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Blue Monday Forever: Alan Michael

BY

Moritz Scheper

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The paintings of Scottish artist ALAN MICHAEL have now been confusing audiences for more than twenty years. Operating in seeming isolation from parallel debates around painting and representation, he has in that time created a remarkably distinct oeuvre: a sedated trip through endless repetition, emptiness, and the permanent presence of death in contemporary culture. In their perversion of realism, what the works of this too-seldom-celebrated but generally admired "veteran" of painting take aim at is nothing less than the awful inevitability of our reality.


TODAY IS GONNA BE THE DAY
THAT THEY'RE GONNA SET THE TEST FOR YOU
BY NOW I KNOW YOU SOMEHOW
SEE YOUR FUTURE FOCUS INTO VIEW
I DON'T BELIEVE THAT ANYBODY
WORKS AS HARD AS YOU IN THE HERE AND NOW
NO CHEATS, THEY'RE GONNA HAVE TO EAT
EVERY SINGLE LITTLE WORD OF DOUBT
BIG GRIN YOU NEVER GIVE IN
SOME DAYS YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO SHOUT
I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT ANYBODY
GIVES AS MUCH AS YOU IN THE HERE AND NOW
AND ALL THE ROADS WE WALK ALONG
ARE BURNING
AND ALL THE FAITH I HAD IN YOU RETURNING
VICTORY IS COMING SOON
THAT MUCH I PROMISE YOU
LET'S WORK OUT HOW...
BECAUSE MAYBE
YOU'RE GOING TO BE THE ONE SO BRAVELY
AND AFTER ALL
YOU'LL NEVER TAKE A FALL
WE'RE GOING TO BREAK THAT WALL

I have vague memories of a conversation about Alan Michael, conducted in an anything but sober state, in which I attempted via somewhat confused routes to argue that his painting is *post-endgame*. To this, my companion dryly responded that "Alan Michael is *ultimately endgame*." This punch line stayed with me, since it wonderfully combines Michael's position in the history of his medium with his sense of pictorial fatalism. It is perhaps this absolute consistency in interpreting the frequently invoked end of painting (whether imminent or long-ago completed) as part of a wider swan song of global society that has made Michael a key point of reference for an entire generation of young artists.[1] Probably this is because painting today must be clear in its relationship to death (which definitely applies to Michael's work) if it is to be credible; otherwise it loses itself and its force on the one-way streets of zombieficated versions of formalism and Pictorialism.

Strangely, Michael's high standing in artistic circles does not correspond to the public perception of his work. In a good twenty years of permanent and consistent practice, he has accumulated just two slender (but brilliant) publications and a handful of articles in the specialized press.[2] Why is that? One reason might be his bad luck in having worked with such fantastic galleries as HOTEL in London, Micky Schubert in Berlin, and Vilma Gold in London, the coherence of whose programs meant they were unable to withstand the pressures of the art market. A further, more obvious reason might be that it is easier to comprehend the conceptual consistency of his project now, following countless exhibitions, whereas eight or ten years ago, his references or latest change of direction might have still seemed entirely hermetic.

A point of entry presents itself in *Cars and Houses* (2008), a hyperrealistic depiction of a Mini Cooper with a Victorian-style townhouse reflected in its windows and black paintwork. This extremely neat and exact painting appears like an establishing shot in a film, invoking in a nutshell a well-heeled British residential district before the camera pans left to kick off the action. The generosity of execution quickly focuses the attention on what is being portrayed—indeed, nothing more than cars and houses—which, in turn, seem barely to warrant attention. This form of photo-, hyper- or super-realist painting, which Michael has incorporated into his practice in various forms since the early 2000s, was already then completely exhausted in art historical and artistic terms. But it is precisely this state of exhaustion that seems to make this school's naive affirmation of surface so attractive to him—he was clearly taken by Don Eddy's mirrored silhouettes of cars, Richard Estes's deserted cityscapes.

Appropriation as the refusal of an imperative for innovation may already have been well established within the arts by the Pictures Generation, but in slipping on this obsolete style like a threadbare old coat, Michael lends it new meaning—one that, initially at least, has little to do with ideas of authorship and its problematization. This was made clear in his 2012 New York exhibition at Marc Jancou Contemporary, *Back to the Docks*, whose singular quirk was outlined in the show's press release: "These works [. . .] refer to an artist friend of Michael's who no longer makes art. Michael's images are based on ideas for works his friend either made or spoke about making during the course of a nervous breakdown, including paintings of cruise ships, images of vinyl text, and drawings of people she thought were following her."[3] In stylistic terms, nearly all of the paintings that were featured make recourse to the stock tools of Photorealism. Even Michael's text paintings, which had until two years before been classified as a "parallel practice,"[4] migrated into the Photorealist register here, rescinding their readability in favor of ostentatious mirroring effects, as in *In a Rotterdam Cell 3* (2012). His cruise ships (for instance *Cruise (1)* [2012]), too, enter Photorealist territory via their subject alone, recalling as they do Malcolm Morley's ship images *Cristoforo Colombo* (1965) and *SS Amsterdam in Front of Rotterdam* (1966). For someone notorious for their use of obscure references, the employment of the ship motif as a tie to the 1960s Photorealists seems almost intrusively obvious. Painting is going *back to the docks*, get it? Considered alongside the previously mentioned *Cars and Houses*, it becomes immediately clear that we are dealing with a series of rehashings: it is not just the characteristic Photorealist style that the artist adopts, but also its choice of subject. Everything is a secondary knockoff, from the ships to the vinyl wall text taken from an earlier exhibition at Micky Schubert. Even the Mini is a reissue of a classic design. Michael shows the new for what it is: the clearly not-new. That this bears at most a technical relation to the age-old strategy of Postmodern appropriation will become clear later on.

The dominant non-new element in the works is undoubtedly the painterly register that Michael has rekindled and claimed for himself, a register whose choice carries with it deep-seated and problematic implications. While realism of any form always rests upon the pretense of accurately depicting reality, no one went further in this assumption than Photorealists such as Eddy, Estes, Richard McLean, or Ralph Goings. The virile assuredness of their craftsmanship found its identity and legitimation in the blessed period of the postwar economic boom, full of unbounded belief in progress and redeemed promises of affluence. Images such as Morley's *On Deck* (1966) and Robert Bechtle's *'61 Pontiac* (1968–69) are veritable advertisements for the Western way of life, full of sunshine, leisure, and prosperity. Specifically, they are adverts for capitalism of the Keynesian bent, whose affirmative attitude can only be understood as a relieved reaction to the trauma brought on by two world wars, and which therefore experienced only a brief period of validation.[5]

But what is the point in reintroducing an aesthetic so deeply loaded in ideological terms half a century later? Offering a rare comment on his practice, Michael remarked that "I wanted to represent reality, the capitalist rapture, in a particular manner; so I looked at painting formats historically suited to this."[6] Put another way, the artist aims to confront Photorealism with the exhaustion of its own narrative. For what was at one time an economic system full of promise has by now, thanks to a neoliberal reboot, come to cripple every area of our lives. Mark Fisher coined the now-ubiquitous term "capitalist realism" to describe the dominant feeling of exhaustion, impotence, and resignation, a collective depression he saw as rooted

in the belief "that capitalism is the only viable political economic system [. . .] , that anything else is unrealistic."[7] It's surely no particularly bold thesis to assert that this feeling pervades all of Michael's images, but without ever being ostensibly politically calibrated—it's enough to apply Photorealism's vigorous and optimistic style to the cold and depressing reality of capitalist realism, which has by now cannibalized any belief in a constructive future. This bleak perspective is exemplified in Michael's work by the conglomeration of retro-mania and half-baked revivals as symptoms of an endless, sterile, and chimeric present. Or in his own words: "The world has dissolved, but I think it's interesting to represent things as if nothing happened, as if continuity exists."[8]

It would of course be overly simplistic to interpret Michael's work as a close reading of Fisher's theories, or to understand the vitamin drinks that have been regularly appearing in his work since 2009, digitally duplicated and positioned in quasi-perspectival arrangements (see *Self Model* [2009] or *Mood 6* [2010]), as a translation of this sad and infinite loop of repetition and projection. Likewise, his images of elegant place settings, their glasses spraying their contents as if caused by a detonation (for instance *the highest dealer, MANGO, kisses from the office* [2012]), should not be understood as an illustration of Fisher's assertion that our reality has been fundamentally shaken. Nonetheless, it is beyond question that their diagnoses of our contemporary situation do overlap in certain respects, and that this overlap consists in the emotional or depressing dimension of realism. The sun never shines in capitalist realism, nor in Michael's images. And it's no coincidence that the ideas behind the works featured in *Back to the Docks* can be traced back to an artist ground down by mental exhaustion.

To expose the propaganda produced by the Photo-realists on behalf of a market-liberal success story as an illusion was undoubtedly one reason for Michael's strategic appropriation of their illusionistic formulations. What may have made this style of painting additionally attractive to him was that it clearly favors another medium, that of the technical image, thereby serving as a sort of reset of the golden calf of painting. For just as Michael's practice implies an abolition of reality, it also speaks of an abolition of painting. To put it another way: if the world is fucked, its depiction must be, too. The aforementioned *Cars and Houses* presents a shot we recognize from thousands of films, a cliché. This is mirrored in his use of stereotypes, as with the place-setting images, which are reminiscent of stock photos. While it should be clear by now what function the worn-out or overused fulfills for Michael, it is unclear the extent to which this material manifests itself on the formal level. Both terms—cliché and stereotype—have their origins in mechanical print technology, and both are closely connected to issues of reproduction and the loss of originality. Michael in fact outlines a broad interpretation of cliché in his work by copying particular motifs, sometimes in grisaille but mostly in bold cyan. Things don't end with the nod to the multiplication of print technology, however: of equal importance as his brushwork is his use of screenprinting, while at times he even glues laser prints onto his canvases. This has the peculiar effect that a work like *Camouflage Netting* (2015) has more in common with a poster than it does with painting, with all the implications this brings for its attendant economies of material and discursive longevity.

Similar in this respect are Michael's many overpainted screenprints, whose emptied aesthetic he took to an extreme in his exhibitions *Calvinistic Girls* at HIGH ART, Paris (2014) and most recently *Astrology and the City* at Cell Project Space, London (2018). The latter, a sort of look-book documenting a shopping trip in central London's retail zone, is so pictorially sterile and lifeless that one can't help but think of the printed canvases sold at IKEA, full of dead imagery. Everything about it is so brutal: the understanding of happiness it presents; the city made into a backdrop of itself; the people extinguished behind their own representation; and above all the manicured and entirely detached mode of representation, where any relationship to that which is represented is entirely buried. Here, images almost become signs themselves, as fundamentally arbitrary as the letters of an alphabet.

The processes occurring within this group of works are vividly clarified in *Unlawful Assembly* (2013), the crime novel written by Michael with fellow artist Lucy McKenzie.[9] The book is actually a conventional and formulaic detective story. A classic whodunit that unfolds under the Italian sun, it functions precisely because of its literary conventionality, while in conceptual terms also thematizing the same conventionality. That Michael and McKenzie appropriated a style that consists entirely in the variation of the same standardized elements is most likely owing to the genre's outrageously routine trivialization of death as a narrative device.[10] This is precisely what Michael's switch to prose, even if in collaboration, makes clear: namely, the extent to which he highlights the intrinsic obsession with death that exists within the forms and formulas of pop culture. It may have become commonplace within theory to claim that painting is dead or has become a cliché of itself (which might amount to the same thing), but rarely has anyone drawn such far-reaching conclusions from this diagnosis. And yes, maybe Michael does engage in Postmodern appropriation, but he does so in a spirit of exhausted, desperate, and self-erasing escalation, where *anything goes* becomes *anything goes, but it's bound to go belly-up*.

Comparisons with other endgame painters present themselves, for instance Michael Krebber, who operates a policy of "unfinished too soon."[11] In contrast to Krebber, Michael claims no special status or particular integrity for his chosen medium; instead, he sees its death in the context of the economic and cultural death cult that permeates all aspects of our society. On the other hand, he effectively puts painting on a level with other forms of image production such as film, photography, and billboard advertising. In doing so, his Photo-capitalist-realism complex leads him time and again to a sprawling range of options for his imagery. Take, for instance, the landscape-format painting *Baseball Cap* (2015), which shows a clipped view of the aggressively designed front end of a military-turned-civilian SUV, bearing the license plate "P3ACH." The vehicle's contours are nearly all blurred, as if it had been photographed at high speed. The image also seems

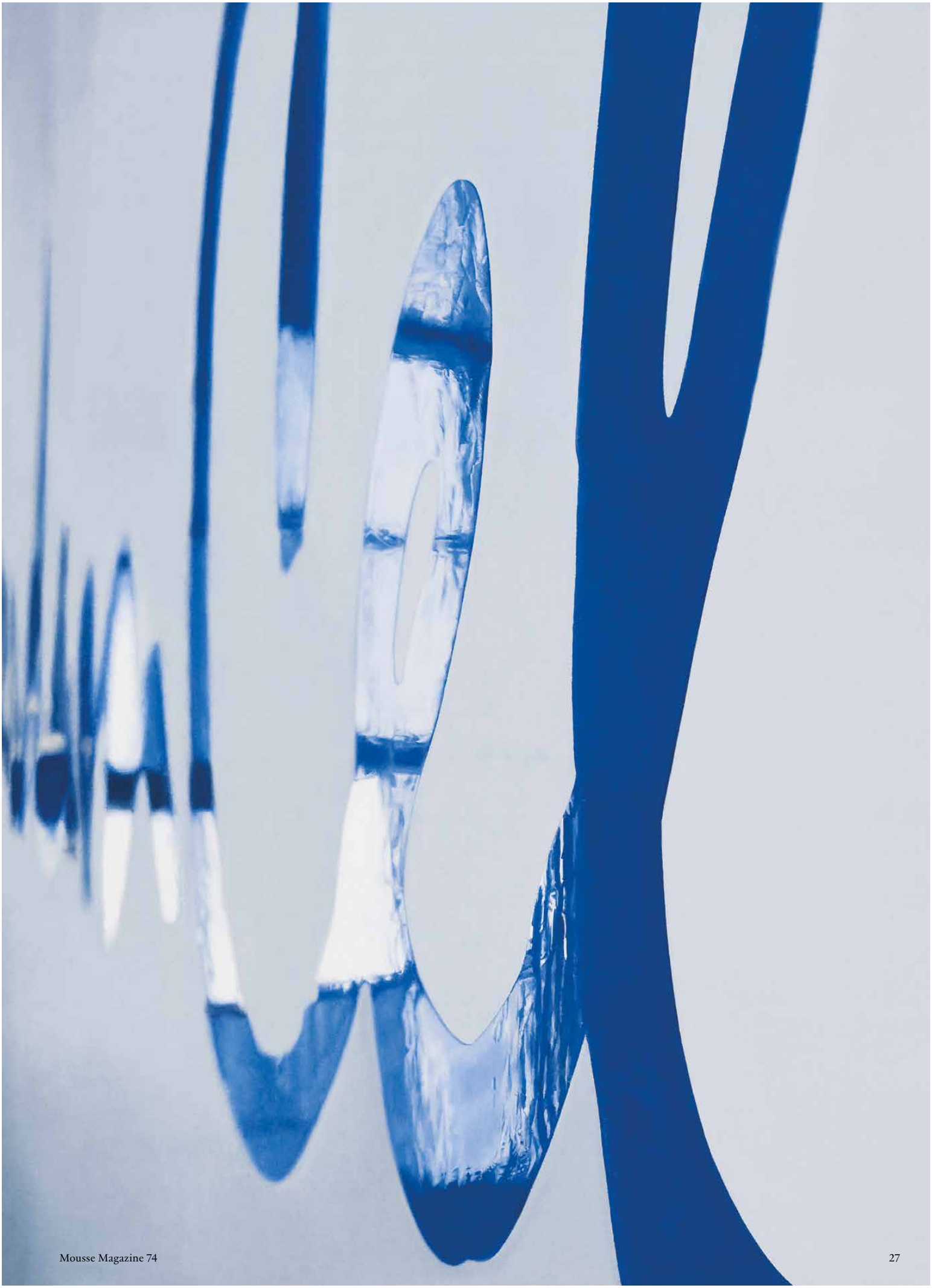
somehow squashed, wrongly formatted, anamorphic. And anamorphisms historically imply death, whether in the work of Hans Holbein the Younger or that of Austin Osman Spare. The motif featured in *Baseball Cap* repeats in varied form in *Today Is* (2017), this time compressed into portrait format. Over a similar-looking image of the front of an SUV, neat typography spells out a verse from Oasis's indie classic "Wonderwall" (1995), lightly reworked into a sarcastic motivational song.[12]

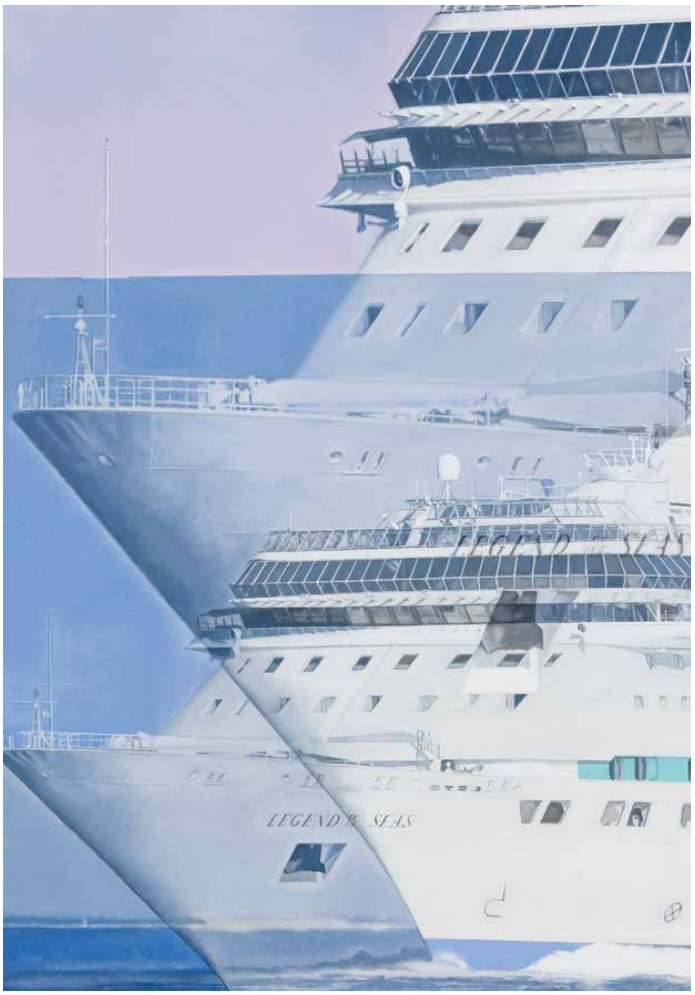
The reboot of the Brit-pop anthem is typical of Michael's complex use of references. Oasis (and Brit-pop in general) were highly invested in the cultural iconography of the 1960s, and so the band was itself a retro phenomenon. Above all, though, it provided the soundtrack for the most disappointing epoch in recent British history. While New Labour and Cool Britannia may have wanted to wash away the inhumanity of Thatcherism, filling many at the time with the hopeful feeling that "things can only get better," they nonetheless sought to do so while "essentially accepting the broad framework that had been imposed by neoliberals."[13] It need barely be said that Fisher pinpointed the sense of disappointment that followed this wave of optimism as the very moment when the logic of capitalist realism took hold in our brains, as an acceptance of the fundamental impossibility of any alternative. Blue Monday Forever. In other words, *ultimately endgame*.

1 References to Michael—ranging from the subtle to the obvious—can be found in the work of, among others, Morag Keil, Edward Kay, Lewis Hammond, Angharad Williams, Jannis Marwitz, Issy Wood, Oliver Osborne, Mathis Gasser, and Gili Tal.
2 *Alan Michael* (London: Modern Art !nc, 2006); *Alan Michael* (London: HOTEL and David Kordansky Gallery, 2010).
3 https://www.marcjancou.com/archive/back-to-the-docks.
4 See Dominic Eichler, "I'M IN," in *Alan Michael* (London: HOTEL and David Kordansky Gallery, 2010), 1–6.
5 Morley, who maintained a somewhat sporting relationship to Photorealism, subsequently established a link to World War II by explaining that his obsession with the trope of the ship stemmed from the destruction of his parents' home by German bombers, along with an almost completed model ship that was in the apartment at the time. Nicholas Wroe, "Malcolm Morley: 'The moment anyone said my work was art, I had this block—I took a long time to find myself,'" *The Guardian*, October 4, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/oct/04/malcolm-morley-interview.
6 Michele D'Aurizio, "Painting It, Touching It: Leidy Churchman, Van Hanos, Alan Michael," *Flash Art*, September 2015, https://flash---art.com/article/painting-it-touching-it/.
7 See "Capitalist Realism: Mark Fisher Interviewed by Richard Capes" (2011), in *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004–2016)*, ed. Darren Ambrose (London: Repeater, 2018), 637.
8 D'Aurizio, "Painting It, Touching It."
9 Lucy McKenzie and Alan Michael, *Unlawful Assembly* (Cologne: Walther König, 2013).
10 Here I pick up on several thoughts laid out by Martin McGeown and Ed Atkins in their foreword, "Note to Self," to McKenzie and Michael, *Unlawful Assembly*, 7–14.
11 John Kelsey, "Stop Painting Painting," *Artforum*, October 2005, 225.
12 With *Opening a keyhole to the city* (2018), at least one further reworking of "Wonderwall" exists in Michael's body of work, where, in general, references to Cool Britannia are legion.
13 "Capitalist Realism: Mark Fisher Interviewed by Richard Capes," 639.

ALAN MICHAEL (b. 1967, Glasgow) lives and works in London. He has had solo exhibitions at 3236RLS/Le Bourgeois, London (2019); Cell Project Space, London (2018); Jan Kaps, Cologne (2018); Tramway, Glasgow (2014); Vilma Gold, London (2014); HIGH ART, Paris (2014); 0HI0, Glasgow (2013); Marc Jancou Contemporary, Geneva (2012); David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles (2011, 2007); Tate Britain, London (2008); and HOTEL, London (2010, 2003). His work has appeared in group exhibitions at Neuer Essener Kunstverein, Essen (2020); Kunstverein Bamberg (2020); Arcadia Missa, London (2019); Christian Andersen Gallery, Copenhagen (2018); Galerie Gregor Staiger, Zurich (2015); Cubitt, London (2013); Artist's Institute, New York (2013); Marres Centre for Contemporary Culture, Maastricht (2009); and Tate Britain, London (2006), among others. In 2013 he published the conceptually ambitious novel *Unlawful Assembly* with artist Lucy McKenzie.

MORITZ SCHEPER is director of Neuer Essener Kunstverein in Essen.

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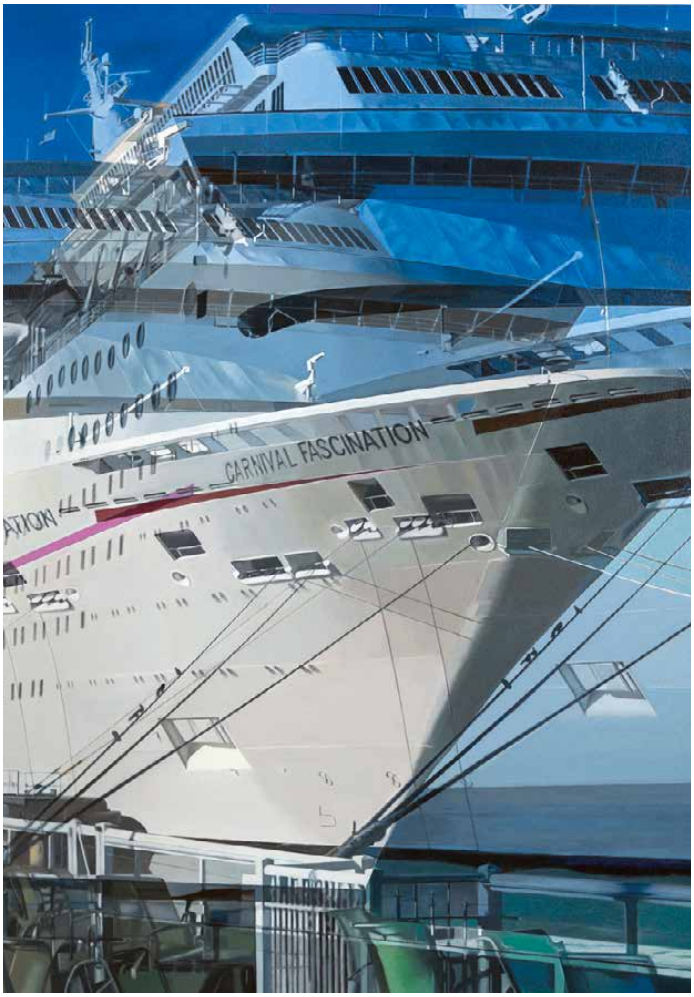
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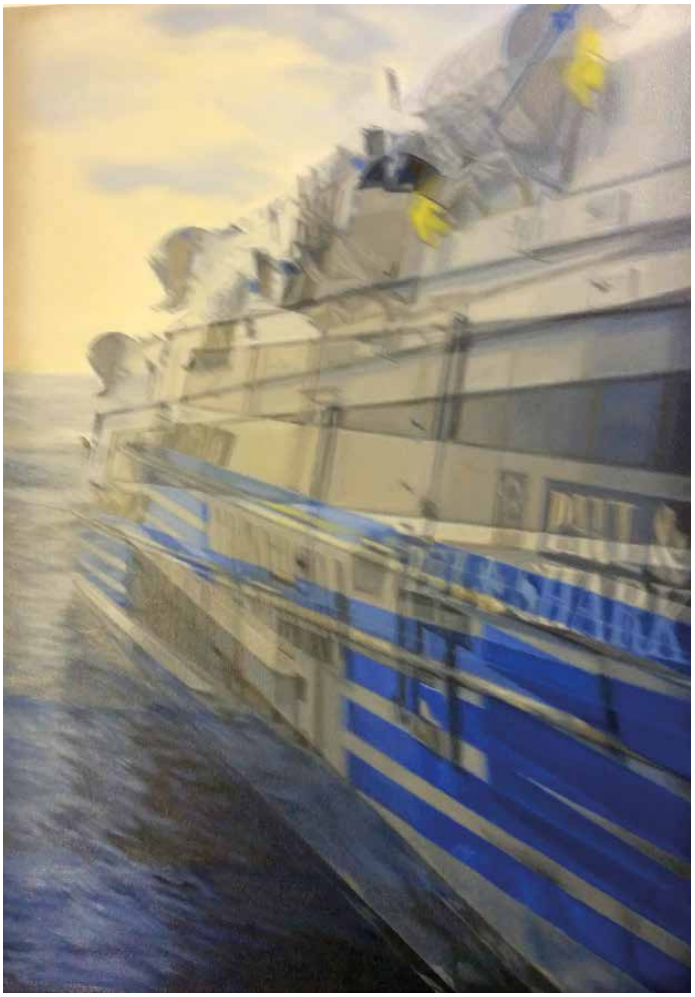
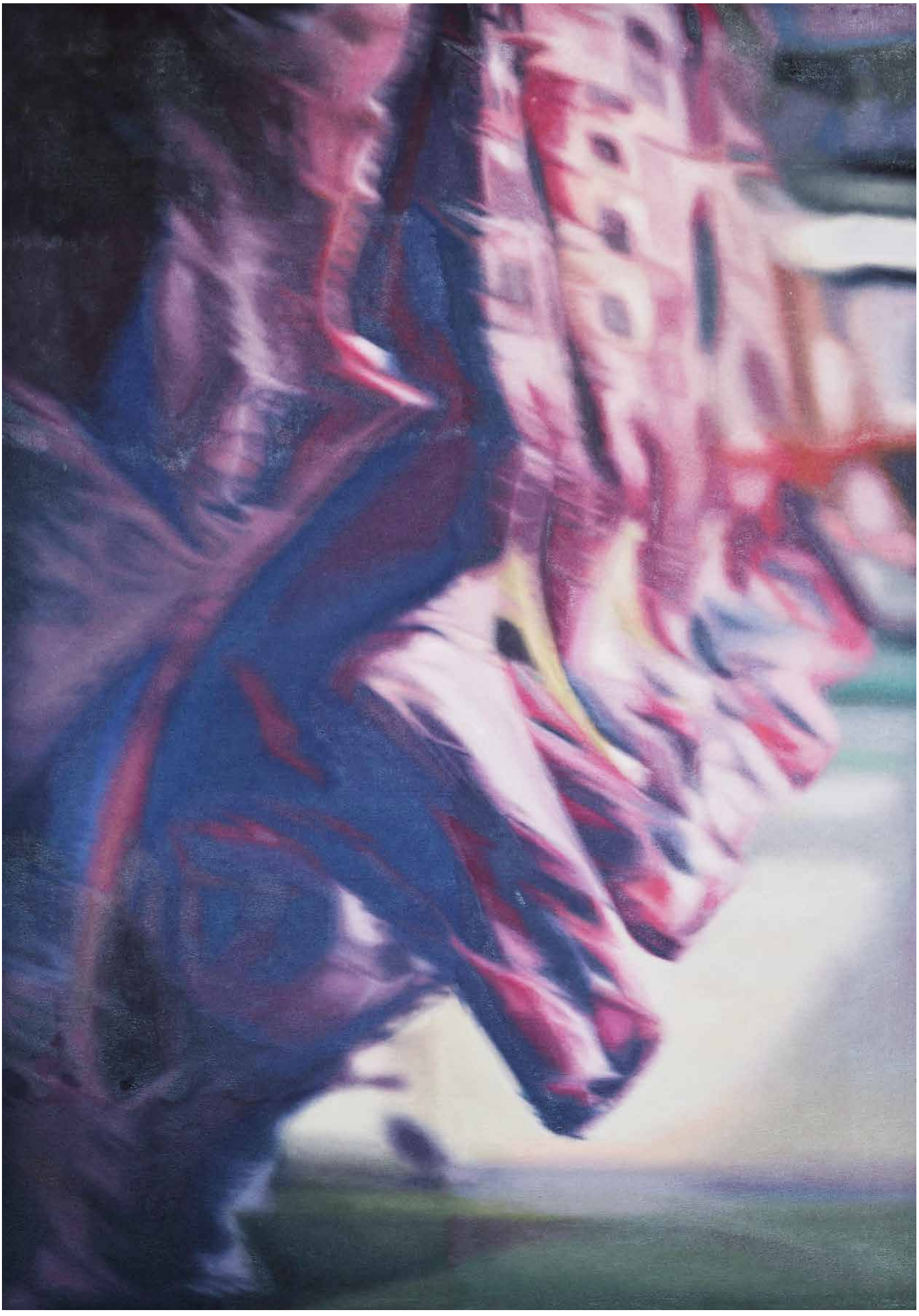


14 *Piccadilly Circus at Night*, 2009.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
16 *Present Day*, 2016.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
17 *Untitled (from Decamp)*, 2006.
Courtesy: the artist and Jan Kaps, Cologne
18 (Top) *the highest dealer, MANGO, kisses from the office*, 2012.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
(Bottom) *Natwest, Anon-nets, Bornagain*, 2013.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
19 *Mood 13*, 2012.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
20 *Mood 6*, 2010.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
21 (Top left) *total depravity, Halifax, hamburger*, 2013.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
(Top right) *ariarta, pizza face, more sensual*, 2013.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
(Bottom) *Silhouette Formulas* installation view at HOTEL, London, 2010.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
23 *Opening a keyhole to the city*, 2018.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
27 *In a Rotterdam Cell 3*, 2012.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
28 (Top left) *Progress 2*, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
(Top right) *Cruise (1)*, 2012.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
(Bottom left) *The Prisoner*, 2013.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
(Bottom right) *We Wouldn't Win Now*, 2014.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
30 *Train in the Snow*, 2014.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
31 (Top) *Cars and Houses*, 2008.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
(Bottom) *Baseball Cap*, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
32 *Untitled*, 2018.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
33 (Top) *Untitled*, 2018.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne
(Bottom) *Untitled*, 2018.
Courtesy: the artist; HIGH ART, Paris; Jan Kaps, Cologne

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