

Time Has Come to Confess

Vadim Zakharov's multi-layered exhibition at the Russian Pavilion offers an experiment around human nature as it follows the ancient narrative of the Greek myth *Danaë* to an extended conclusion. **Ric Bower** caught him in the whirl of the preview days at the 55th Venice Biennale of Art for a portrait sitting and an illuminating interview.

I have no doubt that being charged to 'do something challenging' in one of the anachronistic architectural carbuncles that are sprinkled throughout Venice's Giardini, must have caused many a battle-hardened artist's heart to quail. The challenge certainly did not seem to faze Russian artist Vadim Zakharov however. His work *Danaë*, named after the Greek myth, (the one where Danaë, locked in a bronze prison by her father, is impregnated by the god Zeus manifesting as a shower of gold coins), rises enthusiastically to the occasion. It helps that Zakharov is willing to take total command of the space with carefully choreographed, multi-level action spaces and viewing areas. He even broke out his jackhammer to engage in some impromptu remodelling of Shushev's 99-year-old Russian Pavilion.

The complex performance, (curated by Udo Kittelman and under the supervision of Commissioner Stella Kesaeva), involved the casting of 200,000 gold coins, which circulate steadily through the performance space, helped along by willing female viewers/participants. The coins are placed in a tin bucket and hoisted onto the first level, through a hole in the ceiling. They then travel up into the rafters, via an elevator device, from where they are showered onto female participants. The women, who by now have been offered see-through umbrellas to protect their skulls and coiffures, are asked to scoop up a handful of coins so the whole process can start again.

The male visitors have their own special areas in which they are invited to contemplate their crimes. Their failings are stencilled on the wall - "Gentlemen, time has come to confess

our Rudeness, Lust, Narcissism, Demagoguery, Falsehood, Banality...' and so the list goes on. To aid our woeful cogitations a male performer is seated on a saddle in the eaves eating peanuts; instead of dropping gold coins he deposits peanut detritus, the by-product of his gorging.

I settled in the rickety PR booth outside the Russian pavilion, waiting for the artist to meet me. When Zakharov arrived he was self-assured and delightfully gracious. We sat down and I began by asking him how he squared his use of ancient myth with his complicated and often fraught relationship with the past.

Vadim Zakharov: Ah, that is easy to answer; I often work with archives. I have been building an extensive archive since the 80s for the Moscow Conceptual School and I draw on it now for both exhibition and publication. *Danaë*, of course, is a Greek myth and I have known the story since I was a child. I find it strange that many people nowadays are not in any way familiar with it.

Ric Bower: *What do you feel Danaë has to tell us about gender?*

VZ: Gender is not something I have addressed in my work before, but the myth of Danaë demands engagement with the issue. I only do so by following the narrative through: Danaë's cave was closed to men, so I make the central area of my work an area where men are not permitted. Because of this decision I have received much criticism. All I can say to people who are offended is 'sorry, I am just following the narrative!' I was not expecting the range and breadth of >>



01

reactions the work has had. A few days ago a man threw down ten Euros from the balcony, which a woman then picked up; I thought this was an extraordinary interaction.

Both women and men are stealing the coins at a fantastic rate; ironically, since on the coins is cast the word trust. Corruption, morality and gender are not unusual themes to address and perhaps I have nothing particularly new to say on the subjects; I just pull the elements together and hold them up like a mirror. What people draw from the work is up to them. As an artist, I try to maintain a certain distance.

RB: *You have playfully exhibited your inventory, a near encyclopaedic list of the raw materials you utilise in the making of the work. Its overt inclusion seems to blur the boundaries between that which is the work and that which is not. Is there a line in your mind where the work ceases to exist or have influence?*

VZ: If women cease to place coins in the bucket, or the man on the beam does not drop his peanut husks, the whole process will stop; the break between the world and the work is not a conceptual one, it is physical.

RB: *So your hold, your authorial investment in the work is relatively fluid.*

VZ: Yes and no. On the one hand I construct the work with care but on the other I do not know how it will turn out, for instance I do not know how many coins will be stolen. We have worked out statistically that so far the women have stolen fewer than the men. We started with 200,000 coins; time will tell how many we are left with.

With that we said our goodbyes and the artist returned to his gruelling schedule of interviews and engagements whilst I was left to arrange my parting thoughts. Zakharov does not appear to be a man who is afraid of being misunderstood. I began to wonder if it was a little too easy to take the symbolism he offers us at face value. I wondered if we are perhaps being anesthetised, like laboratory rats, so we do not notice that it was we who are about to become the subject of the artist's experiments. Like Anthony Gormley's work *One and Other*, which famously featured dancing dads and self promotional performances on the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square, with Zakarov's Danaë the viewer does not just become inseparable from the work but would appear to become the very basis and subject of the work itself. — **CCQ**

01 *Previous spread*
Vadim Zakharov outside the Russian Pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale 2013, portrait; Ric Bower

02 *This spread*
ONE DANAE, coin, 2013, Vadim Zakharov,

02



Serendipity and the Beast

The Bahamas is at the Venice Biennale for the first time this year bagging a prize location in the Arsenale for their ambitious show, *Polar Eclipse*. The Bahamian born New Yorker, **Tavares Strachan**, was chosen to represent the island nation and went to herculean lengths to offer a hyper-connected tour-de-force.

Interview: Ric Bower

Thinking back I wonder how I ever came across the Bahamian Pavilion. It was, on careful recollection, through Sky, an American rocker who was part of the installation team; he had invited me to take shelter from the rain in the crepuscular void where the Tavares Strachan extravaganza was taking shape. Sky subsequently introduced me to Christophe Thompson (the Director of Installation). I helped him tie his Trinity knot, (with a little on-line help). Christophe is part of Tavares' famed inner circle. This is the serendipitous wonder of the Biennale, for a brief time everything is not just possible but entirely probable.

In 2006 Strachan found international acclaim by FedEx-ing a 4.5 tonne block of river ice from Alaska to the Bahamas to be exhibited in a solar powered freezer. His practice is by no means limited to the impact of environmental change on close-to-sea-level habitats such as the Bahamas (or Venice) however. In this encyclopaedic show he contributes to at least two further postmodern conversations, the cultural implications of relativism and the unreliability of historical narratives. These concepts are filtered through his personal journey of geographical displacement, from the Nassau to the States, before materialising again through the life of the early 20th century black explorer Matthew Henson.

Henson's role in the 'discovery' of the North Pole in a 1909 expedition and his complicated relationship with his white partner Robert Peary, (who got all the credit for the expedition), has generated a narrative, in itself, as unstable, and treacherous as the environment they were exploring together. It was not until political winds in the US finally shifted, long after Henson's death in 1955, that (on April 6, 1988) he was re-interred in Arlington National Cemetery; a belated sign of national recognition for his contribution to science and exploration.

Strachan explores the metaphysical and historical invisibility of the man Henson and what he has come to represent through a variety of material means; including a full size Pyrex representation of Henson's circulatory system suspended in mineral oil and encased in acrylic (*How I Became Invisible*, acrylic tank, mineral oil, Pyrex glass). The refractive indices of the materials are so well matched that the ethereal, web-like representation of the physical Henson all but disappears into silvery gloom.

I met Tavares after he had completed a marathon meet and greet at the exhibition's opening. I had watched him work the semi-dark space filled with supporters, politicians and gallerists all hungry to feed off the restless energy these events generate. We escaped into a corner of almost perfect darkness and I began by asking him how much of himself he sees in the person of Matthew Henson

Tavares Strachen: My connection to Henson or, indeed to anybody else who has done something amazing but been overlooked when the time has come for the recognition to be handed out, is very personal.

Ric Bower: *What about your physical engagement with Henson's life, you went to the North Pole yourself this year, a journey which is evidenced in this show. That must have been pretty tough; it demonstrates not inconsiderable commitment.*

TS: It is very important. There is that colonial or puritanical mind-set that deems nothing to be of any value unless you work hard for it. Sadly hard work alone does not guarantee a project is going to be interesting though.

RB: *You have mentioned in the past the difficulty of placing appropriate value on objects.*

TS: There is a delicate tension here, I am >>

fascinated by objects. The philosopher Alan Watts used to say that people in the west believe that they are materialists but they actually hate material. Someone who loves material shows a certain level of appreciation for every minute detail of that substance. After all we are made of stuff ourselves and it is when we misuse stuff that I get frustrated.

RB: Some artists are conceptually sharp and others aesthetically tuned in, few seem to be able to move convincingly in both arenas. How have you managed to bridge that divide.

TS: It's just form and idea, a question of how they can co-exist. It is not that complicated, it is not new.

RB: I love the idea that the North Pole is constantly moving, that the moment it is 'discovered' and a flag placed on the supposed spot then the ice sheet moves on the ocean's surface rendering the whole process idealistically pointless. In your mind, is there anything that is fixed in life, is there anything that never moves?

TS: Everything is shifting, and that is terrifying, but also liberating once you get past the terror. I think this kind of thinking engenders cognitive locomotion, whether it be the birth of flight or the invention of the light bulb. It forces a genesis, you know what I mean? Within the instability, lies some other kind of truth.

RB: You have built a close knit community of colleagues and collaborators around you. What effect does this have on how you approach to the

issue of authorship? Do you do much fighting?

TS: I work with friends and a lot of people who are close to me. We do fight, but not about authorship, we fight about whether things should be done this way or that way. Healthy fights, not ego driven.

RB: I come from a Wales that is a small nation with a powerful sense of identity. You come from a small nation too. What advice would you give artists from Wales?

TS: A nation is only as strong as its ability to extend itself into other nations and to diversify.

I am still mulling over Tavares' parting shot at 4am. My 17 stone Russian roommate, Sasha, has by now found full song. His nocturnal sound art is almost beautiful. He staggers in at two-ish each night and settles on his front like a baby, arse high, head to side before commencing to snore. It sounds something like an elephant making love to a cat and reaches its hellish climax in the predawn hours. He then wakes at 7 on the nail, farts, puts on his clothes and leaves. I discovered on my final day that he was a sculptor working as part of Bart Dorsa's excellent show Katya put on by the Moscow Museum of Modern Art at Dorsoduro, Fondamenta delle Zattere. I have come to the conclusion that it is best to accept that the beast that is the Biennale can never be beaten, I have learned not to struggle against it but instead to relax into its grasp, to let serendipity take its course and to allow room for the conversation to begin. — **CCQ**

01 *This spread*
Tavares Strachen, photographed through *How I Became Invisible*, (acrylic tank, mineral oil, Pyrex glass, Tavares Strachen) in the Bahamas Pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale, portrait: Ric Bower

02 *Opposite spread*
(Untitled) Mathew, 2012, Collage and drawing mounted on Plexiglas behind a Plexiglas box, Tavares Strachan

