

ARTFORUM

ZÜRICH

John Russell

KUNSTHALLE ZÜRICH

It might take unnerving times such as these for John Russell's apocalyptic imageboard expressionism not only to shine in all its acute garishness but also to finally stick and enter the canon. That would explain the critical reception of the artist's institutional debut outside Great Britain—which was organized by Daniel Baumann—as being somehow "spectacular" if not patently awesome. "Strength through joy(zzzz)!" one might add to this, *joy* being not exactly connoted neofascistically in this instance, but simply echoing the jovial everyday salutation "Joyz" used by the mutated but mostly contented characters who inhabit the barely futuristic future depicted in Russell's video *Doggo*, 2017, which premiered as part of the exhibition of the same title. That's not to say that Russell's sextet of humongous vinyl prints and the scenarios they contain aren't fascistic in an upended, Bataillean register. Russell has previously referred to this maxed-out anti-aesthetic as "morphogenesis," a style that conjures a paradoxical Silicon Valley as personified by boy-blood plasma junkie Peter Thiel. The artist's methodology and the disemboweled cyber-kitsch he makes can be viewed as an untimely sublation of the empty and extortionate sublime of capital's slick image planes into a hard-lit base materialism. This denial is updated by the sheer infinite procrastinations offered by Adobe Creative Suite to anyone wanting to revivify such abject classics as flies, toads, bodily fluids, limbs, and all kinds of dumb and ugly critters and composite freaks that fester on the digitally printed tableaux, such as *Those were insects that were their eyes II*, 2017, or on the phosphorescent acid-donut-sinkhole *Leech*, 2016. (The predicament of scholarly bad-boy art here, of course, still is that the "real" images of war zones out there will always be more fucked up and "deplorable," i.e., regrettably more affective and hence momentous, discursively as much as physically.)

Russell's art conceives of occidental civilization not simply as anti-humanistic but as farcically doomed. Consequently, the sorry society of the spectacle it engenders is evocative here and there of Bosch superimposed onto Turner-esque vistas, with a whiff of eternally bad-bad Dalí, all of it sprinkled with 4chan's /b/ board folk art. Russell's towering DIY compositions may enter or already live as jaw-droppingly ugly art that adds acquired tastelessness to some even flashier penthouse in Miami, thereby contrasting with the more explicitly low production value of the video on view. In form true to Cool Britannia criticality—i.e., the art of the utmost mundanely pathetic—the characters in *Doggo* are not so much mutants as Aesopian caricatures of certain types all too familiar from the regularity offices staffed by the aspiring authorities who are out to assist, irritate, and devitalize you. Characters appear as awkward archetypes: a dick-nosed monkey as an offishly mistrustful institutional warden; a suicidal retiree turned domestic terrorist as a frazzled and frowsy snow bunny named Prysym Lee. *Neuromancer* (1984) meets *East Enders* (1985–); alien algorithmic landscapes are swapped for a dismal London suburbia of crappy architecture, dispiriting hallways, and rank pubs. The tragicomedy of civic decay and class war is pasted over by crackbrained advertising and anodyne distractions, all encapsulated in the licorice mascot on the print *Bernie Bassett Says Death is Coming*, 2017, which greeted the viewer at the entrance to the show. Saving the day and probably many from death by Prysym's bomb plot is a rugged and pious mastiff bloke (or tomboy?)—equipped with tentacled fingers, a lady's coat, and a 1920s flapper headdress that must have been picked up at a charity shop—who copes with the nearing death of his partner, whom he lays to rest in the closing scene, to the strains of Johann Sebastian Bach and Charles Gounod's "Ave Maria." "Humorous salvation!" exults a fly-masked protagonist at some point, while an end of this stasis remains out of sight.

—Daniel Horn