

Mark Dean: The Beginning of The End?

The development of this solo exhibition has been the locus for the play of tension between two callings. Is this The Beginning of the End or, as per Churchill, The End of the Beginning?

Ideally, Mark Dean wouldn't make art. He likens it to taking a pill for a headache – practicing art as a way of connecting to the world, because separated. He uses video because this has been the platform on which he has been able to successfully combine various skills and preoccupations to develop his ideas. The materiality of the video image and of the way it needs to be shown is what excites the artist. And it is his intimacy with the medium coupled with the content-driven reality of the work that makes Dean a key contemporary British practitioner of video art.

The artist's journey with video began at Brighton Polytechnic in the late 70's when he experimented within the painting department to make a didactic work called "Artists' Video" – a piece that reflected on the materiality of the art-making process, a video intended to be watched by artists. Selecting a 10-minute film in the video library which documented the making of handmade paper, the clip is repeated six times, to make a work with the duration of an hour – the exact length of a U-matic tape, and long enough to become as tedious as the artisanal process of making paper for artists. This earliest video set the pattern for a body of work that only started to emerge a decade and a half later.

Dean draws a veil over his experience of the 80's, referring to a post-punk wilderness. During this time he played saxophone and electronics in various bands, on one occasion supporting The Clash. He specialised in producing thematic mix-tapes, which were often used as a prelude to live gigs. Towards the end of the decade, as he began to recover from his former habits, Dean started taking photographs again. (An earlier attempt at straightening out his life as a teenager led him to become a self-taught photographer who often stayed up all night in the dark room.) But according to the artist, there was always something wrong with the photographs, and he was never good enough at the music.

Montage provided an answer. Dean attests that the first time he was ever happy with his own artwork was when he combined photography and music in *LoveLoveLove* in 1992, the making of which kick-started the next phase of his development as an artist.

Made during intensive therapy with a borrowed camera, and crash-edited as a portfolio piece in the application process for a Masters degree, *LoveLoveLove* re-edited grainy home movie footage of (his) family life in the 60s with repeated incidences of the sung word "Love" spliced from Pop songs and processed with Dean's electronic music equipment. With this work everything came together. Exhibited in the Riverside Open, 1992, *LoveLoveLove* caught the attention of the influential art critic Stuart Morgan. It was Morgan who wrote the reference for Dean's application for the MA at Goldsmiths College, attended between 1992-94. Dean's first MA seminar was held in the artist-led gallery City Racing, where his work was being exhibited, while *LoveLoveLove* became a prizewinner in *New Contemporaries*, 1993.

Dean identifies some other key inspirational figures in this phase of his life. One was Tracey Emin, whom he met (pre-fame) when they worked together on an art project for Southwark Youth Service, and who convinced him to keep making art. She introduced him to John Burgess, who

had seen *LoveLoveLove* at the Riverside; he invited Dean to exhibit at City Racing in 1992, where he later exhibited solo in 1995. Another key figure was a charismatic Anglican priest, Martin Israel, who made radical connections between questions of corporeality and the spiritual – and in 1995 Dean was confirmed as a Christian. Works made at this time explore fear and its antidote - hope: *Nothing To Fear (The American Friend x32+1)*, 1995, *Nothing To Worry About (Easy Rider/Frenzy–6)*, 1995, *What Kind Of Fear (Alice in den Stadten x 4)*, 1995.

Mark Dean's earliest works are essentially autobiographical. Mediated through appropriation and mechanical process, many of these revisit the site of trauma through the selection of iconic moments of cinema, juxtaposed with sampled pop lyrics. All Dean's earlier work is characterised by a process of noticing the essential moment at which fundamental human experience is amplified in popular culture; lacerating that moment from its context and then meticulously and mechanistically re-rendering the incident and re-presenting it to us, as if under a magnifying glass. He is able to speak to us about our human potential for depravity and rejection and in the same few minutes, offer a glimmer of hope – Tippi Hedren gradually opens her eyes in *Goin' Back (The Byrds/The Birds x 32 + 1)*, 1997, while the incantation of the Apostles' Creed survives the horrific soundtrack of a rape and murder in *Nothing to Worry About (Easy Rider/Frenzy -6)*. For Dean the reality of hope is very different from the glibness of nihilism, theorising no hope.

Dean's work was first brought to the attention of an international audience in a British Council touring show¹, which included other British video artists who worked with appropriated cinematic material, thus enabling a distinction to be drawn between their various approaches. As Ian Hunt wrote, 'It is not preference for the underdog that leads so many people in conversation to compare Dean favourably with Douglas Gordon, but a recognition of the qualities of care in the realisation of the work and its very different way with feeling.'²

The dark works of this period often repeat a fragment of film lasting a few seconds. Dean has also explored his preoccupation with death and redemption by going to the opposite extreme with the movies. Responding to a Beaconsfield brief (to explore the indefinable moment of connection that is striven for in the experience of live performance³) Dean inverted his habit of clipping extracts from mainstream film. Using the full-length feature *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in its entirety, he reversed in it a cameo-shaped insert, so that the forward and reverse time frames coincide for an instant at the mid-point: *Picture in Picture (TyhaerPGincatiurroeDoffoDeorruitacniGPreahyT)*, 1998. This led to two other feature-length works first screened during the same exhibition - *Jane/Fonda (Barbarella/Klute)* and *Scorpio Rising 2 (The Gospel according to St Matthew/Hells Angels on Wheels)* – which used a split-screen to investigate the production of meaning through the simultaneous viewing of two films.

Dean explains: "*Scorpio Rising 2* was an explicit attempt to imagine a religious work, but by eschewing editing (beyond the split-screen) I left the interpretation of my material to the viewer. However, this is a hermeneutic that remains committed to its subject matter (as registered by the lower half of Pasolini's movie, which proclaims the gospel in subtitle form)."

At this time, Dean was holding considerable responsibility at Southwark Youth Service, managing a project for young people with learning disabilities in Peckham, where he set up an alternative art school called The Untitled Art Project. But he had reached the inevitable crossroads for artists in

¹ Black Box Recorder, opened Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 2000, touring to 2003.

² Ian Hunt, 'Mark Dean', *Art Monthly*, no 279, September 2004.

³ *Instantaneous*, curated by David Crawforth, Beaconsfield, London 1998.

survival jobs, and decided to leave after his daughter was born. Working freelance, he developed a gallery education programme at the South London Gallery (including an Art & Spirituality event featuring Faisal Abdu'allah and Tacita Dean) and within a year was offered teaching at the Ruskin School of Drawing, Oxford University.

A series of slow, silent works moved Dean's work into a less visceral and more contemplative space, closer to the form of a traditional painting. Of these, the 8-hour *When I Was A Child (I Was Fucked By Someone I Didn't Know – Nothing Was Ever The Same. Now I Fear The Same Thing Will Happen To My Child; Sometimes I Fear I Will Do It Myself)*, 2000, provides a key to the content of Dean's work. When you've seen this work, the rest falls into place – the survivor who's lived to tell the tale, with the artist's ability to place his finger in the human wound and provide cathartic experiences.

This work, although literally a self-portrait, effectively puts the artist behind the camera and opens up a new objectivity. This outward focus was initially embarked upon in more sophisticated appropriation works, such as *The Return of Jackie & Judy (+ Joey)* 2001, where 'issues of the passing of time and meaning'⁴ are registered in less autobiographical terms and developed in later works filmed by Dean, such as the series, *The Band*. These were studies of musicians from his past interacting with Dean's remixes of their early recordings – other survivors, living creative lives, mediated by their past, but not determined by it.

The glimmer of hope brightens and burns longer. Works made between 2007 and 2009 grapple with the conflicts of theology and aesthetics, arising while he was studying Contextual Theology as part of his training for ordination in the Church of England. In *Darker Block (1 Thess. 5:1-11)*, 2007, a radio debate on religion is literally eclipsed by a reggae soundtrack, which is in turn illuminated by a strobing text from the New Testament. In *Experimental Religion*, performed at Beaconsfield in 2008⁵) an audio recording of Gladys Aylward preaching is mixed live with an animated image of Ingrid Bergman playing Aylward in a Hollywood biopic.

The artist has spoken of his anxiety about a loss of emotional precision once the work ceases to be based in autobiography. These fears are allayed, in this writer's view, by a piece such as *How Can You Mend A Broken Heart (1 Cor. 11.23-26)*, 2009⁶. The observational footage taken in a graveyard is specific yet incidental, the signature use of a pop song (the Reverend Al Green's soul version rather than the Bee Gees original) is treated with generosity, the reflective echo insistent and mirrored in the video, but, un-characteristically, preserving the entire song. This is an altogether more positive view of the human condition.

Dean's relationship with Beaconsfield began in 1997 in conversations with David Crawforth that led to *Picture in Picture* and he has responded to Beaconsfield briefs on several occasions since then.⁷ In 2005 he produced three large scale projections to kick-off a fifteen-week sequential exhibition of artists films: *Police and Thieves, (Version)*, *Rag Doll (Version)* and *Crimson & Clover (Version)*⁸, so *The Beginning of The End* is not the first time this artist has exhibited across the Beaconsfield site. The solo focus of the current exhibition is a mid-career reflection upon all

⁴ Liam Gillick, 100 Reviews Alberta Press, 2002.

⁵ Matmos Improv, 3 faces of Matmos, Beaconsfield, 2008.

⁶ Exhibited Crypt Gallery, St Pancras Church, 2009.

⁷ Realm of the Senses, curated by David Crawforth, Turku Art Museum, Finland, 2000, produced by Titanic and Beaconsfield and Chronic Epoch, Beaconsfield, 2005.

⁸ Lightsilver, Beaconsfield, 24 February–8 May, 2005.

aspects of the journey within Mark Dean's oeuvre. Four new works create a loose narrative through the conditions of their installation. Biblical themes of apocalypse, purgatory and ascension are implied by the juxtaposition of seminal snapshots of contemporary culture – weapons of mass destruction, class A narcotics, celebrity and Hollywood.

Love Missile (7" vs 12"), 2010, combines the various mediums which Dean might typically montage in a live mix: two versions of Sigue Sigue Sputnik's electro-punk debut single, played asynchronously, a series of modified still photographs of Cruise missiles in flight and projected video footage of an ambiguous figure at dusk. *Christian Disco (Terminator)*, 2010, borrows and modifies three seconds from the film 'Terminator': a dance tableaux in perpetual motion, mediated by two looped audio recordings ("Here ends the first/second lesson") taken from the ends of Bible readings on Holocaust Memorial Day. These complementary large scale works are informed by foyers works: *Open Your Eyes (Syd/Vicious)* montages an edit of the Syd Barrett song "Two of a Kind" with a documentary image of the Sex Pistols protagonist, Sid Vicious, barely moving, apparently in a liminal space between life and death, while the theme of flawed mortality is picked up in the audio piece, *The Men Who Fell to Earth*, at the exhibition's entrance.

The Beginning of The End is the second in the Beaconsfield exhibition series 'Phase' which proposes an archival element to the project. *Retrospective Jukebox 1992-2010* allows the visitor to dig into Dean's archive of single screen works, offering a chance to reflect on the achievements of this body of work – both aesthetic and philosophical.

Mark Dean received a Paul Hamlyn Award for Artists in 2009 and in July 2010 was ordained in the Church of England. Dean has said that, for him, the conflict between art and religion is not one of competing belief systems, but rather of different languages. He states: 'I am interested in the relation of contemporary art and religion, but do not recognise any shared language with which to discuss this – at least, not at the level that either discipline requires. I might be wrong, of course. In any case, my work is driven by this question.' He has also said that, contra the Modernist axiom, art is not the new religion, religion is (or should be) the new religion. Contemporary art dogma often posits a world where meaning is constructed in an absence of truth. In rejecting this view, one suspects that, as an academic, Dean is swimming against the tide (he teaches Fine Art at his alma mater, Goldsmiths College).

This oppositional position is reminiscent of the historical position of video art, when the discipline originally developed in the 'third area' – the dumping ground for performance and new media which were, almost by default, politicised. If there were no longer a language to enable a conversation between art and religion, this particular artist would seem to be presented with a dilemma. But despite Dean's doubts about their relation, the demands of religion may not be so distant from the demands of art. Christianity is, after all, a religion of representation, full of symbol and metaphor. Conversely, artists, like Joseph Beuys, have often aspired to priesthood as a social function.

Artists make art because they believe in it – as an act of faith and because something experientially special happens in the presence of art, for those who are receptive – and after all, when did Cultural Theory ever mend a broken heart?

Naomi Siderfin, Beaconsfield, November 2010,
(informed by a series of conversations with the artist)
Further information on Mark Dean's work is available at tailbiter.com