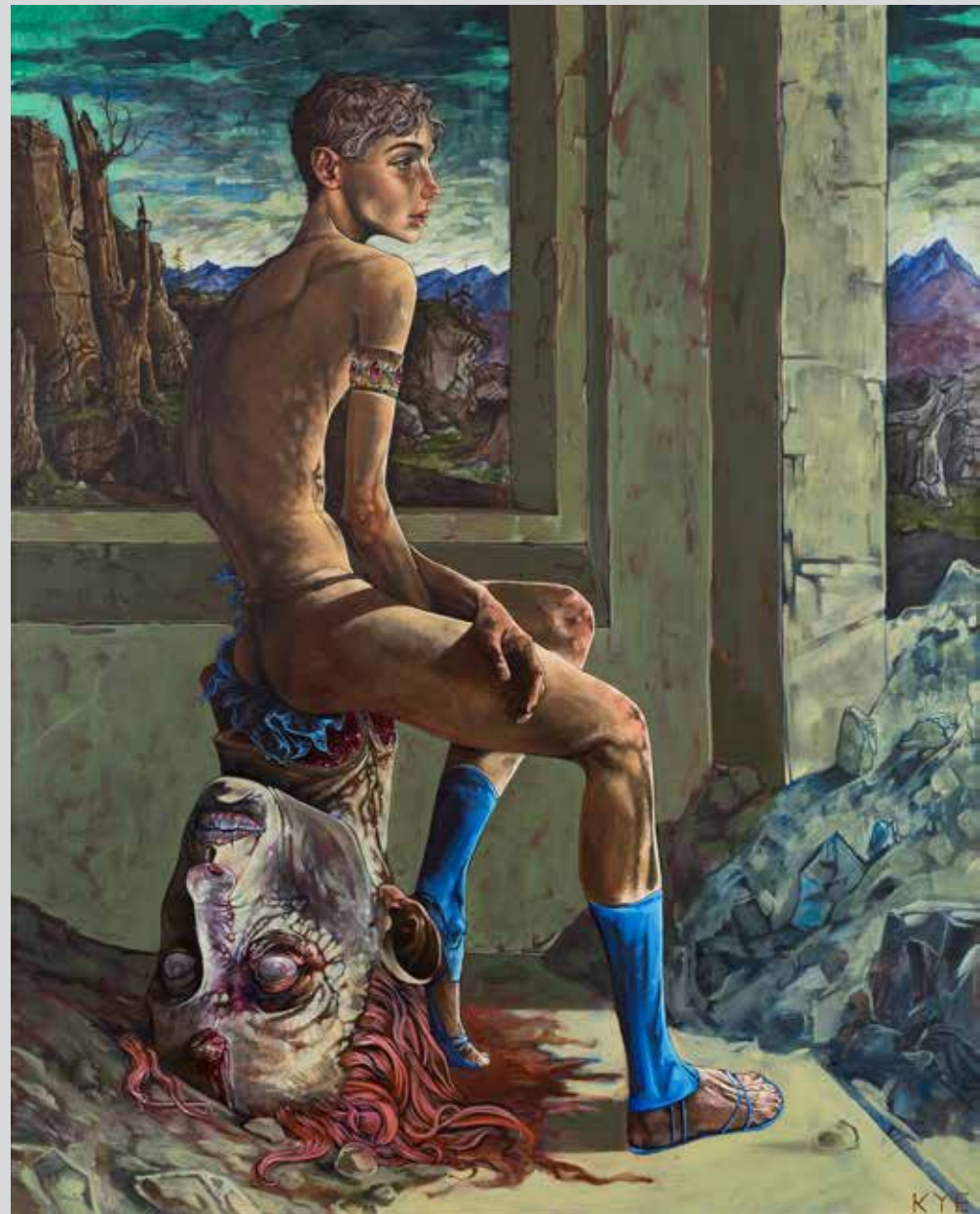
Sometime in late 2015 or early 2016, Oto Gillen started taking photographs of New York City at night. His focus vacillated with a flâneur's (un)ease between the macro and the micro, from the spired and vaulted heights of the new corporate skyline to the pitiful objects that settle and congeal at its lowest strata. (A few wayward snaps capture the skeletons of rats who met their demise next to subway tracks). It's hard to pin down the mood of these images; they're neither expressive nor starkly documentarian, neither comical nor end-of-days dire. But there's an unmistakable *feel*, a restlessness tethered to the sprawl that the artist couldn't quite verbalize at that moment. "It was a really weird time," Gillen recalls. "We were sensing something in the landscape and the architecture, but we didn't know what it was." While these images would eventually come together as a monumental slide show at the Whitney Biennial later that fall, their first iteration was in March of the same year, shown alongside the work of Valerie Keane in a two-person show at LOMEX, a small gallery founded by Alexander Shulan. Nestled in a top floor on Bowery briefly used as a studio by Eva Hesse, the space joined a number of similar operations that were perceived—whether rightfully or not—as harbingers of a gentrifying shift in Chinatown. This awareness might have influenced the somewhat self-conscious moniker after the Lower Manhattan Expressway, an unrealized 1941 highway project that would have demolished much of downtown as we know it under the ruthless eye of the city's master planner, Robert Moses.

The specter certainly amplified the exhibition's somewhat morose tenor, but it could've just been an unintended side effect of the attic-like setting. Keane's ornate chandeliers, roughly gleaned together from smudged, laser-cut Plexi and assorted hardware, pro-

truded at odd angles demarcating strange pathways with their alien contours. Gillen's images, rear projected onto a screen, shifted at regular intervals, offering a syncopated map of the urban-scape. Combined, the impact was almost elegiac, a sharp contrast to the techno-euphoric glow that had dominated the scene just a few years earlier.

The show's title, "Ubu Noir," cemented this distinction: a nod to the experimental British band, Coil, and their 1984 debut, *Scatology*, recorded and released at the height of Thatcherism. That title was itself a play on *Ubu Roi*, the infamous 1896 play by Alfred Jerry, an absurd/obscene satire of *Macbeth* that is often read as pointed indictment of hegemonic power. (Fun fact: a search on YouTube will yield a fan vid of the song set to scenes from Pasolini's 1977 fascist fantasia, *Salò, or 120 Days of Sodom*, an apt juxtaposition that provides a succinct summation of both the song's and the play's political bent). At the time, these tidbits might have seemed willfully obscure, but from our vantage point, the disparate referents resonate together all too clearly. Gillen agrees: "Looking back with Val, it all feels really prescient. This sense that we were hurtling into the future, that something was coming, and then it happened."

Mandatory disclaimer: it would be grossly reductive to filter distinct artistic outputs through the aftermath of one political event, no matter how calamitous. I admit it's tempting, as looking back on 2016, we have no shortage of choices: Brexit, Trumpism and the quickening climate crisis being just the tip of the melting iceberg. But we would be equally amiss to gloss over context, and here, viewed with some minor distance, we can glimpse a shift in the atmosphere, one that was anticipated and mirrored by artists working contemporaneously and in relative proximity, sometimes linked together by friendships, relationships or shared exhibition venues. This is perhaps



KYE CHRISTENSEN KNOWELS, *DAVID AND GOLIATH*, 2018 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LOMEX, NEW YORK



DAN HERSCHELIN, *NIGHT PICTURE (YOU FOUND ME)*, 2019 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JTT, NEW YORK





ALEXANDER CARVER, *A DIVISION OF CELLULAR PHONES*, 2018 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KRAUPA-TUSKANY ZEIDLER, BERLIN

GIANGIACOMO ROSSETTI, *STUDY FROM BÖCKLIN*, 2019 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MENDES WOOD DM, SÃO PAULO/BRUSSELS/NEW YORK





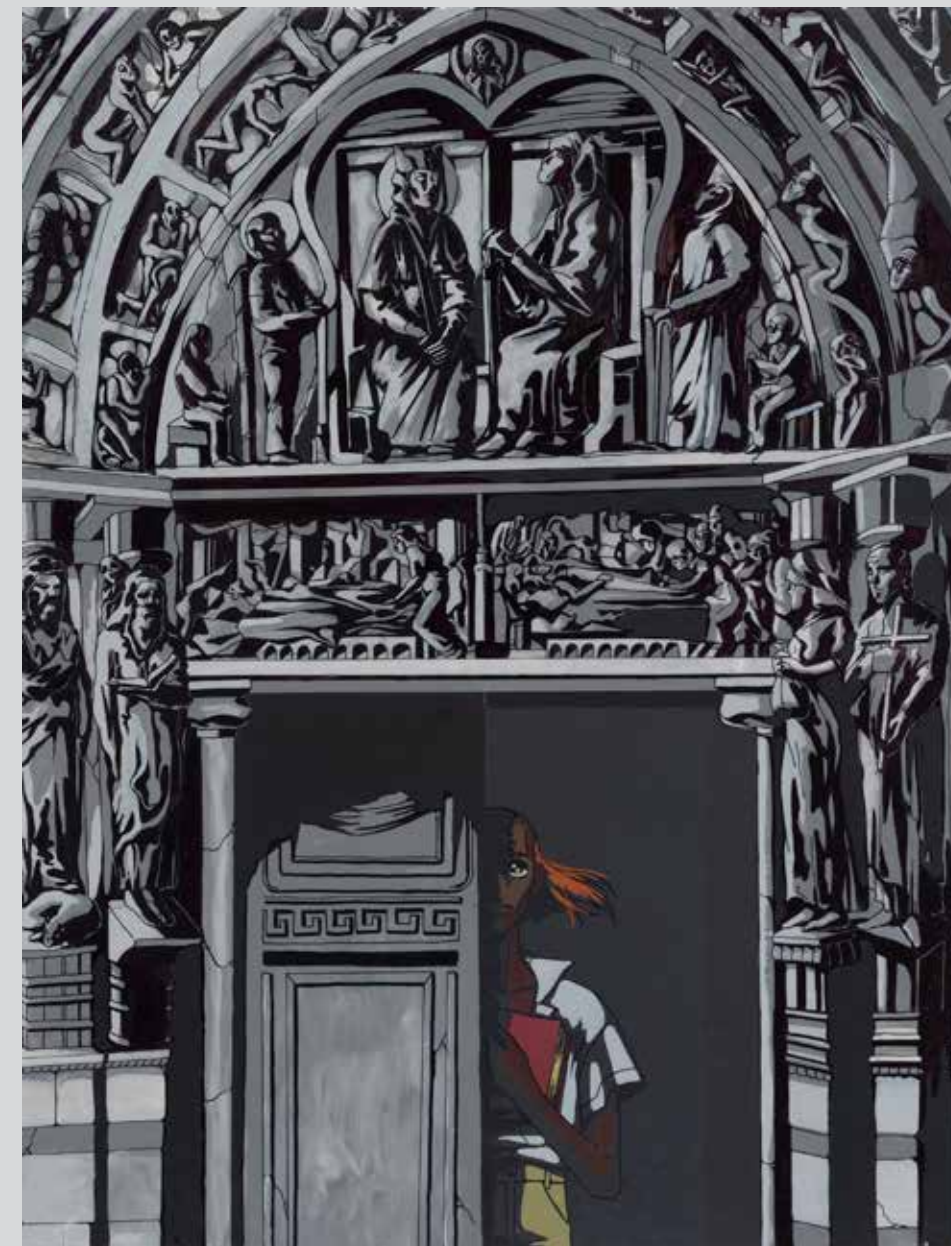
BUNNY ROGERS, *SELF-PORTRAIT AS CLONE OF JEANNE D'ARC (GRIZABELLA JOAN)*, 2019 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SOCIÉTÉ, BERLIN



VALERIE KEANE, *GLASS ALIBI*, 2016 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LOMEX, NEW YORK



WIN MCCARTHY, *UNTITLED (KIND STRANGER)*, 2018 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE FONS WELTERS, AMSTERDAM



JULIEN CECCALDI, *SENLIS CATHEDRAL*, 2016 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JENNY'S, LOS ANGELES

# IN THE NEW GOTHAM, refuse and ornament come together to memorialize AN UNCERTAIN PRESENT.

as good an entry-point as any into a constellation of New York-based practices that embody this anxious spirit, one that attempts to piece together a narrative from our recent traumatic past, sifting through the fragments, excavating our paved-over foundations and unearthing lost lessons that find sudden relevance. Like the misnamed Goths of yore, they pick up the scent of an empire in decline and articulate it through the city's ruins, yielding some formal affinities: a turn to architecture, a questioning of foundational myths, an embrace of found objects, discarded or provisional materials, the grotesque as ornament. But what might link them most is an incessant working-through: a shared drive to construct alternate guises and map new cardinal points for orienting ourselves in this post-2016 reality—a once-familiar landscape made suddenly inscrutable and strange.

This is one lens through which I view Danica Barboza's ornate assemblages pieced together from wreckage of the mundane. Drawing from her writings, as well as a long-standing interest in robotics and Gothic fiction, she articulates a complex personal cosmology through figures that are equal parts zombie and cyborg. Far from static, her amalgamated avatars conjure protagonists for a brave new world whose transcendental incarnations modulate to our erratic frequencies. The avatar also animates the mystic visions of Kye Christensen-Knowles, whose reimagining of clichéd Western myths are skewed by the idiosyncrasies of DeviantArt—a painterly trope he shares with fellow artist Giangiacomo Rossetti. A 2017 painting recasts the biblical David as a lithe sinewy youth, sitting proudly upon a vanquished

Goliath, staring over a ruinous landscape, his gaze more questioning than triumphant. Julien Ceccaldi and Bunny Rogers also harness the avatar in their distinct universes, using customizable identities to navigate the fraught fields of various ontological crises—psycho-sexual, spiritual or otherwise. What is the ground we stand on? How do we orient ourselves on it? These are incessant concerns filtered through the specifics of the city, using its base matter to grapple with political shifts, both national and global, sometimes uncovering their roots cause and/or collateral fallout. For instance, Robert Bittenbender, another LOMEX alum, weaves together cheap dollar store finds and street detritus into dense reliefs that function as topographies as well as makeshift archives. Neither literal nor allegoric, these fossils capture material traces of the unseen forces that define daily existence. Lena Henke digs even deeper still, mining the brutal legacy of city's urban development spearheaded by Robert Moses. Beginning in the 1930s, his drive to reorganize the city's flow, yielded bold new pathways that bisected neighborhoods, bulldozed local histories and displaced families. Here the allegory of "progress" is dismantled, no longer utopic pursuit but destructive drive with immense human costs. These memories crop up in Henke's auratic objects, like the ceramic horse hooves and milk jugs of *Dead Horse Bay*, or repurposed subway crates that appear like remnants of a future whose blueprints we were never privy to. Blueprints are also a motif that pops up in the layered compositions of Alexander Carver. Here, they materialize in heavy lines, restrictive models that trap us in habitual pathways

and impersonal structures. In *Persona Non Grata* (2018), various forms of architectural plans are layered against the background of a tragic-comical figure, head bowed in the stockades—the same one could find in Dan Herschlein's uncanny tableaux.

Much of this also haunts Win McCarthy's "maquettes"—sculptures that double as proposal or models such as those that populated his latest show, 2019's "Apartment Life" at Svetlana, one of Chinatown's newest art outpost. His coffin-like glass structures are filled with the stuff of everyday living, contents largely indistinguishable from the refuse that litters the surrounding streets: egg cartons, soda cans, discarded tooth brusher, refrigerator parts. These are tentatively propped into arrangements that foreground their own ephemerality. But amidst this refuse, McCarthy also uncovers possibilities for reconstitution. The other side of trauma: how do we piece together better selves to inhabit? This is the resonant challenge as we stand on the transitional seam of one era to another; it is an anxious place to be—tethered to the past, not quite grasping an inchoate future—but McCarthy finds solace in the simple act of co-presence, occupying the same moment, as he writes in his preamble poem/press release:

*And then suddenly, a sense of concurrence  
A thought like, "We must be happening at  
the same time."  
This frightens me.*

That perhaps is as good as any description of how we stand tenuously in the wake of 2016, awaiting 2020. **K**