Postcards from Venice

Utopia,

Even now it is rather hard to speak of.

I have no idea what they were talking about. Before I left, I mean, they said, here Snake. here are some biscuits, here are your glucosamine injections. Don’t eat the meat Snake: it probably is man, or at best dog, and in any case it probably won’t be very fresh and if it is, well then you’re damn sure it’s man! Here are your protein suppositories. These other things are vitamin patches. You can wear them on your thighs. That way you don’t taste them. Your cigarettes contain an experimental combustible compound of omega-3, horny goat weed, and electrolytes. They’re gonna burn a bit slow but they taste like acai or that’s the story anyway and you’re lucky we still give you anything that even looks like a cigarette after what happened. Those other boxes that are really cigarettes are for barter only. Maybe you can buy the island from those savages? Ha oh man, we’re kidding Snake and that’s in poor taste anyhow. But seriously don’t touch the real smokes. Because we’ll know. We just will.

Well, you know what they didn’t know jack shit. Because if they did well then I wouldn’t have sat down to an authentic Venetian meal would I? I think they don’t know much as is. There are loads of people here, whole boatloads. They are still talking about the architecture and who did what to what buttress and when was a saint and they still put their tongues in each others’ mouths from time to time, and when they do that, they still look to the side to hope to see me looking so they can say, oh yeah what if this was the hole in the middle of your skull that I was lapping, lapping at like a sloth, shhlp shhhlp (they say with their terrible small yet thick pink tongues), trying to steal little pieces of to bring back to mine? And they still go out to eat.

And I found the place. You know it’s the real deal because the waiters weren’t too nice, which would mean that it was just for tourists only, and they weren’t too asshole, which would mean the same thing, a big puffy bravado so everyone can feel like they’ve had an “Italian experience” and make a scoreboard of restaurant service across the continents when they return to their hotel rooms and take their walking shoes off to let those stinky dogs rest and even put them up on the crinkling bedspread, without even washing them first. No, they just were, and more than that, there were honest white tablecloths, clean and starched. I hated the thought of getting wine on them so I stuck to beer. I know, I know.

There might have been a menu but I did not take it because I saw what the others were eating and I knew what I would be too, it’s what I dreamt of, risotto al nero di seppia, risotto with little tendrils and slices of cuttlefish and the whole thing black, filled up with the ink of the thing that is cut up. I’ve been having this recurrent nightmare, but not at night, just awake while eating in which I am utterly convinced that I am going to bite down on the fork, that I am to shatter my teeth even though this whole time I am saying be careful! that’s not food, that’s a fork and this time it smelled so delicious that I actually stopped worrying about what was going to happen when I put the laden fork in my mouth. When they brought it out to me - I had already finished a beer and made that face while pointing at the empty bottle to say that I will drink another beer, please - I swear even the steam was black, clinging to the corners, whole snarling wriths of it.

And my god was it good. And hot, and the inky grit was rough on my teeth, so when I caught my reflection in the almost fogged window I grinned and it looked like I had no teeth just a hole in my head. And I haven’t been drinking here - you know - and it kinda went to my head, because I felt like those old Japanese women, or not that they are old, but they are young in an old time. Ohaguro it was called, and this was a different standard of beauty and I was the prettiest here with these black choppers. And after that anxiety about the fork and my teeth, that constant grinding fear, it was a relief to get to pretend that I didn’t have anything that could touch metal. So I showed em big to everyone, bared my teeth and I think I was kind of dancing a bit in my chair, they were grinning back those missing grins at me, all of us toothless as babies or old women, and even the waiter laughed a bit even though he sees this every night of his cursed life.

This one face I kept looking toward because it wasn’t quite right, he was smiling too but it was as if someone had painted a perfect copy of his face on top of its face, so that it had feedback, a slight tremor, and he was sweating through his gray polo shirt a bit. And then I noticed that he really was shaking, and that it started at his shoulder and went down his arm to his hand, which was under the table in his lap, and he kept that mirror smile fixed on me as his hand was working away down there.

He was grunting a little bit.

And I just couldn’t believe it, I knew just what he was doing, there with that sick smile on his face, that sheen of pleasure, just going to town on himself here, and I said loudly, really sir this is a family restaurant! We are all trying to eat, every last one of us!

He didn’t seem to hear me but he shuddered, a rattle, and there was a clatter on the ground, and I looked and saw that it was his dinner knife and it was all red, and just then he brought his hand up to the table and in his hand was a large chunk of his thigh that he had saved off loose and ragged, the fat bright as days, and he dropped it right onto his risotto and, tears in his eyes, panting, he said

Man can’t be expected to live on ink alone!

I thought I was going to be sick and raised my hand to cover my mouth and my hand too was red. And I could not look down because I could feel the raw ache in my thigh and I did not see my knife on the table where it should have been, and none of us could, all of us dawning on what we had been doing, our black teeth clenched and we did not feel much like eating anymore and there is a movement to the door.

And I am not even a thing that has been thrown to the garbage heap and I am not even giving this thighbone to someone whose children are hungry even though they are already blackened with death. I am not throwing myself in the pot. We are just making a godawful mess, all of us, we don’t know how to cook, just to make slices and how.
And how is it that to write this means that we end in red again, that one more thing else has been cut, as if this city was a film but it is not. I cannot let it be. Or how that I cannot see the white tablecloth which was the first stark thing I’ve seen in so long other than the black ink, which was also very dark. Or that I can’t see either because, frankly, there is a blood everywhere.

The rain just started up again. How delicate it is. The canals shimmery in their little percussions. I’m eating a cigarette under what I think should be called an awning.

And really I do miss you like I would miss a piece of me that had been taken away and I’m not just saying that because I think there is actually a substantial piece of me that has now gone missing, although just like missing you I don’t want to look down and see because only then will it finally be gone.

Still, sorry about all the mess. I hope you can read what I wrote through it.

Love.

Snake

Utopia,

The natives get no rest.

On my raft a young girl holds a bird like it is no big deal to do so.

- Evan Calder Williams

David Muenzer - Gareth James Interview

David Muenzer: Did you want to be an artist when you were young? When did you first (or do you) consider yourself to be an artist?

Gareth James: Not really. I wanted to leave school to be an electrician when I was fifteen, to get an apprenticeship with my best mate, Lee Hastings, at the Tate and Lyle refinery in Silvertown, East London; earn money, live it up. But my art teacher at school, Paul Finn, went on a campaign of deception, telling me how awesome art school is, all the parties, the drugs, misbehaviour. That convinced me to stay on at school, and it was too late by the time I went to my first party at the Slade (a miserable affair, no dancing, no outrageousness). I never really used the name ‘artist’ while I was in the UK - it always seemed like a slightly delusional nomination to accept, like calling yourself a unicorn. A unicorn is just a horse that you thought you could have made a bit better, a bit more special by giving it a twirly horn but its real purpose of course is to make you feel more special for having the thought of it. I started using it (‘artist’ not ‘unicorn’) after living in New York for a while, but around the same time I started using a credit card, and for much the same reasons. It drops in and out of relevance according to the context.

DM: I was really blown away by your 2009 show at Elizabeth Dee. Looking at that work, I thought that the production of formal complexity by comparatively inexpensive (and possibly futile) materials let that complexity become poetic (as opposed to someone like Ansem Reyle, whose formal experiments harden and leave me feeling cold at best, angry at worst). Could you talk a little about that show, and particularly, how you came to work with bicycle inner tubes?

GJ: Thanks for the kind words... they made a nice pun too: blown-away (blown-up, deflated and inflated, flat tires and flatulence and so on)!

It’s an interesting problem once you attempt to find some non-subjective cause for a value judgement between two artistic practices: as often as not you discover that the grounds for making a value judgement - the assumption that they share important attributes (being art) that would allow us to say that one manifests those attributes better than another - almost entirely dissolves. In fact the ground is so unreliable that if we choose to keep the formal integrity of the idea of art intact, in retrospect we can normally see that we had already unconsciously chosen one of the following tactical forms of compensation: either we explicitly or implicitly dismiss the claims of one of the two to being art at all in order to preserve the coherence of the identity between the idea of art and the other; or we have to force an identity between an attribute that is NOT shared and the idea of art, but behave as though it was shared in order for our preferred candidate to win.

I totally agree with you by the way, I find his work to be death, without regard to the question of whether his work is better art or not. I think that it’s probably accurate to say that our work proposes extremely different ideas about art that are apparent in relation to the question of form you bring up: Reyle is touted as dealing with abstraction and formalism but these things are reductively objectified to become of the same order as Ikea decor or early Modern primitivism. They remain captured by a figurative economy and have very little to do with abstraction or formalism at that point it seems to me. I don’t know how he speaks about it himself. Operating on forms is very different from understanding formalization AS operation: what’s interesting to me is the passage of a chaotic sensibility, the becoming formal of something that was not: it’s a largely Badiouian description of the emergence of genuine novelty, substantial transformation, in this moving distinction between what, of the world, takes part in formalization and that which cannot be taken up. This relation is utterly immanent to questions of form, not statically disposed outside of it.

This is one way of summarizing the relation between one show and the next for me: a new possibility of formalization emerges with each show, and the subsequent show tries to do something with that new possibility, before it too hardens and becomes mere statistical form. There’s a very specific relation between that show in 2009 and the preceding show at Nagel’s in 2008 and the one I’m currently working on which we can go into later if you like, but to talk about the tubes themselves, they entered the work in the first place because I had stolen a bike without wheels of it’s own. Within the symbolic economy, the stolen bicycle’s access to the status of the readymade was blocked by it’s wheels having already been distributed.

I was calling attention to this by the proliferation of tubes, but I was even more interested in the way in which rubber is different from most elastic materials in the way in which it stores strain energy. For some time I’ve been interested in finding ways to decenter my subjective choices from the production of the work, but not in a systematized fashion and what I knew was that I wanted my materials to have a history that preceded my encounter with them (of course this is a banal truism at some level) that could resist being mystified upon entering my field of art, which has a tendency to represent itself as the historical origin of all that it encompasses. It’s a contemporary problem, in terms of