

John Russell

BY ALEXANDER SHULAN



A NEW ABSURDIST NEO-NOIR SET IN A DYSTOPIC FUTURE MARKS A CACOPHONIC ENTRY INTO JOHN RUSSELL'S UNEASY BODY OF WORK. FORMERLY A MEMBER OF LONDON'S CULT COUNTER-CULTURAL ART COLLECTIVE BANK, THE ARTIST CREATES A CHAOTIC IMAGINARY THAT ERUPTS OUT OF THE DARKEST CORNERS OF THE INTERNET, SUSPENDED BETWEEN GOTHIC CAMP AND LEFTIST CRITIQUE.

In the final third of John Russell's film *DOGGO* (2017), produced on occasion of his solo exhibition of the same name at Kunsthalle Zürich, a hybrid human-rabbit creature, portrayed by a woman wearing a prosthetic animal mask, watches a heron through a pair of binoculars. The character produces an animated gun and announces, "I was an optimist once... I think it is still possible... to be an optimist." An illustrated butterfly floats across the screen, in a loop for a moment, like an animated GIF. The character turns the gun on herself, and pulls the trigger.

Taking place in a dystopian future, *DOGGO* is a kind of absurdist neo-noir that defies cogent explanation. The film ostensibly details the search for the aforementioned ill-fated character, “Prysym Lee,” by a pair of post-human detectives. A man with the head of a bulldog, who sports tentacles for hands, and his side-kick, a woman with the head of a fly, venture through a monotonous sci-fi landscape, a seemingly endless network of highways and banal office interiors, interviewing a cast of bizarre characters on their quest to find Prysym’s location.



A characteristically imaginative and willfully obscure film, *DOGGO* appears as a self-contained universe. It renders in broad aggressive strokes a tangle of images that seem to originate from some place that is completely alien. Its experience frustrates many of the de facto methods of art-historical interpretation. Its characters appear like avatars for absent human bodies—avatars with appearances, genders, and personalities that are in a constant state of flux. Watching the film, one is overwhelmed with a sense of discomfort, as the film’s characters occupy some uneasy territory, perhaps even a chasm, between virtual and actual.

This same discomfort recurs throughout much of Russell’s work, perhaps most acutely when viewing his paintings. Beginning as digital images, the works are ultimately displayed as monumental, billboard sized, backlit vinyl prints. They often depict large science-fiction scenes filled with strange anthropomorphized animals or human/animal genetic crossovers like those of *DOGGO*, set into sweeping digital landscapes laden with color that bring to mind the scale and composition of romantic history painting in the tradition of Delacroix. Many of the figures depicted, often composites of 3D computer graphics and 2D illustration, have elements that originated from stock 3D models, and carry with them a kind of memory of their manifold uses in different digital environments. Russell himself speaks to his use of such imagery in a 2015 interview with *Rhizome*, stating: “The images I use are pre-existing and stereotypical—emptied out. Dead figures. I mess about with them a lot, paint over them, re-draw them, re-wrap them, clone them...”

Russell’s sixty-foot *Mirror Mapping the Stars*, for example, displayed across the whole length of Bridget Donahue during his exhibition “SQRRL” there in 2015, portrays a series of hybrid characters (some appearing partially drawn, some 3D-rendered, some seemingly collaged) engaged in a nightmarish maypole dance around a gigantic computer generated seahorse. Dark clouds, cut from a photograph, dominate the front of the image. The work exudes a pagan, archaic atmosphere—a history painting, but one torn from some impossible alternate timeline, a kind of zombified version of Brueghel’s *Dance Around the Maypole*. Lit up in the darkened gallery, it appeared like a screen.



I remember one of the first times I experienced a virtual landscape like this—playing *Myst*, the adventure puzzle video game, in my middle school's computer lab. After booting up the game, you wander through a deserted island filled with a strange series of empty buildings and natural scenes all empty of human beings, rendered in colorful (albeit blocky) computer graphics. You come across a library, and can leaf through some of the books. Upon reaching a certain page in one of the volumes, a video taken in the real world, left as an artifact by one of the world's absent humans, appears super-imposed over the game's graphical interface. The juxtaposition of real video into a world of computer graphics is extremely jarring, and I remember finding myself in the weird position of trying to “remember” what video looked like while immersed in a digital world. A similar feeling of unease produced by an uncomfortable marriage of the digital and the real pervades Russell's paintings.

The gothic camp and atmospheric dread of *Mirror Mapping the Stars* recurs throughout Russell's work—his *Ocean Pose* [Pink] (2008), for instance, depicts a unicorn standing in an endless pink ocean, a huge cascade of red tentacles bursting forth from the center of the image, a scene overwrought with Lovecraftian horror. The long red strokes across the image appear not unlike some kind of perverse rave-reiteration of a work by Jackson Pollock, but with the pop bombast and outsized presence of a work by James Rosenquist. Russell's 2016 painting *Leech* explores similar themes: embedded in a gigantic red circle, a huge anus or a burning star, are a whole cascade of figures—illustrations of crucifixes, a mouth contorted into a scream, the mascot for the English candy Bassetts Licorice Allsorts, and many of the same hybrid characters from *Mirror Mapping the Stars*, all caught within a gaping vortex.

Supplementing Russell's own practice as a visual artist is a multi-faceted practice as both writer and theorist. In concord with “DOGGO,” Kunsthalle Zürich has published a selection of Russell's texts under the same heading, presenting them as both aesthetic constituents of the world presented by the artworks on display and works of theory in their own right. Deploying writers like Friedrich Nietzsche, J.G. Ballard, Donna Haraway and Gilles Deleuze, Russell provides a cascade of intellectual referents that create a kind of meta-fiction in orbit of his work that distends in a manner not too dissimilar to that of his paintings. Re-printed in the *DOGGO* anthology, for example, is the text “SQRRL,” which replaced the mainstay of Bridget Donahue's website during his exhibition there—a piece of hyper-annotated meta-fiction that describes, in the form of a lyric poem, a 195-year-old woman's post-human afterlife as a genetically-augmented squirrel.



Russell's texts are at once works to be read and objects to be seen. He speaks about his series of anthologies *Frozen Tears* (of which three now exist) in these terms. Appearing like mass-market horror paperbacks, each issue is filled with a kaleidoscopic array of theory and horror-laden prose, poetry, and near-nonsense (authors as varied as Kathy Acker, Antonin Artaud, Karl Marx, Reza Negarestani, Dennis Cooper fill out the volumes). In a 2007 interview with Gean Moreno, Russell said of the books, "The idea was to stage the conflation of the visual and the textual both in relation to these ideas of figurality and with respect to the distinction between book-as-text (text art, collection of texts) and book-as-object (art object, sculpture, commodity, found object or pretend found object)... I showed the books as a pile at Cabinet Gallery like Andy Warhol's *Brillo* boxes. This is the idea that the object (or book), though superficially (or perhaps profoundly) visual, could only be approached, interestingly-as-a-text, by reading; which would seem to temporarily negate the point of its visual-ness as an object or art object, in line with the idea that 'reading isn't the same as looking, unless it is'... Put simply, visitors to the gallery would be able to look at the books OR read one."

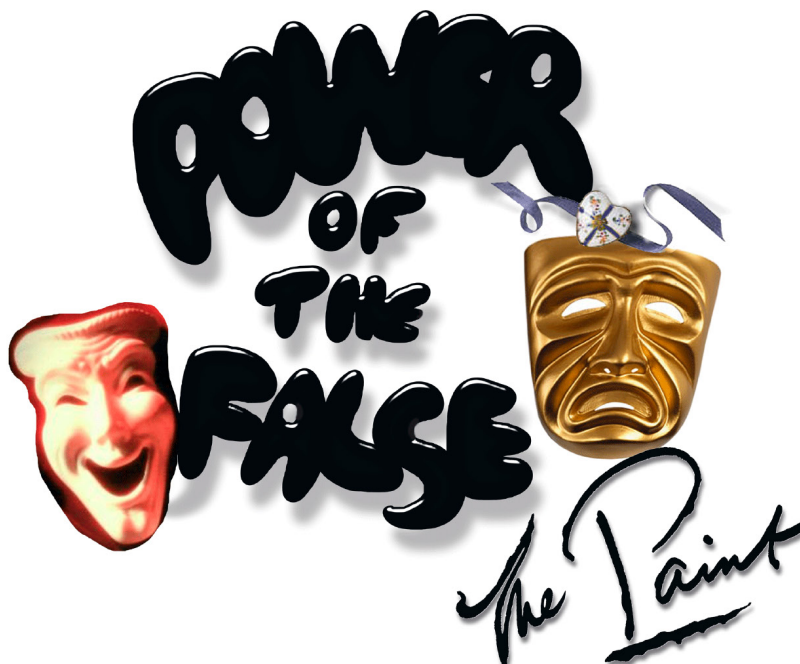
Further in the same interview, Russell asks, "Is it possible we could start forgetting some things, for example forgetting politics, forgetting political art, forgetting critical art?... This whole discourse surrounding critical/political/function. I don't think it's a question of rethinking it. It's fucked." Russell's own proclamation here for a need for art to "forget" recent questions surrounding the importance of fixed critical positions in art is one borne out by the legacy of his experimentation with the British artist group BANK, and sees another example in the "gallery" he founded with an anonymous co-author, Head Gallery, on the Lower East Side. Existing purely online, and listed with the address of Reena Spaulings, Head Gallery is itself an institution staffed by fake artists, with a history of fake exhibitions. Its press releases reiterate the Bataille tone of much of his visual output.

Even if moving from a discursive, disperse location—from a cacophonous point of origin—the political import of Russell's recent body of work has become apparent over the course of the last year, in that it offers an implicit criticism of the most negative capacities of digital technology.



As is now common knowledge, running up to the UK-EU Membership Referendum and the 2017 American election, a vast negative mythology and coded visual language erupted out of the darkest corners of the Internet into Western politics, through the vehicles of the Trump campaign and Brexit respectively. As a wave of new and seemingly meaningless symbols suddenly proliferated online, digital technology allowed the far-right to use them to attract new followers and create an entirely obscured system of referents to protect its language from outside incursion.

Russell's work, with specific attention to *DOGGO* in particular, suggests the abject possibilities for this kind of self-insulating use of technology, exposes them, and thematically cloaks them in an aura of horror. The work also gives insight into the dark forces behind such negative phenomena—as the irony of the lines “I was an optimist once... I think it is still possible... to be an optimist” being spoken by a virtual avatar about to commit suicide should underscore. Fittingly, after seeing Prysmy Lee commit suicide, their manhunt now over, the two protagonists of *DOGGO* decamp to a bar. Discussing the event, one of the characters blithely comments, “I didn’t expect that—although, in hindsight, it was a possibility.”



John Russell (b. 1963) is an artist living and working in London. He was a founding member of the BANK art collective between 1990–2000. Since 2000, he has shown his work internationally at venues such as ICA and Tate Modern, London, and PS1 MoMA, New York. He is represented by Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York, where his solo exhibition "SQRRL" was held in 2015. Since 2007, Russell has taught at Reading School of Arts. He is also a prolific writer and has contributed regularly for publications such as Mute, dot dot dot, and F.R. David.

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