Cy Gavin *Indian John* 2017

The art of confusing men

They have been censored in Bermuda and they have upset traditional artists. Cy Gavin, Gina Beavers and Austin Lee are three of the forty artists to exhibit their distinctive art at Carl Kostyál this summer.

Text by Justina Hüll

Never before has summer appeared as dark as at Carl Kostyál gallery. There will be no sunshine nor blooming flowers this year. Instead the curators Johan Deurell and Oscar Carlson have selected artists that question our sense of reality. Through grotesque beauty and bold statements the artists explore how mediated realities have truly affected art. New York based artists Gina Beavers, Cy Gavin and Austin Lee talk about art inspired by Instagram, fake news and digital technology.

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Cy Gavin *Horseshoe Bay* 2016

Cy Gavin *Portrait of my father* 2015

Cy Gavin on fake news

Tell us about your work exhibited at Carl Kostyál gallery.

– A lot of my work has come out of investigating my family's relationship to the places they're from. My dad was from Bermuda and my mum from Puerto Rico, and this painting was born from a trip to Bermuda from two years ago. I was thinking about getting a citizenship there, which meant that I would have to go there and physically go through old archives to find my relatives. I didn't get further than my great grandmother, that I actually found by sheer coincidence.

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You went to Bermuda many times before in order to get closer to your heritage. I have read that you once lived and worked on a beach. Was that why you went there this time as well?

– No I went there for vacation to see my friends. But of course they all have jobs and were busy during the days, so I started working this project to piece together the history of my family. I would go around the Island on a small motorcycle with a GoPro attached to my helmet. Everyday I'd go past this cemetery where it later turned out she was actually buried. It's almost impossible to find this kind of information in Bermuda. Her first name isn't even in the records, it just says "female coloured" since a person of colour didn't have their own identity at this time.

How is this reflected in your art?

– My art is completely influenced by this. I have worked with these themes before, but this particular time was very special for me since it was the first time I got to see her surname and discovered that it actually was Portuguese. That was very strange to me since the Portuguese were the original occupants of Bermuda, and I had always assumed that I came from another social class because of my father being coloured.

When you found out that your ancestors were both slaves and colonizers did this realisation somehow change your perspective?

– Not really, my work has always been more about asking the question rather than finding the answer. I'm not a historian, for me it's all about asking questions about our age. That's why I'm fascinated by how information is distributed at places like Bermuda where you deliberately create a whole new story and withhold historical information. And since information is dangerous to certain people that of course makes me want it.

Wasn't it frustrating for you not having access to information that we often take for granted?

– It was more of an awakening. It reminded me of that one can't take anything for granted and that you have to question the information you receive. When you go to places that has gone this far to change their history you realize that you have to check the information you get. They have deliberately removed all the

darkness from their history; their historical society doesn't even have any registers or mentions of the slavery at all.

A while ago I was asked to do an exhibition in one of the only galleries they have in Bermuda. It was an incredibly strange experience. The art is hung in the city hall and you can sort of feel that someone is watching you. A reporter contacted me from their daily newspaper *The Royal Gazette* and wanted to do an interview, so we did one via email because I felt that I had to make absolutely sure that all of my answers were waterproof. When the article was published, everything regarding Bermuda's history had been removed.

You have previously described your art as a time capsule, which made me think of the book the Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes which questions our ability to properly perceive history since humans are unable to remember and store information accurately.

– That's exactly how I work. I want to question our ability to remember and our own credibility. Written stories versus told ones. Yes I investigate history, but I don't want to do it as a historian. Art also doesn't have the same responsibility to be documentary as it had before, it's okay for art to be free now. Furthermore we now also have Photoshop and fake news that does anything but documenting reality.

Have you always known you wanted to explore this through art?

– I never expected to work as an artist, but I've always painted. I grew up in a religious family in Pennsylvania and when you grow up like that you have to do something that's free.

Art can be seen as a provocation by the ones who struggle with the freedom of thought.

– Exactly, art is dangerous since it has the power to question power structures. These kind of secluded societies can't handle that.

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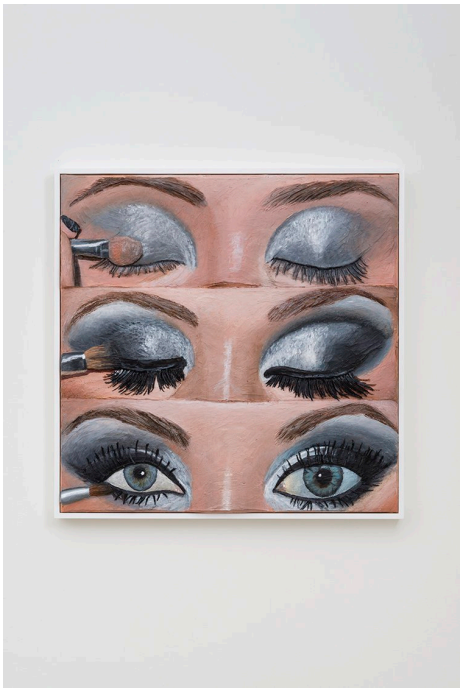

Gina Beavers *Silver eye* 2015

Gina Beavers *Burger eye* 2015

Gina Beavers *Ariel inspired* 2015

Gina Beavers 2015

Hippie chich, nude, pale pink, butter linha matte

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Gina Beavers on lipstick feminism and Instagram

Tell us about your work in the exhibition.

– I'm exhibiting a piece that's based on a makeup tutorial by Paul Lips. It's very much pop art at the same time as it looks a bit like a cartoon. It's inspired by a makeup genre that's created by self taught amateurs that you can find on the internet. I find the play between cartoon and high relief pop art very interesting. It's real at the same time as its completely unrealistic.

You often work with recreating imagery found on Instagram. Why is that?

– What's interesting about Instagram is that it's a body on it's own, created by peoples ideas. It might seem dishonest to take other peoples images, but to me it feels more like true documenting. Here we have this already made thing and I find that there's more truth in recreating that rather than coming up with what I think and feel about things on my own.

It's odd how you see Instagram as something real when social media is often criticized for being fake.

– Yes that's interesting. Social media is dishonest in the sense that you're always blowing yourself up and editing the reality. I'm fascinated by what makes people feel like they have to put a filter on their lives.

I recently spoke to a friend who retouches images. He pointed out that if you were to see one of these portraits in real life the faces would appear all flat since the elements that make the models human have been removed.

– Because they've removed all the lines right? Maybe I'm doing the opposite with my art, I take back what others are trying to wash away, zits and such. I put people in a place where they look at something beautiful and disgusting at the same time.

What's it like working with makeup which in a sense covers what's real?

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– I've thought about this very much because I have many friends that are in to makeup. For me it's all about femininity and feminism, I really don't want to judge anybody for taking an interest in makeup. I recently read a very cool interview with the director Jill Solloway that said that women spend so much time thinking about how they are seen that it interferes with their being. I think that women struggle with being a whole person that doesn't always has to care about everything.

Do you ever feel that people expect you to depict makeup because you're a woman?

– I feel that more men were interested in my art when I made pictures of food. When I started making my makeup series it felt like I was loosing men's interest. I think that many men look at my paintings and feel that it's female coded. I don't really know what to do with that, this is just a body of work that I happened to come across. I could easily do something about car engines tomorrow. It's possible that it gets extra weird since my name literally is a euphemism for "vagina, vagina". I couldn't get away from my femininity even if I tried.

Do you think Swedish men will react differently to your art since the focus on equality and gender issues is stronger here than in America?

– I really hope so. When I've shown in Europe the issues people might have with my art hasn't felt like such a big deal. I mean, we hears about your maternity leave in the States and envy how much more equal it really is over here. It's impossible to get that in America.

When you look at makeup tutorials you work with mainstream perception of beauty. What's that like?

– It's funny because when I create an eye or a lip it always starts with me thinking that it's going to be elegant. But it always ends up looking surreal and ghostlike. The more I try to recreate, the more it differs from the concept of beauty.

Why do you think that is?

– It's like with HIT animation, you can make things seem human until they actually start looking human. It's like the more human they become, the creepier it gets. When you're in the same room as a person you can feel their depth, but you

can't do that with something that's trying to recreate a human being. I think that's what it's all about.

Austin Lee on bad animations

Your work in this exhibition is called 'Goodbye'. What are you saying goodbye to?

– I just finished a show in Japan, so many of my ideas are a continuation of the ideas that I started working on over there. I kind of always work, and it makes sense for me to work with the ideas that have come up because of an exhibition. I actually usually I think the curators work is more interesting because I like to see what happens when they connect different art pieces together.

Has this exhibition turned out as you expected it to?

– There's a lot of work that I'm pretty exited about. I know many of the artists from before, like Brian Belott, I'm really looking forward to seeing his work

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in real life. And I'm a huge Jana Euler fan so it's very exiting for me to be exhibiting together with her.

Your artistic process differs quite a bit from traditional art in the sense that you often start off with Photoshop and paint with an iPad. How come you started working with that technique?

– I was lucky to get a computer rather early as a child. My friend and I started messing around with it and explored what it could do, so the computer was a part of my creative expression. The more I began to take an interest in art, the more it became a natural extension of that. It doesn't feel like it's a big of a deal any longer to use technology in your art, most artists I know integrate it in one way or another. For me personally it's been cool to be a part of the transition of when technology has gone from being rather unusual to being common.

You describe yourself as a computer nerd that happens to do art. What is it like for you when you exhibit in traditional settings?

– It's a generation thing. Some people use the digital culture and some don't. For me it's about questioning in what sense it's useful, I want to use technology and make the experience human. I want to take human forms in to the digital esthetics. I'm interested in how technology could be a tool, especially in 3D modeling and with animated cartoons where they have become a part of our visual culture.

Speaking about our generation, I recently had a conversation with an artist who was worried we are overly stimulated by visual impressions because of social media.

– That's a concern of course, but I think that my role as an artist is to question technology. We can perhaps change its role and somewhat control it, but we can't stop it. There's no turning back.

I always find it funny to look at old episodes of *Star Trek* because now we have all of their future gadgets. I'm not entirely optimistic to social media, but I think that we can learn to adapt since everything is evolving so fast nowadays. You barely have the time to learn the old stuff before something new has already turned up.

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It's funny how you get used to things. I often reflect in my art about when HD TV first arrived. Now it's completely normal, but when I saw it for the first time I remember how struck I was by the clarity. It completely changed the way I looked at pictures.

That is interesting. Gina Beavers just mentioned how we integrate with technology and how it scares us when something is too similar to a human being.

– That's the thing. You know when something is super close to reality, but it's not 100 percent? To me it's about the small means of art that makes us perceive the whole artwork in an entirely different way. It can change just depending of the material one uses. It's like *Star Wars*, when they made the old movies with puppets and special effects. The new movies don't feel as real anymore even though the effects are better. It's like the brain looks past the created because they've has removed all of the subtle human elements. The greatness lies within not trying, I always feel like art gets the most close to humanity when it verges on hyperrealism but doesn't fully reach it.

My friend claims that there are no good movies being made anymore because computers make them look too real.

– Yes, I think that's where I feel like I don't fully understand it all yet. How the technology relates to my art or how it relates to us as humans. I'm curious about that, so that's why I'm exploring that with my art.

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