

ISSUE 62

OCTOBER 2012

Art Review:

Contains 7% FRANCES STARK; 4% LUCAS SAMARAS;
35% PANTONE WARM RED; 7% BJARNE MELGAARD; 2 GREAT MINDS

Interview

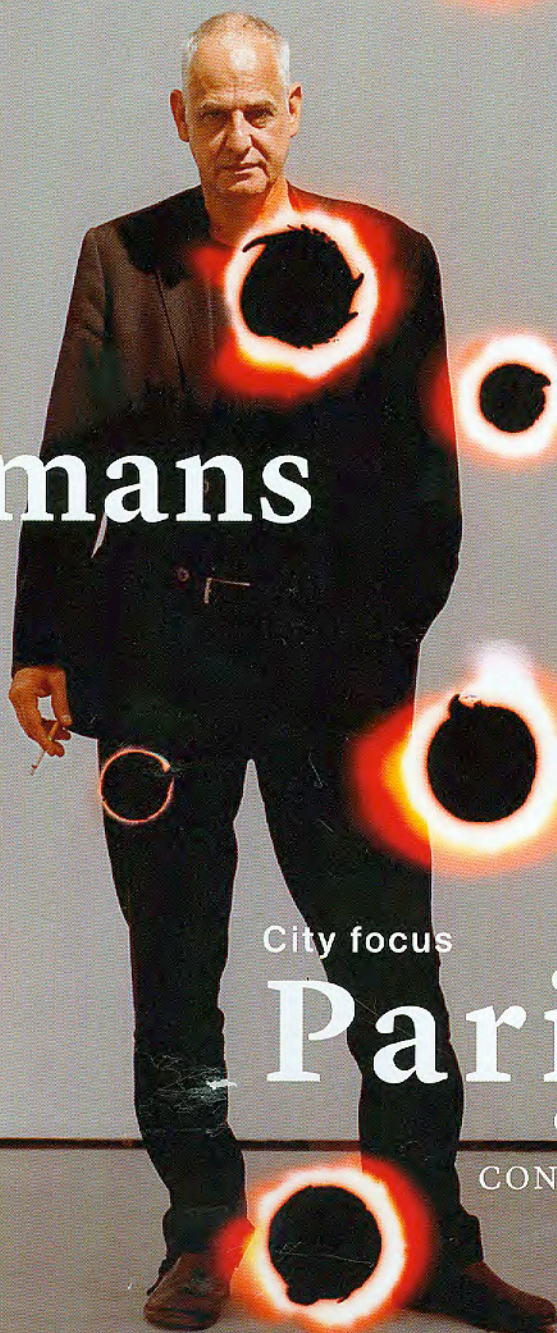
Luc Tuymans

"I DON'T LIKE THE TYPE OF
ART THAT STANDS IN A
CORNER AND THEN ONCE
IN A WHILE SAYS
SOMETHING INTELLIGENT"

City focus

Paris

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Art Review:



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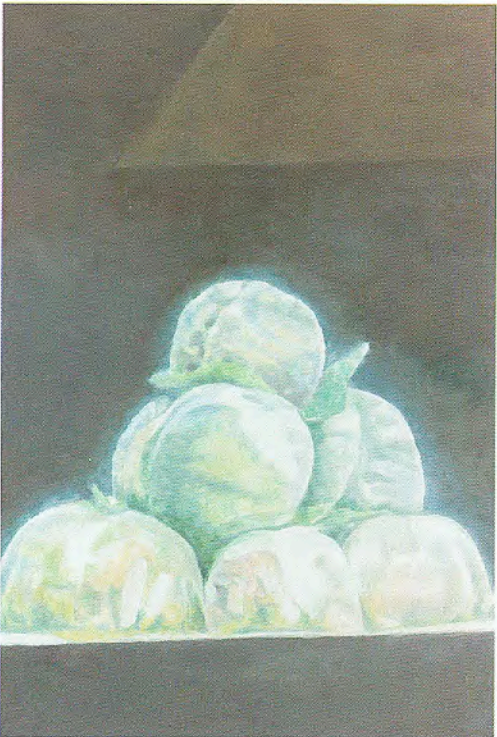
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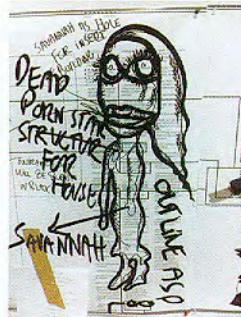
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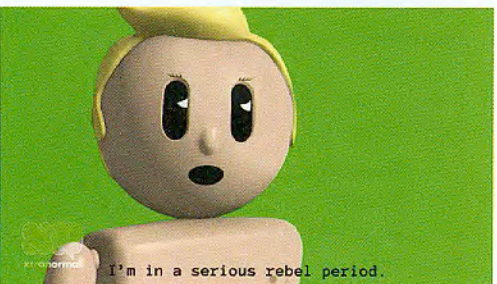
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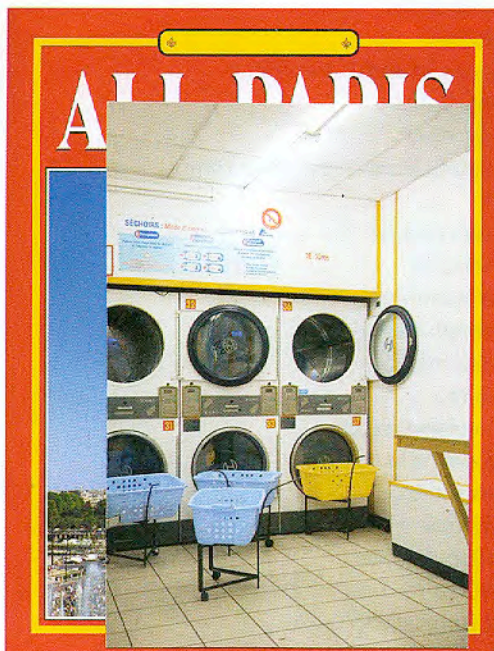
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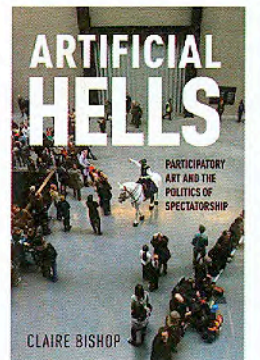
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**BJARNE MELGAARD:
A HOUSE TO DIE IN**
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ITALIAN MALES, AN ARRAY
OF HETEROGENEOUS
FRAGMENTS

Bjarne Melgaard

Has the vulgarly provocative Norwegian artist been infected by good taste?

By David Everitt Howe

Bjarne Melgaard and I have something in common: we both love dick. In fact, writing on Melgaard is a very convenient excuse to write about my favourite male member as well as one of my favourite pastimes, gay sex; the artist is perhaps the *enfant terrible* purveyor of both. Since his bravura institutional outing in 1997 at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam,

interracial gay sex – ‘hate fucking’, ‘gay terrorism’, ‘white Daddy dick’, ‘big fat black dick’, ‘straight cock’, and other delightful variations on the theme, layered and scrawled on paintings, old beds, couches spilling over with posters, and other messy piles of carefully amalgamated bric-a-brac.

Melgaard's schizophrenic accumulations of vulgar ephemera might evoke the installations of Thomas Hirschhorn – that is, if Hirschhorn's papery images of war-ravaged, blown-apart bodies and *Hellraiser*-like mannequins were replaced by cum-dripping penises and self-fisting platypuses; that is, if Hirschhorn were in fact not a heterosexual Swiss man but a sexy, hairy, Australian-born Norwegian gay guy hell-bent, in the abject tradition of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, on figuratively shitting all over mainstream culture. In this instance, though, it's mainstream gay culture, or rather the *mainstreaming* of gay culture, that draws Melgaard's ire.

In the wake of recent victories to legalise gay marriage in the US and the continued normalisation of gay men and women in the media, the military and other sectors of everyday life, Melgaard has sought, in the most excessive way possible, to turn back the clock. Bluntly evoking a time when homosexuality was viewed as a deviant, frightening infection, Melgaard espouses a militant gayness fatalistically marked by an AIDS-induced death drive – a self-

Melgaard's forte has been crass, crudely drawn, graffiti-like images of, and writings about, bareback and

destructive, sexual *jouissance* that indulges in the ‘extraordinary narcissistic enjoyment’, as Jacques Lacan would say, of aggressive sex, violence and consumerism.

Take Melgaard's 2010 exhibition at Greene Naftali Gallery in New York, *The Synthetic Slut: A Novel*: walls and floors covered with fictional pornographic writing about a hypersexual gay NY lifestyle – Grindr, sex parties and all. Various sized and coloured vinyl lettering reading ‘Feel cool. Wanna fuck’, and ‘Who doesn't want to fuck their brother?’ alongside other explicit sexual musings. Above the text, and partially obscuring it, hung a large group of paintings featuring the recurring figure of the platypus and other human-animal hybrids. In one untitled work from 2010, a gruesome, monsterlike figure in thick black outline, jerking off with a stretched-out anus over a faded image of an antique couch and puppies, is surrounded by scratchy black text declaiming, among other things, ‘Come on nigger whore, just admit we want each other’ and ‘Bug chaser’. Another painting features the same figure fucking another, and on yet another canvas he's lying on his stomach, spread-eagled, over >



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the White House.

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of Butt me
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the



WHITE PRIDE WHORE 96



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above:
BJARNE MELGAARD AND
RICHARD LAU, *Untitled*, 2012,
oil on canvas, 178 x 279 x 5 cm.
Photo: Jason Mandella, New York.
Courtesy the artist

facing page, from top:
BJARNE MELGAARD, *The
Synthetic Slut: A Novel*, 2010
(installation view). Courtesy the
artist and Greene Naftali Gallery,
New York. BJARNE MELGAARD
AND JOEL SALADINO, *Untitled*,
2012, oil on canvas, 178 x 279 x 5
cm. Photo: Jason Mandella, New
York. Courtesy the artist

preceding pages:
BJARNE MELGAARD, *The
Synthetic Slut: A Novel*, 2010
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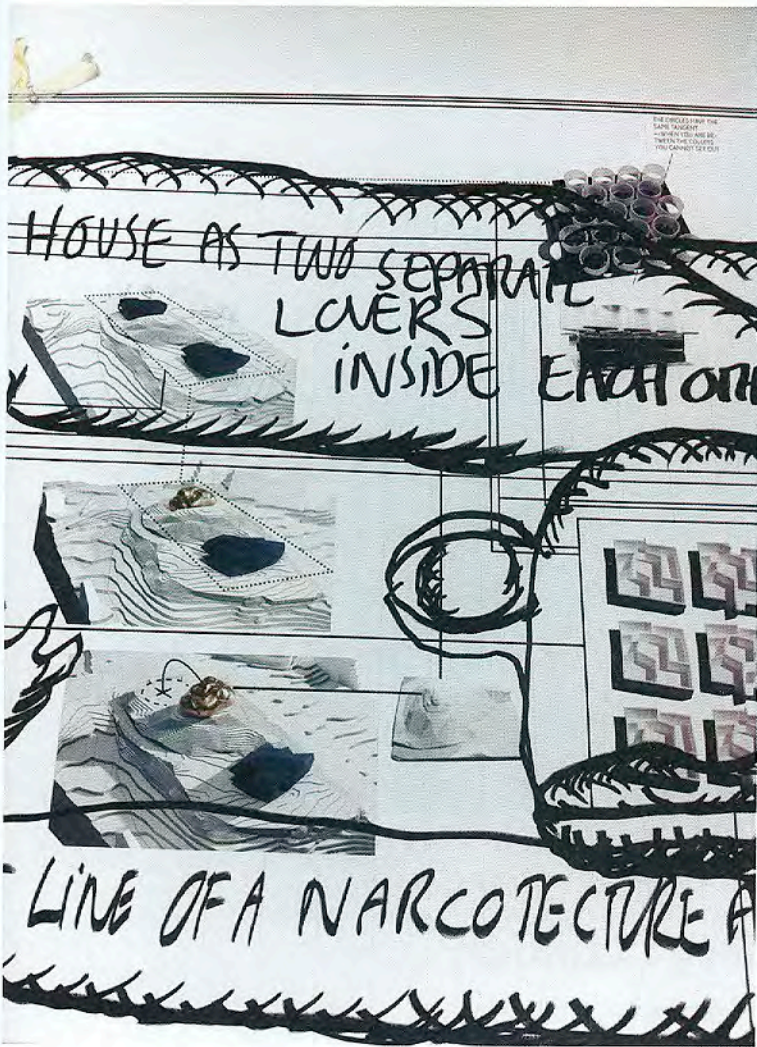
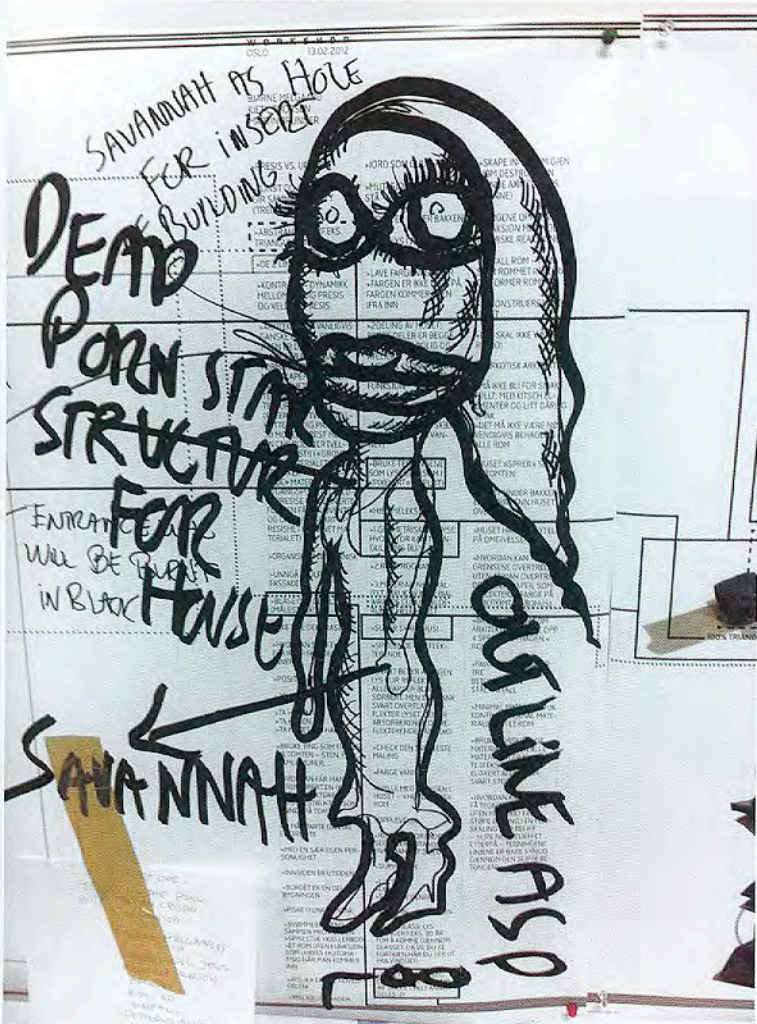
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IMAGES OF, AND
WRITINGS ABOUT,
BAREBACK AND
INTERRACIAL
GAY SEX

curving colour fields. In distinction to these gestural, expressive paintings, Melgaard's other works were nearly photorealistic, such as the two black-and-white canvases portraying very young naked men either spread-eagled on a bed or, if their shy countenances are any indication, reluctantly exposed to the viewer. A third painting somewhat incongruously depicts two Sierra Leone youths holding automatic rifles.

Conflating sex and violence with consumer culture, the sculptural assemblages littering the space offered a dizzying array of disparate objects and source material, from crude figurative sculptures made of marble surrounded by Diet Coke cans and used coffee cups, to a rack of wrinkled Maison Martin Margiela suits. In addition to furniture from his own home, which Melgaard cut up and repurposed for the exhibition, this 'multifunctional novel', which was partly inspired by the postmodern, unpredictable fiction of Kathy Acker and Jane DeLynn, raised the stakes on the readymade legacy. In lieu of the cheap consumer goods favoured by Marcel Duchamp, such as bottle racks or typewriter covers, Melgaard's soiled and beaten objects were conspicuously luxurious. By assimilating them into narratives of late-night hookups and other erotic adventures, Melgaard seemed to correlate the male body with Hästens beds and Louis Vuitton goods, bringing the inevitable question of what, exactly, is commodifiable to its seemingly natural and by now familiar end: pretty much anyone and anything, from rotting bananas to a pair of spread ass cheeks.

Yet Melgaard's work isn't as nihilistic as it appears. There is real critical agency in his dystopic settings, and it pushes back forcefully against cultural convention. In his *Baton Sinister* exhibition as part of the Norwegian pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale, a video interview between Melgaard and queer cultural critic Leo Bersani featured prominently and has had a lasting afterlife (the video was the later centrepiece of a screening and panel discussion at the Kitchen, in New York, among other venues).

Bersani may be best known for his 1987 essay 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', which pinpoints how strangely close gay culture hews to its heteronormative other, even appropriating straight male behaviour and terminology in ways that don't so much undermine as reinforce; the macho style of gay men in the 1970s, for instance, was seen by many cultural commentators as threatening to the sensibilities of straight men. Rather than posing a threat, Bersani argues, this stylistic adoption was viewed by heterosexual males as a 'yearning towards machismo', even an attraction to their style and behaviour. Subsequent essays by Bersani, including 'Shame on You' and 'The Power of Evil and the Power of Love' (both 2008), develop this line of thinking further, most notoriously through the topic of gay barebacking, which post-AIDS became a taboo topic and practice in the gay community: it was, and is, unprotected anal sex that often revolves around the potential transmission and reception of the HIV virus. Like the strategic adoption of hypermasculine behaviours, barebacking is defined in terms of conventional gender roles, such as the designation 'breeder' given to the inserter, a strangely



heterosexual label applied to sex between men. Quoting a study by Tim Dean on the practice, Bersani notes in 'Shame on You' that 'bareback culture would be ethically troubling less for its radical departure from mainstream values than for its perpetuation of them'.

In its most freewheeling and promiscuous form, however, such as gangbangs where one man receives 20 or more loads of semen (this bottom is aptly called the king of loads), Bersani – while not advocating this dangerous practice – sees in barebacking something startlingly dissimilar to any heterosexual convention: a selfless, radically liberating form of relation that, nodding to both Lacan and Gilles Deleuze, divests one of the selfish ego. In a word, he sees in it a kind of intimate and private 'pure love' suggestive of an entirely new, unique and individual form of behaviour decidedly outside the mainstream.

In *Untitled (Bjarne Melgaard Interviews Leo Bersani)* (2011), Bersani sits opposite Melgaard and discusses such strategies of queer liberation. Wearing suits, they both talk in grave tones. The video would be very staid were it not for Melgaard's humorously crass intercuts of cowboy porn, salacious intertitles and overlays of digital animations. As Bersani discusses the differences between

'legitimate' gays – ie, those successfully assimilated into society, as through marriage – and 'illegitimate' ones – ie, sluts and whores – a huge digital dick sprouts from Bersani's lap and ejaculates crudely drawn semen on Melgaard's face. In other moments, the studio background is replaced by a pride rainbow flag, stars circle around Bersani's head like an injured cartoon character and the infamous sewn-up mouth of David Wojnarowicz flashes intermittently on screen. These and other interjections cast an air of mockery over the proceedings. One gets the distinct impression that while Bersani, ACT UP and other icons of the gay rights movement are touchstones for Melgaard, they're not nearly radical enough. If his work is any indication, nothing short of a gay army stuffing the mouths of its critics with large, swollen dicks will do. Such unbridled aggression may be gross fantasy, but it speaks to the gross fantasies buried deep within the collective gay ego, of liberating an identity always seen in relation to another and doing it with abandon.

As provocative as Melgaard may be, his solo exhibition at London's ICA perhaps signals a new, more muted direction. While he'll display works made in partnership with schizophrenic artists, most of the show is elegantly designed by progressive Norwegian architectural firm Snøhetta, which is helping Melgaard plan a 'house to die in', as the press release states, including models and furniture which he will ultimately build in Oslo in 2014. With the structure looking austere modernist, it seems the artist is becoming more sombre, more serious. Lacking much of the infantile aggressiveness characterising his earlier work, perhaps *A House to Die In* is a more adult effort. Or perhaps not. Either way, Melgaard is planning for a future in ways that look strangely tasteful. This is a dubious aesthetic sea change for a man with little regard for good taste. What fun is good taste, anyway? If his outrageous history is any indication, the alternative is much more interesting. :

Bjarne Melgaard: *A House to Die In* is on view at the ICA, London, from 15 September to 18 November

this page: BJARNE MELGAARD AND SNØHETTA, the artist's drawings on the architect's plans for the exhibition *A House to Die In*, 2012, ICA, London. Courtesy the artist