HOW DOES THE PERFECT HUMAN FALL? LIKE THIS

MAX ANDREWS TALKS WITH JORDAN WOLFSON
JORDAN WOLFSON: No I don’t really see them as a trilogy or necessarily connect them in a formal way, except possibly I would connect the crows and the Chaplin piece, in that both signal some sort of change coming about. But the wall painting piece has nothing to do with either of those works, it has work to do with the Whitney itself.

MA: I like the fact that we’re talking about it and I haven’t actually seen any crows.
JW: Yes, it doesn’t matter, it’s so much about the image of the work in your mind.

MA: Perhaps the crows and the Chaplin piece are both dealing with cursed moments – I thought of this analogy that the three works are like your Zombie Trilogy. You know in zombie movies there is almost always some premonition that something bad is going to happen – so here that’s the crows maybe – and the Chaplin film is like this undead piece of traumatic history, given life like the walking dead. And it’s also a moment when Chaplin’s career sort of suicided. Then the wall painting work is a kind of reburying ...

JW: I’m super interested in moments when things are about to change, when things are at such an intensity that they either have to reverse or go forward, and for me that’s what the Chaplin piece is about – a certain moment in history where we were reaching critical mass in terms of tolerance towards people like Hitler, etc.

MA: But how can you come to experience that moment? – your not a historian for example, and you obviously didn’t live through the war ...
JW: I think that we all exist together throughout history. Being born during a certain era is not specific to being human.
MA: I just wondered how you came to be interested in the psychology of *The Great Dictator*, was it through looking firstly in a more formal, cinematic way?

JW: I became really interested in Chaplin as a historical figure and how, for example, the silhouette of Chaplin at the height of his popularity was more recognisable than the image of Jesus Christ. He was this universal symbol throughout the world, we all have a relationship with Chaplin. I started watching all of his films after I saw part of *The Great Dictator* – the scene where he is throwing a ball up in the air – one night in Naples at this party, that was the moment when I became interested in Chaplin. There is this very strange scene at the end of the movie and I read up on it and it turns out that he broke character to speak as himself, the actor. I thought this was a really interesting moment, where something breaks and this man makes a speech to address the public. It turns out that there were a bunch of alternate endings to the film. He realised that the ending could not be funny – it’s a funny film, but if you end it funny, you say that it’s not serious. So you could maybe call it a public service announcement for humanity that Chaplin makes at the end of the film. This was his first talking film as well and I starting thinking, ‘how do I put it back into motion’, because that’s the original way he communicated, so I re-silenced him by having the speech translated into sign language. Then I realised that that wouldn’t be enough as a work, because people might see it but they wouldn’t understand it – it would be alienating the viewer. I realised that the title of the work had to be the entire speech so then the work became totally circular and totally open – it wasn’t going to be the formal and closed work that would exclude people who hadn’t seen the film as the speech was always there in the title.

MA: Why then did you choose to mention the Jørgen Leth film *The Perfect Human* in the accompanying wall text, isn’t that an alienating reference?

JW: Because at a point the work was still not finished and I was thinking ‘if I’m going to redo this, I can’t dress someone up like Chaplin’. I was looking for something to somehow counter Chaplin, and I had just seen *The Five Obstructions* by Lars von Trier where he focussed on this film *The Perfect Human*, which in my interpretation is about a certain irony of the acceptance of man’s imperfection. That man drives himself to fail in the end. And the film is presented in this pseudo-scientific late-1960s aesthetic with this perfect white, very sterile backdrop – there was this notion of a good clean future like in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. For example, ‘soon we are going to be able to rely on the robot’. So there are these two failing portraits of Utopian ideals, one is so idealistic that its impossible – that being Chaplin’s – then on the other hand *The Perfect Human* admits to all these flaws, but this also fails and you watch it fail. So my work is a combination of these two things.
More than machinery we need humanity; More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical, our cleverness hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little: we think ourselves but we enslave the people. Now let us fight to fulfill that promise. Let us fight to free the world, to do away with national barriers, do away with greed, with hate and intolerance. Let us fight for a world of reason, a world where science and progress will lead to all men’s happiness. Soldiers — in the name of democracy, let us all unite! Look up! Look up!

The clouds are lifting — the sun is breaking through. We are coming out of the darkness into the light. We are coming into a new world. A kind new world where men will rise above their hate and brutality. The soul of man has been given wings — and at last he is beginning to fly. He is flying into the rainbow — into the light of hope — into the future, that glorious future that belongs to you, to me and to all of us. Look up. Look up.


MA: With many of the works in the Biennial — for example Francesco Vezzoli’s Trailer for a Remake of Gore Vidal’s “Caligula” — there seems to be this suggestion by the curators that they are ‘biting satires on the Bush administration’. Well, with Richard’s Serra’s Stop Bush, piece it’s obviously the intention, but do you think your Chaplin piece could be shoehorned into being seen as a comment on the Great Dictator that is George W. Bush?

JW: I don’t see the work as a specific reference to George Bush, but it does reference today, because that’s where I’m showing the piece. The work is a reference to today like the Biennial is a reference to today. Whenever you see a work your going to reference it to the present, it’s just the nature of art.

MA: But by its very nature, the Chaplin work is political.

JW: It’s a piece about human nature. I guess behaving politically is part of human nature; to feel that you are being oppressed by a power and to revolt against it — that’s political.

MA: We have talked before how you are always careful not to oversubscribe your work with too much specified meaning, but it seems to me that these are things that aren’t necessarily available in the work itself as you would hope, but are things that exist in knowing about the history of Europe in the 1940s or knowing about Chaplin or Jørgen Leth.

JW: Well, it’s true that not everyone will know about Jørgen Leth’s film, for example. But it’s my responsibility to mention him, because I referenced his film.

MA: So you mean that if you didn’t note Leth, you’d feel that you hadn’t duly credited the film.

JW: Yes, part of the intention of the work conceptually has a lot to do with it. Even though it’s a heady film reference to some degree, so be it. I can’t deny the content.

MA: So, to turn to your wall piece. If you’ll entertain my spurious Zombie Trilogy thinking, there is a reburial of the zombie moment that’s unleashed in the Chaplin film. Zombie’s come back from the dead because something went symbolically wrong with their burials. So perhaps that’s what emerges from your Chaplin film — a Hitler body that is never able to come back from the dead because something went symbolically wrong with their burials.
Paul McCartney
MA: I understand your work as operating on these psychic levels rather than being so readily parsed out into references, it exists for me in the realms of emotional states or moments of suspense, between being dead or alive. I’m thinking of your work about Christopher Reeve (Infinite Melancholy) that presents a really weird suspended state of memory or dreaming...

JW: I guess in a way it’s a question of setting up a situation of recognition for the viewer. There is a certain kind or formalism in the work whether it’s a blank wall or a film.

MA: In terms of how you present your work as it appears to the viewer?

JW: Exactly, and from there the viewer finds their own response, the chance to experience something on their own terms, and that brings it back to why I chose Chaplin, because he was so universal. I figured there must be a way of making a work that exists for everyone on their own terms.

MA: For the sake of argument, what kind of art or artist would be the opposite? Something that automatically sets up a conflict and alienates its audience?

JW: I don’t know. Well, if the Chaplin film were a pure sign language film and the title was something else other than the text of the speech ...

MA: But isn’t that a question only of how one frames an art object?

JW: No, it’s a question of how one constructs an art object.

MA: I guess what you are aiming for is a precision that enables clarity in what is expected of someone approaching a work?

JW: I don’t know if I’m ‘creating a package’, but the ideas of preciseness and fluidity in communication are important to me in my work. But I guess that’s formalism not content. You could have the best content in the world but without formulation the work doesn’t exist, it sinks. But maybe the way I’m talking about this right now is formalistic, maybe I’m being conservative as an artist. You can have a work that has content but it doesn’t really matter how it turns out, it’s all about how it exists in the viewer’s mind, for example the crow piece functions on that level. It’s not about formalistic or conservative fault in the work: it is what it is. It exists the minute it’s thought of, the minute it’s said it exists and doesn’t need to go further than that.
Nostalgia is Fear, 2004 – courtesy Perry Rubenstein Gallery, New York – T293, Napoli
MA: Would you say that the category of cinema encapsulates all of your works in that respect?

JW: If anything I use cinema as a tool of recognition. Maybe our memories are made up of films and all of our expectations about love and death and how we deal with things have already been portrayed to us in films, and when these things happen to us we can reference these things we have third-party memories of and then behave with them. Like a break-up or falling in love with someone. What’s romance? Maybe romance is something you see in the movies, it’s a idealism. So it’s possible that I’m working with the image of idealism, not with the actual idea of Hollywood or cinema.

MA: I guess I mean cinema as a form of consciousness. I don’t know to what degree you are aware of this but you always talk about your practice in terms of pieces, and there might be a cinematic analogy there in that there are clearly-defined works within an oeuvre within an auteur structure.

JW: Cinema is something of the last one hundred years – maybe it’s more like story telling, how one gives form to a story, how is the action of portraying or how does one illustrate or articulate an idea, publicly. That’s all a film is – a public articulation of an idea. I’m operating cinematically but maybe more humanistically, using humanism in my work. I’m not interested in cinema as a phenomenon, I’m more interested in the experience of life and the experience of memory and how we see the world – that’s a phenomenon. Cinema is only a reflection of a greater picture.

MA: I can try and be a bit clearer about how you tend to conceptualise your work as a conglomeration of ‘pieces’ rather than how another artist might characterise their practice as research, where the boundary between engaging in research and constructing ‘pieces’ is never established. So you work in works?

JW: Well it’s not really about me, I feel I’m working as an anonymous individual and that’s why each work is finished, closed, finished, closed, and then you move on. I don’t feel I have an ‘open project’.

MA: Do you have something analogous to a sketchbook, a state of being where things are allowed to half-exist as works or trials?

JW: I don’t do any of that stuff. I don’t have a studio practice. I just have a laptop and a couple of hard drives and most of my ideas come to me on the street or in conversation. Usually I don’t even ‘work’, I just hang out. So I don’t sit there drilling away, but then when I become interested in a subject I’ll rent videos or go to the library, I’ll do research like that. For example right now I’m reading a biography of Lenny Bruce. Things sort of fall into my lap, that’s how I feel. I want to keep it open. I’m usually working on two or three works at once and during the process I won’t allow myself to have any new ideas, because it will only distract me.