

A PLEASURE AND A DAMNATION: SEEING THE SHAPES IN EVERYTHING WITH RUSSELL YOUNG

by Cara S. Vincent

Picture this: the last house on the last road on the Greek island of Ithaca, a thirty-eight hour journey from Southern California. The men in revelry, full of food and drink, diving off high cliffs, engaged in song. Down at the very bottom of it all, a lingering, lurid image unfolds: Russell Young, against the backdrop of the orange earth, the wind heaving in thick squalls off the ocean, caught in a hypnotic performance of goat's blood and body, pigment and flesh on linen—a feral, fever dream. The idea had long haunted Young's brain, culminating in *Goat Blood*, a bloody, anarchic and exquisite collection of photographs printed and bound.

"I wanted a larger quantity of blood than I could take out of myself on a little island," Young explained of his decision to ask a Greek butcher for a bucket of goat's blood. This manifestation of what felt like a building up of tensions, a visceral, primal need to release, writhing up out of his body—a conversation with memory and nature, Odysseus longing for home—was the



beginning of a long and tumultuous journey. Russell Young's more famous works serve to examine both the glamour and the grit

of celebrity culture in large, diamond-dust encrusted screen prints of famous icons for the series *Dirty Pretty Things*, and sordid



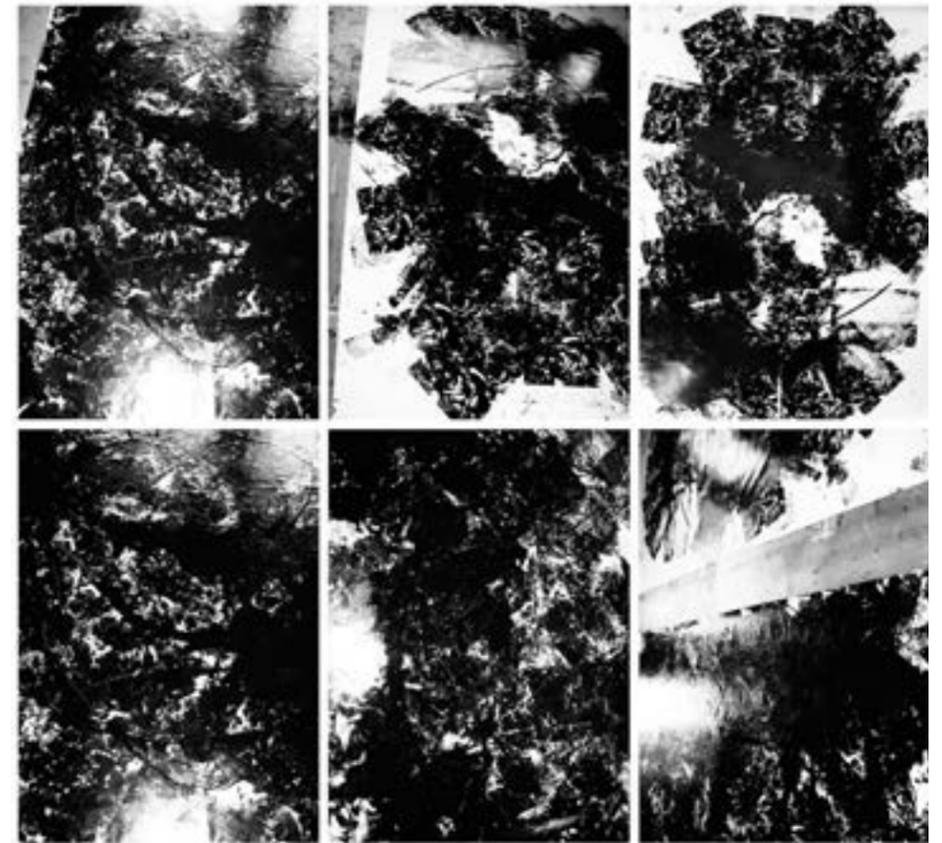
celebrity mugshots for *Pig Portraits*. Young describes his choice of subjects: "I have to be interested in the person and the story, and that's really the thread that goes through everything. I love the rebels, I've always sided with the underdogs." Yet, for as long and as prolific as Young has been in his public professional career, he has also created an expansive and elusive body of private works, which had hardly seen the light of day, until they debuted as *Superstar*, an exhibition last year at the Modern Art Museum in Shanghai, China.

Young, who grew up in Northern England, started his career in London as a photographer of rock stars and a director of music videos in the 1980s. He moved to painting and screen printing with the help of his mentor Christos Raftopoulos after "falling out of love with the industry." According to Young, it was Raftopoulos who taught him how to see and since then the image ideal has inhabited Young's vision and imbued him with the ability to "see shapes and figures in everything, a pleasure and a damnation, as well."

Image is central to Russell Young's body of work. The image is what captivates and resonates. Russell Young is the image embodied—he speaks in images, he uses his body to create, to push enamel paints through a screen, to frenzy-dance through the paint in a trance-like reverence, violently throwing down screens until all there is left to do is collapse in a fit of energy and exhaustion. The image evokes a sense of madness and genius. Enter *Helter Skelter*.

In 2010, Russell Young contracted H1N1 virus which left him hospitalized and gravely ill. As Young puts it: "I was in a coma, all my organs were shutting down and I was dying. But the main doctor did something, and I lived." In the aftermath, Young came out of the hospital very frail. He had forgotten how to read and write, couldn't walk, needed oxygen to breathe and had temporarily forgotten the color green. There is a funny thing, though, about the tenacity of the human spirit in that the human will to live is relentless. Russell Young, the inexorable Northern England life-force coursing through him, survived. What followed this illness and trauma was a refocusing of the lens, a continuation of the dialogue between himself and the surrounding world that began the previous year, blood-drenched in Ithaca. Odysseus lost at sea, at war with the lotus eaters; Odysseus, homesick and adrift.

It's important to know the history. In 1969 at the Altamont Rolling Stones concert in Northern California, the Hell's Angels, who were brought in as security, murdered a young African-American man named Meredith Hunter. He was 18. The scene was



HELTER SKELTER, 2014

documented, photographed. The original image depicts a crowd watching, a man on the ground, and two Hell's Angels, sticks in mid-swing. Someone in the background is wearing a Mickey Mouse t-shirt. Russell

Young, in describing why he chose to use this image for the creation of *Helter Skelter*, explained, "After the free-love, free-spirit Woodstock, came Altamont. And Altamont, the murder, the whole thing was so violent and brutal, it really seemed like this innocence in America was finished." This sense of reckoning with what came before, what was now muddled, merciless mayhem, resonates in Young's *Helter Skelter* paintings. There is no end, no beginning; the image distorted beyond recognition.

Since his recovery, Russell Young has given himself permission to do whatever the hell he likes. A lot of this whatever the hell he likes are abstract, boundless works of energy, color and passion. One series, *Dreamland*, is what Russell describes as "all the colors on top of each other." Printing without the screen print, if you will." Young recently culminated a years-long endeavor of a collection called *The West*, printed images stitched together of Americana: motorcycles, cowboys & Native Americans, guns, NASCAR, supermodels, the juxtaposition of archetypes indemnifying the great American myth-dream of it all. ♦



AUDREY HEPBURN, 2017, hand pulled acrylic, enamel screen print and diamond dust on linen, 70 x 54 1_2 inches