

cartoon versions of such characters as Kenneth Williams, Norman Evans and Frankie Howerd, so that the comics' constructed selves were exaggerated and parodied even though their own recorded voices were unaltered. The audience – on the *SS Shieldhall*, so evoking the entertainment of troops – fell about. It is true that the bond of live appearance disguised the underlying melancholy somewhat, but for me it still cut powerfully through the danger of nostalgia.

The two films constituting *True Crime*, 2013, were shown at a community centre in one of Portsmouth's rougher areas. Jordan Baseman interviewed a criminologist and an ex-criminal turned writer, edited the soundtracks to feature only their voices, and combined their words with separately produced images. The combination is effective: Simon Bennett's piquant tales of his previous life in crime are accompanied by unpeopled urban nightscapes, often reduced to abstracted lighting effects, such as a nocturnal burglar might expect to move through. Dr Diana Bretherick's analysis of criminal tendencies are far less concrete than Bennett's tales, but is paired with a succession of specifics – the mugshots of individual recidivists. The whole set-up turns neatly on itself when, after we have been drawn into Bennett's behind-the-scenes exposure, Bretherick conjectures on our wider cultural complicity in consuming crime as a spectacle, in glamorising and hence encouraging it.

The theme of breakdown and reconstruction moved from the social to the natural in the gardens of Mottisfont Abbey, a National Trust property best known for its rose garden and house which contains a *trompe l'œil* saloon by Rex Whistler. For *Resuscitare*, 2013, Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva re-erected five discarded tree trunks, standing roots skyward in the middle of an established ring of 34 beech trees. This sculptural coup makes for a complicated meditation between various modes of human intervention in the landscape: everything is artificial here, directing us perhaps to consideration of the substance of our interventions rather than the simplistic contrast of natural versus man-made. The impact was undermined, though, by the addition of gold motifs painted on to the trees to pick up on the decorative scheme of Whistler's room, which fussily distracted from the trunks as representing the ghostly futures of the living trees.

In Winchester, Graham Gussin doubled up on the collaborative aspect, employing a dance troupe to work with the military to make a half-hour film, shown in ten minutes elapsed time across three screens simultaneously. In *Close Protection*, 2013, army training drills – hand-to-hand combat, rolling under barbed wire, fitness routines – are converted into balletic movements filmed under cover of darkness in and around the brick structures of Longmoor Training Camp. The use of a night camera gives a slightly hazy, green-tinged look. This could be taken as a formal exploration of how far you can push something before it becomes something else, or as a message, signalled through what Gussin calls 'the choreography of war', about the correspondences between art and its broader community. Does Gussin mean to suggest that this is a dark night for the arts? Or does he perhaps refer to the military planning required to obtain funding?

No doubt there were dark moments and some call for military rigour in the years of planning for artSOUTH. The whole event is itself an exemplar of the collaborative principles its projects required: run by Hampshire County Council, funded by Arts Council England, supplemented – in cash and in staff time – by artwork (a Southampton-based youth arts development agency), the National Trust (which provided three venues) and the galleries involved. My one carp would be the opening hours of Southampton City Gallery: the biggest space involved might have been the flagship venue, but its closure at 3pm on



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weekdays and for all of Sunday contrasted sharply with the efforts made to open up such offbeat venues as a bunker off The Needles. Overall, however, artSOUTH delivered a cohesive and high-quality programme across a variety of settings, well chosen both to enhance the experiences and to spread them beyond the narrow arts audience to which such work is often restricted. ■

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## Asco: No Movies

### Geoffrey Farmer: Let's Make the Water Turn Black

Nottingham Contemporary 12 October to 5 January

Bit parts accorded to Asco, the Los Angeles art collective, in the survey exhibitions 'Pacific Standard Time' in Berlin in 2011 and Tate Liverpool's 'Glam!' last February (Reviews AM366), as well as the two-part film programme at the South London Gallery in April, made clear that a European audience deserved deeper knowledge of this radical and productive Conceptual Art group. Nottingham Contemporary has delivered that opportunity with a show indirectly derived from a much larger retrospective seen in LA and Williamstown in Massachusetts last year. In a sense, the recent institutional interest in the group demonstrates the success of its original project 40 years ago: to highlight the marginalising of Chicano artists and to bring Chicano identity into the cultural mainstream. The art world's embrace has not been universally welcomed by former collaborators, but this exhilarating exhibition does pose the pressing question of whether art can ever again have the will to ally itself so creatively with political causes.

The four artists at the core of the collective (they collaborated with many others but this group remained consistent into the 1980s) were not alone in challenging the ingrained prejudicial landscape. Asco, which translates as 'disgust, loathing, a desire to vomit' and by which the group became known accidentally and enthusiastically, was part of the larger struggle for civil rights among minorities which, in the Mexican-American neighbourhoods, generated diverse cultural expressions, especially in murals, figurative painting and agitprop theatre. Asco, however, stood out by taking a conceptual route, adopting a pronounced performative element and by not being limited to specific locations. Instead, the group's activism was mobile, choosing symbolic sites for 'pop-up' events, such as tagging the LA County Museum of

Art, dining on a traffic island on Whittier Boulevard and creating an instant mural by taping two members to a city wall. They agreed that time was too short ever to seek permission; their theme was the 'locking in' of communities by zoning policies and their aim was to make that inaccessibility visible.

As this exhibition confirms, the strength of Asco was not only its conviction and intensity but also its irreverence and wit. Although the geography of East LA, the home district for much of the city's substantial Latino community, reinforced the social isolation of its inhabitants within the metropolis by surrounding it with freeways, the artists themselves did not emerge from a cultural wilderness. Each contributed a particular skill – as muralist, writer, photographer, performer, painter – and pooled influences from Dada, Federico Fellini, French New Wave cinema, theatre and Conceptual Art focused on the body and action.

Nonetheless, the ironic backdrop to their lives was the famous Hollywood hilltop sign and what it represented to a community which, when not totally ignored by film, was invariably subjected to depiction through demeaning stereotypes. When in 1972 a LACMA curator defended excluding Chicano artists as they were only good for folk art, the group responded by spraying their names on the museum's exterior (and photographing the gesture), thereby asserting their 'ownership' and forcing their presence. By using the urban idiom of graffiti, they both parodied the majority association of Chicanos with street gangs and mobilised the form's emerging function as an instrument of urban resistance.

Asco became active in 1972, although three of its founding members – Harry Gamboa Jr, Patssi Valdez and Willie F Herrón III – had known each other since high school when Gamboa was a student leader. In August 1970 an important, radicalising event, which locals termed a 'police riot', had occurred in East LA: a peaceful march protesting at the high casualty rate among young Chicano servicemen fighting in Vietnam was broken up, leaving four participants dead. One of Asco's most notable performances, *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*, 1974, took place at rush hour on the central reserve of the boulevard where the violence had taken place, with masked diners at a table dressed with images of torture, mirrors and a naked doll. The commemoration had obvious allusions to Christian sacrifice and the festival of the Day of the Dead, but it also invited the population to express itself publicly.

Most events, recorded by the photographs and Super 8 film selected for this show, were transformed into performances. This development perhaps reflected the influence of the fourth member, Gronk (Glugio Nicandro), to whom (with Valdez) may be attributed the glam rock-style costumes that outraged some onlookers. Those

outfits featured in *Walking Mural*, 1972, another war protest which had overt religious references and made plain that Asco not only fearlessly targeted political and social injustice but also parodied the elderly stereotypes of Chicano identity to which the community clung, such as painted murals and folkloric motifs.

Although media were merged to create a distinct image drawn from urban life and global modernism, photography was the most effective channel for disseminating the group's concerns. Indeed, the members' status as artists brought access to audiences unavailable to other activists. Gamboa and Gronk, especially, documented their activities on camera, and, augmented by Gamboa's contextual writing, images were presented in schools and libraries, published in counter-cultural circles and eventually shown in galleries.

Photography was the vehicle for *No Movies*, 1973–1978, which highlighted the absence of Chicanos in Hollywood and avant-garde cinema. In place of moving images, stills from non-existent films, with melodramatic narratives and elaborate costumes, were projected against walls like murals. Another photographic project, *Decoy Gang War Victim*, 1974, also turned its target's methods on itself. Tackling the media's taste for sensation and racial behavioural stereotypes, it shows a young man stretched out on an LA street, his body surrounded by flares. Gamboa sent the transparency to news desks with the caption announcing the war's last death. The image, aesthetically compelling and heavy with photojournalistic values, was an attempt to halt the effect of the papers' coverage on inciting violence to maintain sales.

The imaginary world of cinema and the dividing line between fiction and reality are also prominent elements in Geoffrey Farmer's 'sculpture play' shown in the adjacent galleries. On a low platform connecting two rooms, objects in strange combinations of shape and scale enact a kind of opera. They range from fragments of a statue, a barrel surmounted by a feather, a tripod camera and stepladder, some musical instruments, truncated plaster creatures and a variety of oversize and obviously fake vegetables painted in an animator's palette. The combination resembles a theatre prop room given its own play to perform in the main house or an eccentric instrument – a digital steam organ. Dramatic coloured lighting lifts the spectacle and the score seems to rise from deep within, like a clamorous context for individual events. The result, which masks its technical ambition behind a crafted, stagey cack-handedness reminiscent of 1950s horror films, is often amusing, aurally and visually fragmented like a collage and, in the tradition of puppet shows, simultaneously endearing and spooky.

Different forms of composition openly cite Frank Zappa's experiments with abrupt rhythmical changes, editing and connecting diverse sounds – and, indeed, the project's title quotes Zappa's bizarre story song from 1968 about the wild antics of the singer's neighbours, the tearaway Williams brothers. Farmer evidently relishes these parallels and the daily programme offers a kind of fantasia on Zappa's creativity, condensed into a day that culminates in his death every night before closing. In contrast with Asco's fight in the 1970s to be admitted to the art world, the museum is Farmer's natural habitat and, once in, he interrogates its purpose. With his fascination for the institution and the 'lives' it confers on static objects, he spins constantly revised narratives around inanimate things. Farmer contradicts history by presenting new scenarios and, alert as he always seems to be to his audience, guarantees a new experience with each visit. ■

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Asco  
Asco 1975

