

FIGURE



conversation with **JENKIN VAN ZYL**
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Working Title, Photograph, 2013.

JENKIN VAN ZYL *in conversation with*
MARCO GALVAN

MG

Could you tell me about your background and how did you decide to study art?

JVZ

As a teenager I was making these gaudy four-by-five-metre paintings that depicted storms of Dionysian bodies—all highly ornamented with layers of plastic rhinestones and broken costume jewellery. But more than becoming a painter, I was obsessed with the Brothers Quay and wanted to be an animator, making grotesque stop-motion films that reanimated offal meat to vomit out gemstones.

Looking back now, I see a lot more of my current practice in the films I would make on my parents home camcorder when I was really young. I had an overactive imagination and would rope in family friend's kids to perform to camera; shot in the living room or roads outside



my house, the footage would resemble campy reality TV show auditions or soap operas. I never thought of that as art then, obviously.

As far as my memory stretches I had an inextinguishable desire to be an artist. I moved to London when I was eighteen in 2011 to do a foundation course in art, and simultaneously became immersed in the city's nightlife spaces. It was a bit later, while I was doing my BA at Slade, that I did my first show. Around this time I had become interested in, and made some work about Foley Sound the reproduction of sound effects that are added to films in post-production to enhance audio quality. I became interested in the process of transformation, almost like a catholic transubstantiation, that happened to everyday objects. Watermelons and cabbage, for example, became audio stand-ins for the squelch of a body in crisis, of skulls being split and trampled.

I had been hanging out at an artist's squat in Lewisham called DIG (some organisers of which now run the art studio organisation SET) and put on a show in the leaky basement of the warehouse in 2014, indulgently titling it "Liquid Gold: Act 3". At this time I had been collecting any free detritus that was being chucked out from film and theatre productions, and so for the show I built a labyrinth from these sets that resembled digitally glitched cruising spaces, with snippets of short films projected onto the backstage areas. The show ran for one night: we served cocktails distributed inside of hollowed watermelons and cabbages in reference to foley sound, and the opening quickly disintegrated into a chaotic party.

I had not properly figured out the role of film in my work yet, and it was only later in my



Door Whore (as part of Escape from Fort Bravo), Polystyrene, occasional performer, club stamp, 2016.

undergraduate degree show project at Slade, “Escape from Fort Bravo” (2016), where I established a lot of the methods I’m still working with today. We shot it illegally, guerilla-style, on semi-abandoned Spaghetti Western film sets in the south of Spain. These sets were built as an economical stand-in for the American desert for classics of the genre such as *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, but were now left crumbling and only used for occasional TV adverts or as a stop-off for the occasional tourist. Interestingly, the extras from the Leone-era productions had bought the land that the sets were built on, and had passed the studio on down generations. The titular film set, *Fort Bravo*, was one of the biggest studio lots and was a Western labyrinth kept under surveillance by a group of these ex-stuntmen and their guard dogs.

Three of us flew out there, staying in cabins that were on the outer rim of the sets. As this was my first location shoot we had no idea what to expect; all we had to navigate was a set of notes as prompts, costuming and printouts from Google Maps with circled pixels that I hoped were unattended sets. The desert became a video-game map to be cruised for treasure — each day we would select another character to play with, stuffing rucksacks with GoPros, jockstraps and fake blood to skittishly head out into the desert.

We unintentionally filmed in the style of *Blair Witch Project*, scraping together footage in adrenal snatches. The most successful of these would be at nighttime, when the majority of staff were asleep, and the only person manning the grounds was a singular security guard and his dog. The process would be one of ducking-and-diving; snatching footage until we got caught





and then hobbling back to the cabin. I remember being covered in fake blood and snagging my arm on a metal nail bent out from a foam prison set, and I still think about my films as a scab formed from this clotting of real and fake blood.

This process of breaking-and-entering established an immersive way to improvise narrative, but obviously the footage was chaotic. When we got back to the UK, I had to fill in the film with extra footage. Back at Slade, I remade low-fi versions of the sets out of cheap billboard prints that became another layer of simulacra, another re-performance of the masculinity of the American West that had been already re-performed in Spain by the Italian filmmakers. The living room of my flat became a constantly rotating film set; first I filled it with an inflatable pool of wet clay, next a horse's stable made from piles of hay, next a watermelon farm made from dirt, in a building sediment of mess that (rightfully) pissed off my flatmates.

All of these layers of repeated rebuilding and remaking resulted in a three-channel film that initiated a relationship between film, installation, and sculpture that I still work with now.

MG

Blurring and switching between performer and artist, you tend to work mainly with film, creating a very distinctive visual world. Where does your interest in filmmaking stem from and are there any specific directors that inspire you?

JVZ

Most good creative endeavours are fundamentally synergetic. I enjoy filmmaking as it is necessarily collaborative, and I love working with the unpredictability of performance and the magic of moviemaking.

I vividly remember watching *The Shining* when I was around seven or eight and it inevitably



seared itself into my psyche, where it's never left. The filmmakers that defined me as a pre-teen were Pedro Almodovar, John Waters, Jan Švankmajer, the entire filmography of Nicole Kidman, David Lynch... *Mulholland Drive* in particular was a really important film for me in terms of its disruptive and meta approaches to narrative. When it comes to art films, seeing Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch's installation at the Venice Biennial in 2013 really impacted me with its riotous exploration of the changing roles of community and technology and how it interfaces with identity, but I was mostly inspired by the use of multi-camera surround filming and group improvisation around a text.

I also love the films of Lynn Ramsay, Andrea Arnold, Gaspar Noé (mainly *Climax*, which rubbed off on my film *Surrender*, 2023), Julia Davis, James Bidgood... Mika Rottenberg is probably my favourite art filmmaker. I love how production lines in her films use an unsettling blend of the fantastical and the banal to explore labour politics and production, and the way she works with performers—often these women who advertise their unusual characteristics online for hire—is hyper fascinating to me.

MG

In your films, you sometimes incorporate sculptural pieces. Themes of extreme desire and violence, pleasure and pain seem to translate perfectly into your two inflatable sculptures *Loon* (2019) and *Vore* (2022), the latter exhibited at Rose Easton in London last year. The two works recall an idea of precariousness—as the action of inflating could be unpredictably followed by bursting—also engaging the viewer in a profound exploration of latex and its long sexual and subcultural history. Could you talk about how inflatables are incorporated in your practice?

JVZ

So the worlds established in my filmmaking



Looners, Installation View, 2019.
Hayward gallery, London, UK.

enable these sculptural escapees, which are often integrated back into the installations the films are screened within. The series of inflatable sculptures you mention came out of my attraction to phenomena that teeter between hellscape and paradise, and originate from the latex characters in my film *Looners* (2019). These sculptures reference inflation fetish internet subcultures, whilst also having the cartoon slickness of a child's toy, and so far have been installed inside two-way mirror perspex cubes.

Looners (2019) was shot by breaking into a partially-active film studio in the Atlas Mountains and an abandoned Western theme park in Japan, collapsing the geographies between them. These sets, in an even more extreme fashion than the spaghetti western sets from *Escape from Fort Bravo* (2016), had been continuously mutated to suit a series of productions. This is how fortresses, catapults and temples—all from awkwardly conflicting civilisations—jut out from beneath the desert.

The film follows a gang of Caretakers that squat the ruins of a Fortress, a set within the studio complex which was recycled for various productions including *Game of Thrones* and then left to rot. In the film, I imagined it to be hosting battlefields in which rituals loop, day after day without end, with latex inflatables built and burst by the Caretakers. I was thinking about how much of our society is built off of dopamine-driven feedback loops, and the film depicts the character's compulsion towards “Love-as-Violence” and “Violence-as-Love”.

I was looking to rethink some of the violent legacies of Hollywood films that had been produced at these sets, and to seize on the apocalyptic breakdowns in civilization as



Loon, 2-way mirror, mild steel, LED lights, latex, ladder, lipstick, PVC tubing, breath, 214 × 200 × 142 cm, 2019.

opportunities to pursue new systems of meaning, as after all apocalypse literally means to uncover or reveal. The hope here was to counteract the failure of global politics with a wilfully anti-patriarchal and communal celebration of decay, chaos, and collapse.

The inflatable bird in *Loon* (2019) appears as an antihero of sorts. In the sculpture it has been tangled into a balletic pose inside of its cube, reflected back to itself in an infinite hall of mirrors covered in lipstick, the oils of which corrode latex. For *Vore* (2022), the second sculpture in this series, I was looking at the niche (and physically impossible) fetish of vorarephilia, which is characterised by the erotic desire to be entirely consumed by, or to personally consume, another person or creature. *Vore* (2022) depicts a humanoid figure that is in the process of devouring and being devoured by a cockroach beast in an headless ouroboros. I was looking to materialise within a sculpture internet-based fantasies, ones that are distinguished by their impossibility, and also to think about how fetishes can not only evoke repressed desires but also reveal latent societal tensions. Here, rather than pursuing the idea of artwork as monument, as something that gets erected and never collapses, this series is drawn to ideas of impotence and precarity.

MG

Desire and oblivion, where does your interest in juxtaposing the dualism between passion and pain come from?

JVZ

I'm generally keen to complicate binary oppositions; front and back stage, male and female, self and other, style and content, time and space. My close friend Jordan Tannahill wrote a text that accompanied the show of *Vore* (2022) that further explored this idea of insatiable



Vore, Two-way mirror, mild steel, LED lights, latex, windowlens, PVC tubing, breath, 214 × 200 × 142 cm, 2022. Photograph: Theo Christelis. 17

desire, or desire that leads oneself to oblivion. Although often there are disturbing shades to my work, I do try to always reinstate pleasure and bodily excess within the celebratory, bacchanalian realm.

MG

You mentioned *Looners* (2019), which was commissioned by the Hayward Gallery for the “Kiss My Genders” exhibition in 2019. The film echoes a queer reimagining of old and abandoned movie sets, with elements of horror, sci-fi and gore that all together contribute in evoking a strong sense of tension...

JVZ

I am drawn to the filmic genres of horror and sci-fi because they're often distorted mirrors to the anxieties of a society that have produced them. I am generally curious about how the monstrous things that emerge from any given time reflect the fears and anxieties of that culture and their audiences. Therefore, I like to use horror to reflect some of the politics that we might be facing now. Sometimes, the narratives we create about our own identities can be as crucial as what happened.

I am extremely pro bodily autonomy, and I also try to use horror, particularly body horror, as a way to have fun with things that might hurt us. I think that at its best this kind of horror can also de-solidify and redistribute ideas of the self, allowing an emancipatory pleasure in its ability to reinvent the body.

There is also obviously a long connection between horror and the othering that happens to the queer body. Monsters are creatures that challenge biological, physical, social and even moral rules. This attitude of divergence ultimately makes them dangerous to our society. In a backdrop of an increased moral panic on queer sexuality, on trans people's right to basic human dignity, I try to make spaces in which deviating bodies are centred and might not only live but survive and



Portrait of the artist by Alien, 2022.

even flourish.

MG

The use of masks and prosthetics is a common thread in your films. What prompts you to use them?

JVZ

I've been drawn to the emancipating potentials of disguise and costuming since before I could talk. Typically for a spooky incipient faggot, my childhood revolved around finding excuses to get into fancy dress: secretively fashioning elaborate wigs out of towels, smearing my face white with sudocrem and talcum powder, and coupling it with clip on earrings foraged out of my mums wardrobe. Any occasion: birthday parties, mufti days at school, Christmas... would be redirected as an opportunity to transform into increasingly elaborate monsters.

I arrive at my obsession with transformation from an experience of the world that holds the construction of identity as both liberator and defence. I also can trace my interest in multiple identities to coming of age in the lawless age of chatrooms, with a sense of self that was largely constructed on these early versions of the internet.

The masks we use on set act enable improvisation, anonymising performers into a new species of fantastical creatures. I think this is partially in response to a world which hellishly posits individual identity as the centre of the universe. I am trying to make characters that challenge that with their multiplicity, deviance and slipperiness. These characters approach gender in a way that feels both playful and terrifying, and the masks free the idea of selfhood while also troubling it.

I am also interested in costuming as a talismanic and ritualistic thing. This is most evident in my repeated use of latex, but I try to use clothing as magical in other ways too. In my



Machines of Love, Installation view, 2020-2021.
Glasgow International, UK.

recent film *Surrender* (2023) the collapsed contestants are treated by marathon staff in the mysterious power of restorative Cryosuits: silver sleeping bag suits that were customised for the film by a company who fabricate clothing for extreme weather expeditions and survivalist preppers. These Cryosuits initiate a process of purification and rejuvenation, and also exist as a magical octagram intended as a compass back to the hotel in one of the final images of the film.

MG

You always seem to combine playfulness and mischievousness, like in the immersive installation *Machines of Love* (2020/1) which comprises both sculpture and video built out of the remnants of decommissioned airplanes. Could you expand about this work?

JVZ

Previously the screening spaces for my films have taken the shape of a wreckage of reupholstered car seats with masks pulled taut over the headrests, a hospital-themed hotel room, and an armoury of ridiculous weapons. *Machines of Love* (2020/1), which was shown simultaneously in different installations between Glasgow International at Tramway and my degree show at the Royal Academy, was both partially filmed with and screened inside of the fuselage of Boeing 747s.

My disruptive logic here was to take this phallic symbol of the aircraft—one of travel, emissions and acceleration—and to bury it underground in order to make the ambitions of tech progress infertile. My hope was to reclaim this symbol from the world, this vehicle that is so powerful and so dominant, and to rehouse it in my own context; to take its powerful equipment and bury it beneath the ground, ready to be filled with new and rotten fantasies.

After shooting had wrapped, and because



Six Scintillating Sinners (In Vitro), Cake, fridge, PVC piping, padlock, bingo balls, cake mix, jerry can, mirrored staging, torch, dice, fake blood, vial, cloakroom ticket, 2020-2021.

of the pandemic, many of these aeroplanes had been decommissioned and skinned, and so it was a brief moment where it was much cheaper to source the fuselage. The two different shows ended up both being delayed to the same week, and so was made as two distinct versions, one with a piping system of interconnected toilets that hosted figurines of the characters, and one a set of refrigerated cakes.

Although *Machines of Love* was all shot by 2020, key issues it was concerned with—of grounded travel, the permeability of the body, isolation and crisis—were all being reconsidered on a daily basis because of the pandemic. Some of the projects themes were being mirrored in bizarre ways. Airlines began flying large numbers of empty or near-empty flights for the sole purpose of protecting their slots on prime sky routes, while Qantas Airlines started running “flights to nowhere”—not bound for an international or even regional destination; instead, the flight would end exactly where it started. Or, more absurdly, Singapore Airlines offered a “suite of experiences” that would give customers the chance to tour airplanes, eat airline food, and meet with pilots while actual travel was still stalled.

For the on-location filming in Iceland we filmed at a rotting Viking film set, imagined in the film to be built above this bunker of buried airplanes. This set had been built for a film that never got made and so had been deserted. I was precisely drawn to this set’s dormancy; a wasted space that had not yet been activated, and so felt pregnant with potential. The film follows a set of six ghouls that grow cakes into each other’s stomachs, before being cast out into the barren and endless landscape surrounding the bunker.



Machines of Love, Installation view, 2020/1.
Glasgow International, UK.



MG

For an installation related to this film, *Cabin Pressure* (2020), you also showed a drawing. Do you usually draw to prepare your films?

JVZ

I'll draft in the construction process of costume, set and prop-making, but the drawings you mention, like my sculptural work, tends to be collaged out of the filmmaking as a re-articulation of the films, rather than preparatory thing. The drawings made during *Machines of Love* (2020/1) mostly existed as in-flight safety manuals, using the graphic design layouts of pamphlets I found inside the airplane seats I had salvaged.

A more recent drawing, *Limitless Growth (Works Where it Hurts)* (2023), is a twisted advertisement of sorts, drawn from the world of my recent film project *Surrender* (2023). Here a bulked-up avatar of a humanoid rat is depicted grinning in an advertisement for the energy drink from the film, in a sealed image that could have been pulled off of the ballroom's walls.

MG

Your show "Surrender" (2023) at Edel Assanti in London, sees eight anthropomorphic rats participate in a series of odd, gruelling dances set in between a grimy love hotel and an industrial warehouse. The viewer enters through the gaping jaws of an enormous inflatable rat sculpture, whose fleshy innards create a sculptural walkway leading to a love hotel. Where does the inspiration for the settings in this film come from?

JVZ

There were a few primary areas of research for the project, but the key one was 20th century American dance marathons. These started as dance contests in the 1920s and developed into gruelling entertainment events during the Great Depression in the 1930s, where couples would dance, almost non-stop, for hundreds of hours. I was drawn to these marathons as proto-reality TV; with storylines manipulated by the marathon's producers, they combined suffering and



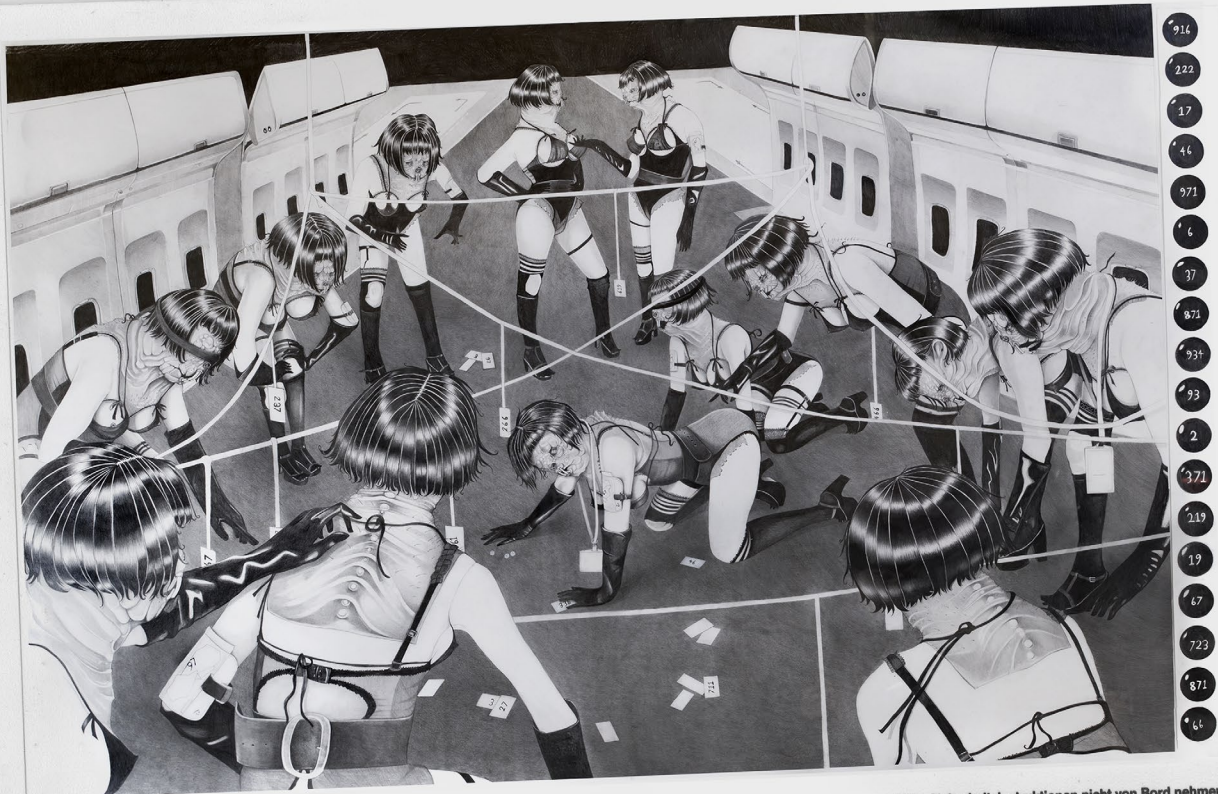


entertainment in a way that foreshadowed our contemporary attention economy. These dance marathons, in a time of increasing socio-political instability and depression, reconfigured the space of leisure as a place of threat and competition, but also reiterated it as a place where competitors could make claims for autonomy and seek victory.

In *Surrender* (2023) we follow a character Grace, played by my best friend Alex Margo Arden, as she checks into a marathon hosted at the P.E.E.P. hotel. Her stay over seven days in the hotel takes her through a series of increasingly bizarre rounds of a competition alongside other rat couples that have no clear winner, so she's kept in this purgatorial propulsion.

As well as referencing the long-form marathons, I was researching Japanese short-stay love hotels, and was particular interested by the ones that were the most garish that were built before the Businesses Affecting Public Morals Regulation Act legislated against this, with beds fashioned within castles, carousels or UFOs and lit with elaborate neon lighting.

The formal structure of the film is really important; GRACE constantly checks into the P.E.E.P. hotel but never checks out, and although the film takes place over seven consecutive days, the days reset and loops back into itself. This is partly a nod to the peculiar gallery mode of looping cinema, and my empathy for the characters are always infinitely looping and re-performing in the screenings of art films. It is also in response to the base expectation that Western narratives should take the form of progress or uplift, and that characters should embark upon a linear journey. I am more interested in approaching narrative structures from the point of view of cycles, and to encourage a conception of time that



Bitte Sicherheitsinstruktionen nicht von Bord nehmen
Please do not remove this card from the aircraft

is always oriented towards the loop. *Surrender* (2023), though elusive in its chronology, is referential to several times from and locations in the human world. This is my attempt to set up imaginary lived environments which collapse the past and the modern. It is in some way an attempt to think about how much of the world we live in are remnants of the worlds that have been lost.

Finally, I was looking at the lore of the cryptid rat king. This is where a pit of rats wrap their tails to one another to stay warm in a grasping reflex during the cold. While confined to this small burrow, these tails can become matted together through the clotting of their frozen secretions. Once glued, any wriggling ties a tighter pact until the jumbled rat king is attached by a thick, floating knot in a collective organism.

This idea exists in the film choreographically, but also in the installation with the large pneumatic tube system that knots throughout the space and leads to a trophy room with pyramids of Limitless Growth energy drinks. These tube systems are now mostly defunct but were used to send cylindrical canisters throughout buildings like department stores, cash carry systems, or in hospitals. I became primarily drawn to their contemporary use in the love hotels, where interactions with staff are minimised as much as possible. Here they are used both as a means to settle bills, but also to enable the delivery of basic hotel amenities such as keys, dildos and toothbrushes.

The Lamson pneumatic tube system I reconfigured in *Surrender* (2023) was the last operating system of its kind in the UK. It was maintained at the department store Jacksons in Reading by its' archivist Robin Adcroft until the store closed in 2014 when he dismantled it and





stored it in his shed. Robin passed away recently and I got the system from his husband when he listed it on an obscure messaging board about pneumatics. In the film, the system is primarily used as a messaging device and carrier for the safety instructions of tournaments, but in the installation also emblematic of the project's wider interest in the cryptid of the rat king. I wanted the corridor to the screening room to feel like the audience had been shrunk into passages hidden behind the hotel's walls, with its knotted, coiled tubing.

MG

The characters in your movies recurrently perform and enact rituals and ceremonies, like the ones in *Surrender* (2023). Would you say they are paradigmatic figures that stretch and explore the limits of the body?

JVZ

I am fascinated by fringe and subcultural communities, places where we can begin to trace an alternate way of living. I am drawn to the vital and complex world building that occurs within these spaces, and how the body can exist inside of them. My work often makes reference to different forms of nightlife, and the joy, ritual and tensions that erupt from it, but also to internet chatrooms, fandom and reenactment societies.

A specific example for *Looners* (2019) was attending historical reenactments and events such as Military Odyssey, which happens every August in Kent. Military Odyssey is an enormous multi-period battle reenactment, where you can see 3000 years of history compacted and reenacted simultaneously, with Medieval jousting occurring next to displays of The Gulf War. I would say that in *Looners* (2019) this exploration of the limitations of the body was quite literal, as I was dealing with the elasticity of the body being expanded to the brink of explosion.

For *Surrender* (2023), the idea of the body's



Welcome to the Palace of Wasted Footsteps (as part of *Surrender*, 2023),
Inflatable, bouncy castle blower, bunting, 2023.



Everybody Loves a Winner (one-half-of-GRACE) (as part of *Surrender*, 2023),
Resin, Citadel paint, ribbon, Lamson pneumatic tube canister, LED
light, rosetes, paper, perspex cylinder, stickers, Limitless Growth
energy drinks, pneumatic tube, 2023.

endurance, referencing the dance marathons, becomes the driving force for the film. The hotel's ballroom, and by proxy the notion of the dance-floor, is the beating heart of the film, and in the film the dance floor variously a cell, a nightclub, the belly of a whale, a courtroom, a labyrinth, a treadmill.

I inevitably think that this film, and its exploration of the body, was subconsciously motivated by the redefining of intimacy during the Covid lockdowns. In the sixteen months before clubs could reopen in the UK (at the stroke of midnight on July 19 2021...) it had become increasingly clear to me that the 'real world' was untenable. And then anyway, if I had lost the belief that this world could change for the better, than what? Even pre-covid, London's queer nightlife was in a decline, and by 2017, half of London's gay bars had closed.

I have an addiction to fantasy, and when I used to go out, more clubs were a votive for dreaming; if the world were crumbling, you could count on it to be there, weekend after weekend. I would essentially seek to go out out because I like the space of being in a state of oblivion without feeling alone: in a good night out it is not about individualism or atomisation, it is a collective experience of reaching beyond yourself and creating something — a deluge of sensation spun amongst other fantasists. Inevitably, the outside world, with its attendant issues, provides the scaffolding for the queer dance floor. But I ultimately think clubbing at its best can be its own form of world building, with new logics, negotiations and also disappointments.

I was interested in thinking about how mutable the dance floor can be, how it is the site for the negotiation between self and other and of



Rat King (as part of *Surrender*, 2023), Lamson pneumatic tube system, recycled film set, 2023.

the stretching of stamina. In *Surrender* (2023) this is explored through repeated states of collapse followed by recovery, and the films the tempo builds into this almost hallucinogenic and sleep-deprived mania.

MG

Do your films operate a sort of observational critique of humans' societal expectations?

JVZ

Surrender (2023) is driven by the character's pursuit of escapism, which in the film is constantly placed in friction with moments of failure. In the ballroom of *Surrender* (2023), they are also under the watch of two forms of authority: the hotel's nurses who advise them to rest and the referee's who ensure they keep moving. The dancers are ultimately shown in relation to structures of control and power too.

It reflects on our contemporary moment of doom, with all these overlapping crises. I think that art is an important means to create pockets of progress and imagination within the larger political landscape of decay, deadlock and the long state of emergency. I do believe that imagining is a political act: through the process of imagining new worlds, you draw attention to the contingency of your own and to the fact that the systems we live in are equally just something we imagine. We could just as well imagine them differently.



Surrender, Installation view, 2023.
Edel Assanti Gallery, London, UK.



Surrender, Installation view, 2023.
Edel Assanti Gallery, London, UK.

Jenkin Van Zyl, Figure Figure 2023
Courtesy of the artist

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