



CHRISTIAN HOLSTAD

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AVID PHILLIP VETTER was born in Shenandoah in Texas on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1971. Suffering from a highly rare genetic malfunction that disabled his immune system, David Vetter was forced to live for 12 years in a plastic bubble: he came out for only 15 days in which he underwent treatment for an illness that was to cost him his life. It was during those two weeks, much of which spent in a coma, that his mother was able to touch his skin for the first and last time.

CHRISTIAN HOLSTAD dedicated his first solo exhibition to the story of David Vetter. Installed in Daniel Reich's gallery, which at the time occupied the dealer's small apartment in Chelsea, *Life is a Gift* consisted of a plastic membrane housing a single bed with an embroidered blanket, strange mutant puppets, a carpet, a balloon and a series of drawings and collages. Highly disturbing in terms of its references to a home environment hit by a traumatic event, the installation clearly showed many of the themes and preoccupations still to be found in the world of Christian Holstad. First of all, *Life is a Gift* focuses on the obsession with the idea of contagion and infection, themes to which many other artists have dedicated major works in the past ten years. While adopting gay culture to suit his particular aesthetic, Holstad's sensual work, while paranoid, is not in the tradition late '80s and '90s AIDS crisis work. On the contrary, by telling the story of David Vetter, Holstad's work becomes not sexually queer, but cojoined to the peculiarity of the outsider, loner or rebel. In an atmosphere where most art work has positioned itself as echoing the amoral aspects of contemporary society, Holstad's work is decisively a rejection of the contemporary.

For instance, in *Life is a Gift* – a story from suburban America, ruthlessly banal in its conformist simplicity – the fear of contamination does not appear to be connected to sex or desire; it is simply contact that represents the means of infection. The entire installation is built using materials that evoke an almost infantile, polymorphous, dollhouse-like sense of tactility. Even the drawings included in that exhibition – the first of the so-called series of *Eraserhead Drawings* – have a palpable quality: rather than drawings, they are exercises in hand coordination, in which pens and pencils are hardly necessary. And rather than images drawn, perhaps we should speak of images wiped out. Holstad, in fact, cuts out photographs and illustrations from newspapers and magazines and removes the background, blurs the edges, and then traces a number of details with a pencil, thus turning everyday news images into monstrous creatures, trapped in a disturbing metamorphosis, worthy of Francis Bacon, John Heartfield or David Lynch, the title of whose first feature-length film Holstad used for his drawings.

That of monstrosity is another of the themes that may be traced through the works of Holstad. In fact, rather than the domain of the monstrous, Holstad's works belong perhaps more properly to the register of the grotesque: disguises, masks, puppets and rag dolls appear cyclically in Holstad's installations, but even his most disturbing scenes are lightened by an irreverent, ironic touch. Like in mannerist grotesques, the monstrosity of his subjects is lessened by the repetition of his decorative patterns. In Holstad's work we witness an explosion of ornaments, an overdose of colours and we are overwhelmed by repeated geometric patterns, like inlays that constitute a sort of visual carnival. This is the inheritance of the imagery of psychedelic culture, which

explodes in particular in his collages of the *Bathroom Series*. In this series of works, Holstad makes use of the pages of pornographic magazines portraying men in somewhat explicit poses. The artist then slices off the genitals and obscures bodily details with patterns taken from furnishing and interior decorating magazines. The upshot is a crystallisation of the pornographic image: the bodies appear to be transformed into minerals, polychrome fossils, or perhaps the butterfly collection of some listless dandy.

On first glance, the contrast between the bodies of the lovers and the interiors in which they are placed is reminiscent of the renowned series of collages entitled *Bringing the War Home* in which the American artist Martha Rosler overlapped images of the war in Vietnam and home interiors taken from the pages of fashion and architecture magazines. However, in Holstad's work the domestic environment is treated with more ambivalence and is not necessarily associated with a set of bourgeois values to be contested. Maybe it's just generational distance or a profound cultural mutation, but Holstad's work no longer seems interested in a stance of conflict or refusal. Although he does adopt critical attitudes, politically and sexually – oriented ones at that, Holstad always maintains the cult of sensual, hedonistic pleasure. One of Holstad's earliest works provides a clear illustration of this attitude of not wanting to refuse the dimension of pleasure. In *Free Play*, Holstad installed a working jukebox in a McDonald's, inviting onlookers to warm up the tragically institutional atmosphere of the fast food joint with a selection of songs with titles ranging from musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Grace Jones and Yoko Ono.

*Free Play* represents the umpteenth reflection on the domestic environment and the negotiation of a private space: another theme that appears to have always fascinated Holstad. From the bedroom of *Life is a Gift* up to the *Bathroom Series* collages via *Light Chamber (Part 2)* and *Leather Beach*, Holstad is intent on exploring intimate spaces. Unlike many other artists of his generation who transform art galleries into haunted houses or film sets, Holstad seems to be attracted by situations that are anything but domestic, yet in which the artist attempts to re-establish a personal dimension. In *Leather Beach*, for example, Holstad insinuates his way into the abandoned spaces of a deli transforming it into a leather club. Holstad recently re-created part of the *Leather Beach* installation in a work entitled *Light Chamber (Part 2)*, for which he reconstructed the interior of an underground bunker on the roof of a building in Chelsea, enhancing it with objects to do with the care of the body, including a tanning bed and a colonoscopy machine. This work stages the entirely contemporary obsession with bodily hygiene and perfection. *Light Chamber (Part 2)* and *Leather Beach* on the other hand are not so far away from David Vetter's plastic shelter: they are both bubbles, hideouts, or perhaps – as the Americans would say – they are time capsules on a quest to conserve disappearing local aspects of the American way of life and a romantic hippie yearning.

Like an archaeological novice busily digging up the remains of the urban subcultures, Holstad does not give in to the temptations of nostalgia; he is not interested in glorifying the past. Rather, he is more interested in analysing the friction created between past and present. *Infect Others* is the name of one of Holstad's works, perhaps one of his most complex statements. Infect others with what? The spectre of HIV is exorcised: this is clearly not what Holstad is talking about. The artist looks upon infection as a metaphor for his creative method: his work expands by infectious outbreaks, constantly on the lookout for a new territory, medium or area to occupy.