

# HISTORY BITES

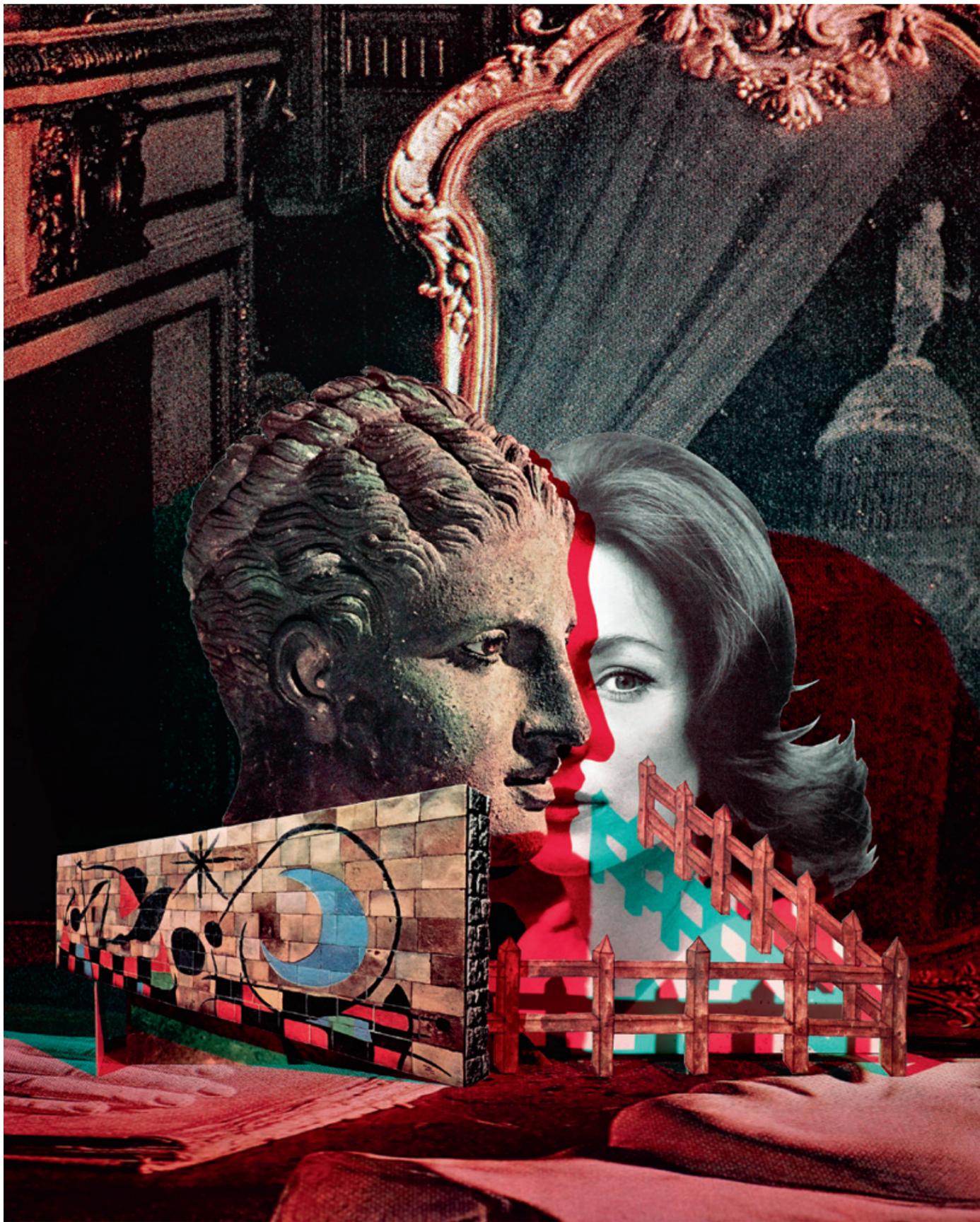
DAZED

60



CONFUSED

AS SIX  
OF THEIR  
LEADING  
LIGHTS  
CREATE NEW  
PIECES FOR  
THIS ISSUE,  
FRANCESCA  
GAVIN  
EXAMINES  
THE RISE OF  
THE OFF-  
MODERNISTS  
– ART REBELS  
USING  
TRADITIONAL  
METHODS  
TO REWORK  
HISTORY



[previous spread]  
SCOTT  
TRELEAVEN:  
CIMITERO  
DRAWING #29  
2012  
gouache,  
pastel,  
house paint  
and collage  
on paper  
30" x 22"

courtesy of  
the artist

[opposite  
page]  
MATT LIPPS:  
UNTITLED (SAFE)  
2010-12  
C-print  
33" x 44"

courtesy of  
the artist

The internet is a bit like a carnival sideshow. Step right up! Looking for some fun? Want a bit of culture? Look at this screen here. Everything that has ever been made, drawn, filmed, painted, written, sung, danced to and watched is here – all of human creation. Yet as we stare into the abyss of this ever-expanding archive machine, a question arises. What's next? Is technological referencing all there is? Some artists are increasingly drawing from our oh-so-accessible history and looking for past inspiration. There is a huge rise in the use of the imagery and ideas of modernism, classicism and abstraction – three veins of art history that could seem old fashioned, regressionist and dead. Yet this pop-eating-itself contemporary culture is pushing creativity into a very interesting new direction.

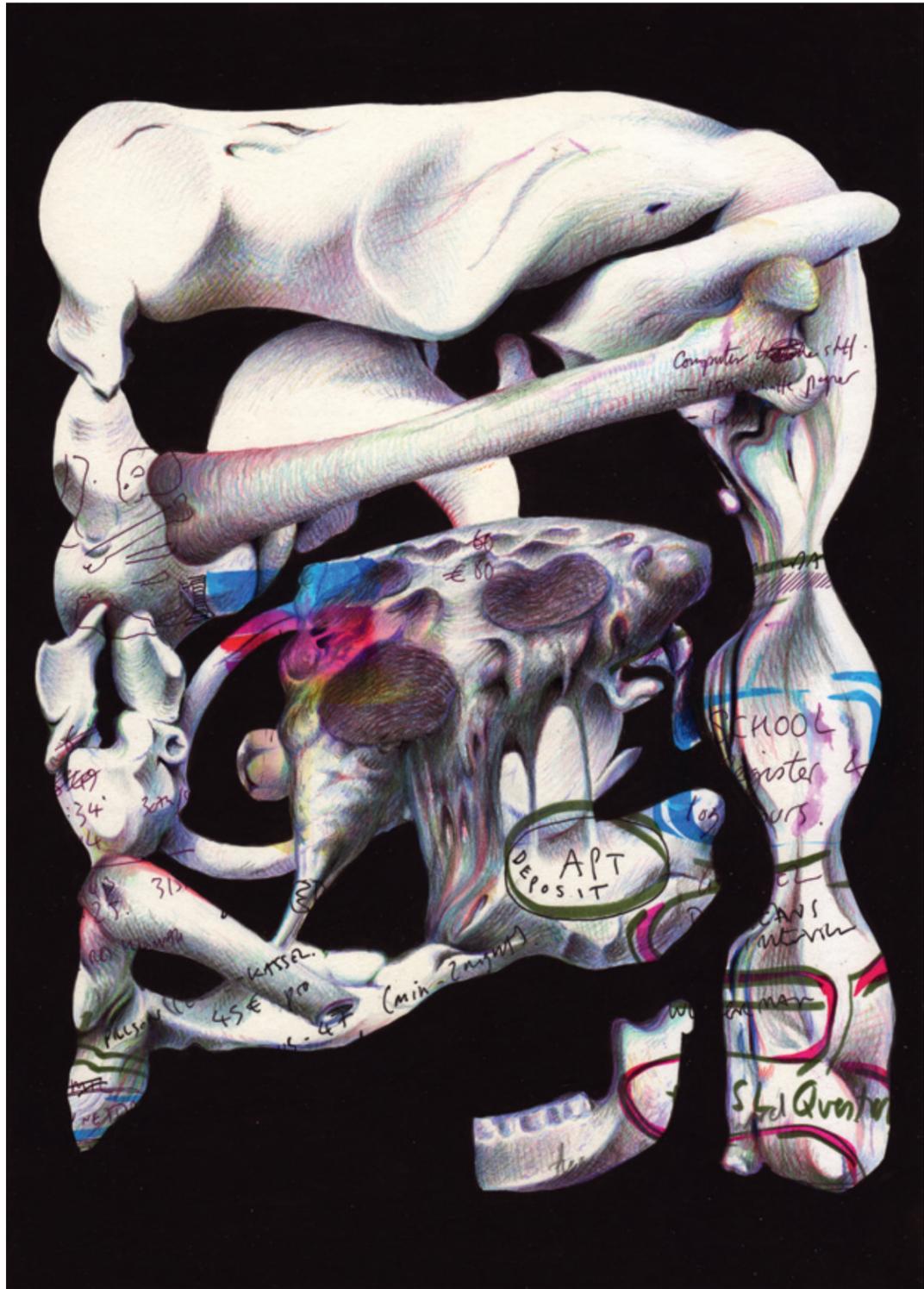
Music writer Simon Reynolds' 2011 book *Retromania* charted our current obsession with looking back. He talks about how we now absorb culture – drifting, skimming, instantly accessing everything – and how culture generally and music in particular is obsessed with pastiche, sampling and quotation. Time itself, he argues, has changed. "Our relationship to time and space in this YouTubeWikipedia-RapidshareiTunesSpotify era has been utterly transformed. Distance and delay have been eroded to nearly nothing... On the internet, the past and the present co-mingle in a way that makes time itself mushy and spongiform... Can culture survive in conditions of limitlessness?" Although Reynolds is tentative and critical of some of the changes in contemporary pop culture, he does argue that "the past can be used to critique what is absent in the present."

So how do we move forward? Billy Childish's hardline retro stuckism (a reaction against YBA conceptual-schlock accessibility) isn't it. The "just take it" ethos of the Pictures Generation isn't it. The readymade approach of Duchamp has been done to death, and postmodernism feels like a rerun of a 1980s sitcom. Seth Price put it well in a roundtable discussion published in *Frieze* magazine: "With the internet, the amount of material at hand approaches infinity, and using aggressively disparate material isn't really a matter of taking things out of context anymore, because that step has already been done for you."

Aaron Rose, Mandy Kahn and Brian Roettinger's book *Collage*

*Culture*, published by JRP-Ringier last year, aims to raise questions about the current status of things. "Why has the 21st century become an era of collage, in which creative works are made by combining elements from the former century?" the authors ask. "Why have musicians, writers and designers fallen in love with the past, busying themselves with borrowing instead of creating their art from scratch?" Rose says that the book came out of disappointment at how artists were repeating previous generations' work rather than striving to create something new – the replication of the past rather than its reinvention. "I have always thought that the job of youth was to put their elders out of business. Not out of disrespect, but out of a longing, a real human longing, to be better than the last generation. To push things to the next level. To commit patricide." Rose considers. "Sometimes when I look at guys like Kanye West, I wonder what they're thinking. Those guys just steal and steal."

Reworking, however, isn't the same as theft. A number of artists are looking backwards and absorbing the past to create a new visual future. Theorist/artist/writer Svetlana Boym has come up with a concept that is having increasing resonance: "As you know, post-modernism is dead. In fact, each time the end of history was declared, as in 1989 or 2000, we witnessed the return of history with vengeance. We are living in the culture of rapid obsolescence of everything and

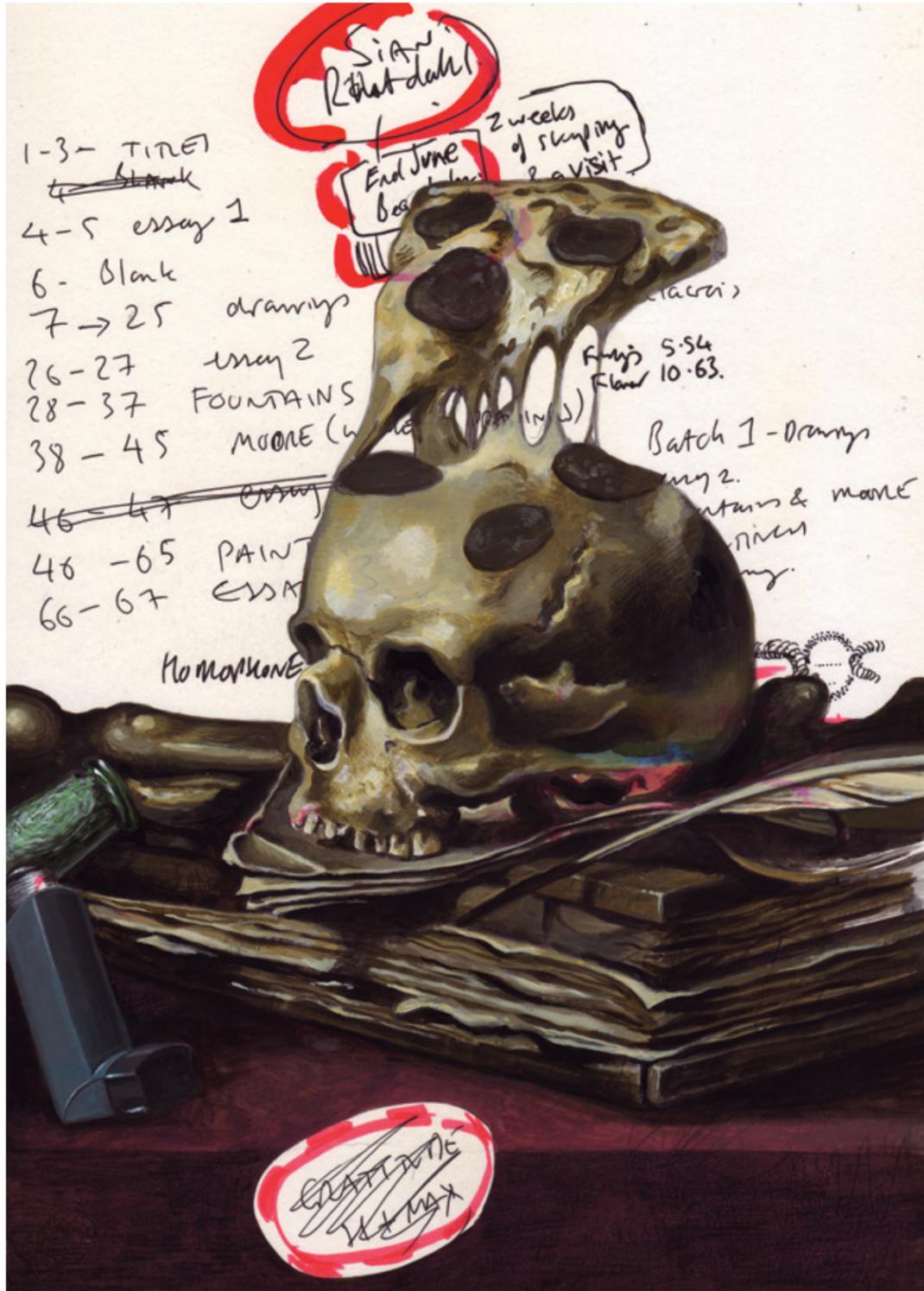


PAUL MCDEVITT:

[this page]  
 NOTES TO SELF:  
 6 SEPTEMBER  
 2012  
 ink, acrylic,  
 coloured  
 pencil on  
 paper  
 8.3" x 11.7"

[opposite  
 page]  
 NOTES TO SELF:  
 7 SEPTEMBER  
 2012  
 ink, acrylic,  
 coloured  
 pencil on  
 paper  
 8.3" x 11.7"

courtesy  
 of Stephen  
 Friedman  
 Gallery,  
 London and  
 Sommer &  
 Kohl, Berlin



a fast pace of forgetting of history that strikes back as a boomerang. To bring back Walter Benjamin's distinction between the culture of information and the culture of experience, the culture of information does not always allow us to digest, inhabit and make meaning of the recent events. Many contemporary artists return to a slower pace of reflection and an alternative new media which I call off-modern."

She coined the term "off-modern" in her 2001 book *The Future of Nostalgia*, but has developed the idea further and is releasing *The Off-Modern Manifesto* in 2013, to coincide with an exhibition at the Ludwig Museum in Budapest that will feature Anri Sala, William Kentridge, Agnieszka Kurant and the Raqs media collective. The term was inspired by a concept introduced by Russian theorist and writer Viktor Shklovsky in the 1920s. Shklovsky suggested that cultural evolutions follow "the knight's move", from chess.

The idea is essentially to go off-kilter, off the path, off the wall, off-piste and off-brand, making creative cultural detours into the unexplored tangents of modernism. Essentially, going backwards to form a new idea of forward, rather than following the utopian 20th-century obsession with progress. Boym highlights lateral examinations of misfits, outsiders and unexplored potentials that engage with "the new political situation of today's world culture." She's keen to note though that it's "not yet another 'ism",

but a different prism of vision and interpretative optics."

There are a number of artists reworking and playing with historical references in interesting ways. Canadian artist Scott Treleavan is a perfect example. He made his name with his own style of collage work, which in recent years transformed completely into a practice of abstract paintings and multimedia objects. "I ended up working with abstraction out of necessity," he says. "I've been using collage in its broadest sense (including montage and Gysin-style cut-ups) since the early 90s, when I was primarily making zines and films. I grew up with 80s punk culture, with all of that salvaging and interspersing of tangential histories alongside the more accepted versions. There were endless nuances, endless subtleties and clashes just waiting to be activated. I noticed that the more I cut up, and the more I intervened with the material I was working with, the more abstract it became."

In 2010, during a residency in Milan, he found himself covering up his collaged images and replacing them with marks. The starting point was some photographs he had taken of Italian headstones and memorial statues. "I had no idea what I was going to do with the photographs when I was taking them, and the process of elaborating over the top of and eventually erasing these beautiful monuments had quite an effect on me. It really shook me up. If you look at them, you can see that these statues are machines: they're made to generate sensations of mourning, sensuality, loss, religious comfort, immortality, temporality, dread, faith..."

Under layers of paint and marks the faint outline of the collages beneath are still visible in Treleavan's paintings. In the same way the hint of history and the weight of those ideas are still part of his work. Rather than modernism, Treleavan's influences are occult and religious texts, zine aesthetics and cinema. But as he notes, "modernism took its cues from the same kinds of places that I'm looking at. The utopic drive, the fascination with colour and harmony and its relation to spirit... none of that was innately modern. It all came in from the periphery, from religious texts, from proletarian aims, from a western mind trying to grasp the exotic."

Kadar Brock is another artist creating a new definition of the

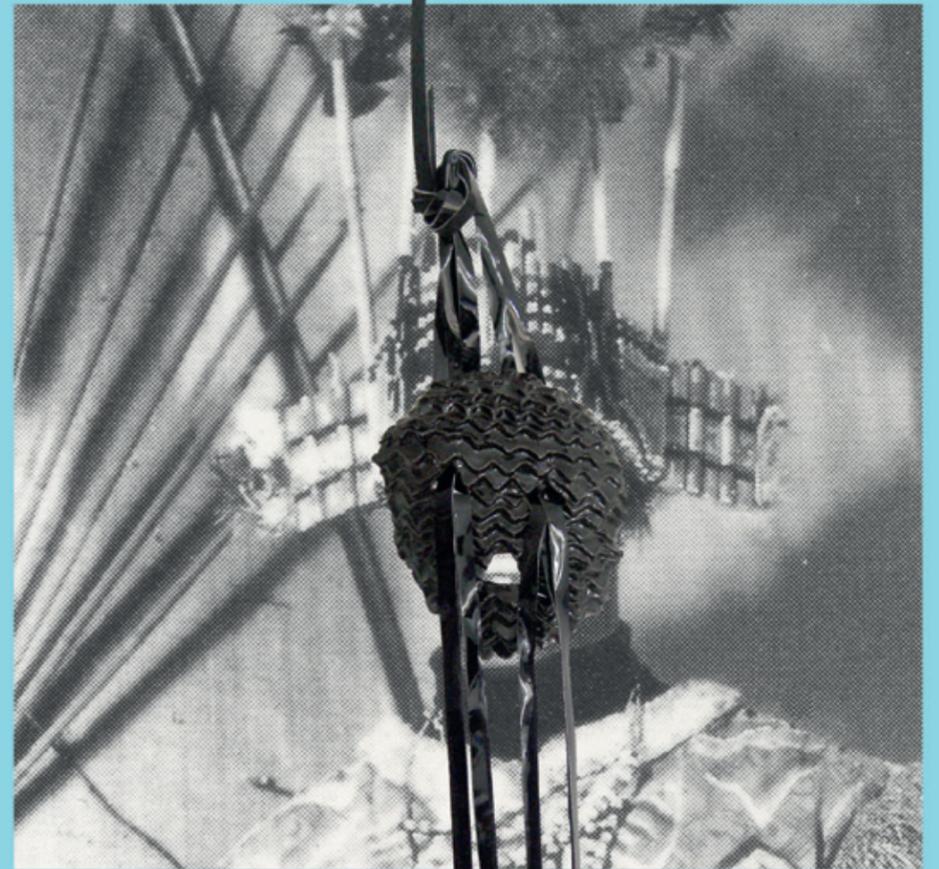
abstract. His paintings are often built upon layers of hand-scrawled text or images, which he covers with paint and subsequently spends days sanding down. The result: abstract paintings in which the artist has less control of the outcome. Brock often creates approaches to find ways of painting in which his interests aren't the impetus for production. This is abstract painting with a very different conceptual thrust from Pollock, Albers and Rothko. "I think the impetus for abstraction is primarily historical," he argues. "Connecting with past ideas and ideologies and contextualising them in the present. Art has always referenced other art or reacted to other art, but maybe it's a tighter spiral now."

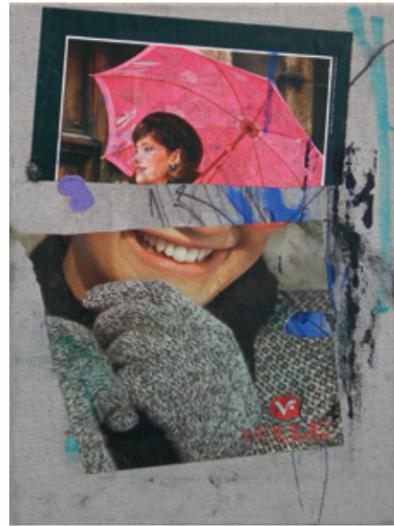
Berlin-based artist Paul McDevitt's artwork strongly addresses visual history. His work is refreshingly broad: 17th-century still-lives painted perfectly on beer mats, intricate biro drawings developed over phone doodles and daily notes, and paintings, sculptures and prints that reference everything from Mickey Mouse to Mondrian, Henry Moore, Andy Capp and newspaper comics. "Many of us have a surface view of visual history," he says, "by which I mean it can be like looking

**"Finding and replicating imagery is easier than ever. Artists have been doing this since they first got their hands on magazines, photocopyers, cameras. In one sense or another all artists are grave-robbers" – Paul McDevitt**

CAROLINE ACHAIINTRE: FRINZ 2012 collage 8.25" x 11.4"

courtesy of the artist





CHRIS DORLAND:

[this page, clockwise from top left]  
BILD MULL (FROM PICASSO TO POLITIKS AND BACK AGAIN)  
photocollage, enamel on canvas  
37" x 48"

BILD MULL (COTTON MOUTH)  
photocollage, acrylic, ink on tarp  
12" x 14"

BILD MULL (WAITING TO EXHALE)  
photocollage, enamel on canvas  
18" x 18"

BILD MULL (THE 9 LIVES OF VICTOR VASARELY)  
photocollage, acrylic, digital print on paper  
9" x 12"

BILD MULL (SIDE EFFECT)  
offset litho, digital print on paper  
8.5" x 11"

BILD MULL (SEASON'S GREETINGS TO YOU AND YOURS)  
photocollage, ink, laser print on paper  
9" x 12"

[this page, clockwise from top left]  
BILD MULL (LIPSTICK TRACES)  
offset litho, digital print on paper  
8.5" x 11"

BILD MULL (SOUL FOOD)  
photocollage, enamel on canvas  
12" x 16"

BILD MULL (AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS)  
ink, marker, collage on paper  
9" x 12"

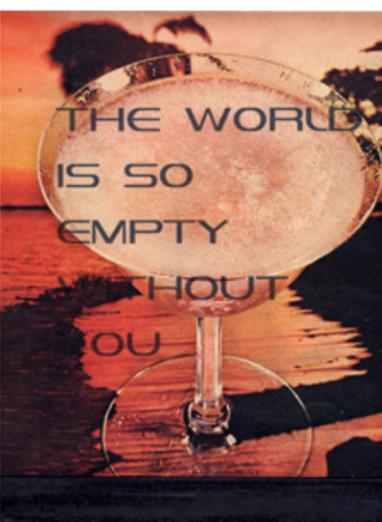
BILD MULL (VOODOO)  
offset litho, digital print on paper  
9" x 12"

BILD MULL (ERSATZ)  
photocollage, enamel on canvas  
48" x 60"

BILD MULL (THE HORSE WHISPERER)  
photocollage, pencil, digital print on paper  
9" x 12"

all 2012

courtesy of the artist





KADAR BROCK:  
POSEIDON AUS  
PERGAMON  
2012  
house paint,  
spray paint,  
ink, colour  
xeroxes  
8.75" x 14"

courtesy of  
the artist

at thumbnails on screen, all the same size and intensity. This can lead us to mix psychedelia with impressionism or minimalism with comics – it's all fair game. Such fluidity, at its best, results in extremely interesting artists who are not afraid to broaden their practices to a tremendous degree. People like Dieter Roth, Mike Kelley, Rosemarie Trockel and Urs Fischer." McDevitt considers. "Finding and replicating imagery is easier than ever, as is the process of perverting and recontextualising the plunder. Artists have been doing this since they first got their hands on magazines, photocopiers, cameras. In one sense or another all artists are graverobbers."

The 1990s are now the past. The 20th century, as Boym puts it, is antiquity. Artists looking at history are increasingly looking at the more recent past. Life has become very fast. "Of course, art is a mirror so it ends up reflecting things," NYC-based artist Chris Dorland says. "But the speed of daily life is insane. To a large extent Baudrillard was right about things. He described the transformation, the perversion of 'reality' by technology. I experience that on a daily basis."

Dorland makes work that reflects a fascination with hoarding the throwaway pop ephemera of modern life. Modernist buildings, cheap advertising, bad film posters, infomercial culture and bank logos all inform his paintings, photocollage and videos. He describes his plundering approach as "a compulsion really. It's like I'm at this giant junk sale. Everything is dirt cheap and I can't stop myself from loading up on crap. My arms are full. My bags are bursting at the seams. Shit is everywhere, stuffed in all the nooks and crannies. Weird shit, shiny shit, old shit, funny shit, dumb shit, rare shit, broken shit, shit shit. So I grab as much as I can carry home with me, and then I spend all sorts of money and energy trying to filter, reconstruct, duplicate, translate and organise all the fucking crap I just bought." Except in this case the crap is imagery rather than objects.

It's arguable that today we are living in a mannerist epoch. As with the original mannerists in later 16th-century Italy, art is no longer about the rational, harmonious or utopian 'progressive' creativity that came before. Instead, artists are exceptionally aware of their own history. As Brock points out, "Mannerism started when painters after the Renaissance started

making works that were more focused on an art context than on a naturalistic context or religious/symbolic context. Granted, for them it seemed even more focused on aesthetic innovation – a longer, more elegant line. I'm more interested in how it implies a mode of art-making that's self-consciously talking about other art, or art-making self-consciously as a way to talk about ideas." Throughout the last century creative focus was all about moving towards a brave new world. Perhaps it's time to consider looking back to develop an alternative future to the one we're in.

collageculture.com  
svetlanaboym.com

SCOTT TRELEAVAN  
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