

Just America

An essay by John Carlin, 2024

In the 1980s Vaughan Grylls came to America. The former colony had grown up to help win World War II and generated a potent stream of myth and iconography that defined 20th century culture. Edward Paolozzi was the first British artist to make art from it. He transformed magazines left behind by American soldiers into what we now call Pop Art, such as the seminal series *Bunk!* whose title was a pun on where soldiers slept and the junk they left behind.

Paolozzi's use of collage to transform mass produced imagery into personal expression would be used by British artists such as Richard Hamilton, Peter Blake and David Hockney. The trend took the world by storm via popular music, notably The Beatles, who manipulated sound, sampled and layered to create a new form of popular music that would influence everyone who came after. (Peter Blake designed the cover of *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* perhaps the most famous photomontage of the mid-20th century).

Grylls came out of this tradition, took it further and applied new techniques and technologies as he traveled across America, reflecting what it looks like while also showing what it hides.

Take for example, *Slave Graves* (2010). On the surface it's a 'bad' photograph of rocks lying in a field printed at a scale that suggests, but doesn't reveal, something important. The artist notes that he took the photo on his iPhone, while visiting friends in Virginia who casually pointed out the stones on a stroll. They were lying under an old tree to mark graves of enslaved people who weren't allowed proper burial.

The placement in two straight lines of four stones each, indicates something deliberate, like earthworks in the 1970s. But whereas Robert Smithson moved piles of rocks around to form the *Spiral Jetty*, these anonymous enslaved people did so to record the death of kinfolk, a powerful memorial in the only way they could. Grylls records their record to represent not only the injustice wrought upon people treated like chattel, but what we now call the legacy of slavery. "The past is never dead. It's not even past," as the Southern writer William Faulkner pointed out. These are not 'rolling stones,' the aphorism about 'not growing moss' that came to represent freedom in popular music from Muddy Waters' song with the verse: *my mother told my father/ Just before I was born/I got a boy child's comin', he's gonna be/a Rollin' Stone*. Bob Dylan's breakthrough hit was *Like a Rolling Stone*, the premier *Rock* magazine used the name as did the second most important British rock band of the Sixties.

When The Rolling Stones came to America a decade before Grylls, they immediately made a pilgrimage to the Chess Studio where Muddy Waters (along with Howling Wolf, Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley) recorded and went about appropriating Chicago Blues and American music with savage fury, but little irony about its underlying social reality. *Slave Graves* depicts stones that don't roll, left by people whose compromised freedom still looms over America like a shroud.

Grylls returns to this theme time and time again and America, a country founded on genocide and enslavement, provides ample opportunity.

Sioux Nation (1994) photographed by Grylls in 1988 ("I couldn't get round to completing it because it was so upsetting" said Grylls) is a large mural-sized collage of photocopies of video stills taken around the Lakota Sioux Reservation at Wounded Knee, the place of the deadliest mass shooting in American history where roughly 300 Lakota men were slaughtered.

The Native Americans' "Ghost Dance" provoked the massacre because people misread it as a "war dance" based on false stereotypes of native people. Grylls' mural depicts the contemporary location with typical aplomb in a grid of allusions

that displace the tragic event into the banality of contemporary life, accentuated by using grainy video imagery in place of elevated fine art photography. As Grylls shows, America's 'Center of Nation' is now here.

The confusion between media and reality is a constant in Grylls' work, from the 1980s to the present. A relatively simple example is *Walk of Fame* (2010), that shows four stars on the famous Hollywood Boulevard sidewalk, framed in constellation around an impromptu shrine to Michael Jackson's star just after his death.

The stars Grylls chose, combine fictional Disney characters, (Snow White and Mickey Mouse) with real people famous for playing cartoonish characters (Al Jolson and Liberace). Snow White, thanks to the foot of a passer-by, becomes 'now white', a clear reference to Michael Jackson's change of skin color. Three of them: Michael, Mickey and Jolson, share a predilection for wearing white gloves, which seems innocent, but is a legacy of racist minstrel shows. Once minstrelsy was 'cancelled,' Hollywood evolved the underlying concept into cute characters like Mickey, who's literally putting on blackface in one of his earliest cartoons (*Mickey's Mellerdrammer* from 1933).

One of the greatest minstrel artists was Bert Williams, a Black man who wore blackface. He was the highest paid American performer in the first two decades of the 20th century and the first African-American to record a song (in 1901) so there's a direct line from his stardom to the King of Pop, Michael Jackson, whose glittering white gloves continued a tradition no one wanted to talk about.

No one wants to talk about the other things that tainted Jackson's undeniable brilliance, one of which was the prescription drug use that ended his life.

The most recent piece in this exhibition about *Just America* is *Fentanyl Drive* (2024), which tackles the overdose crisis straight on. It's a twenty-one-foot mural manipulated digitally from an iPhone video Grylls shot from the window of a bus in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love.

Fentanyl Drive combines ghostly images of over a dozen people loitering on the street with a trash can in the foreground. In the background are horizontal stripes of protective shutters. In the center are two figures from Michelangelo's *Pietà* - 'pity' in English.

The pity here is not just the poor souls trapped in addiction, but also soulless behavior of Big Pharma, notably the Sackler Family, who helped bring opiates to the masses and whose name, until recently, graced many of the most distinguished museums and art institutions in America.

Forty years after Grylls began making art based upon fragmentary mosaics of visual imagery, we live in a world dominated by streams of pictures on our phones, which look like life but often separate us from it. Doom scrolling has become so commonplace it now has a name.

Grylls' art of the 80s was made before the digital era, but anticipated what it would feel like to live in a world of disconnected imagery perpetually flashing by.

Photography began as a way to record reality, but now is the way we are distanced from it.

Grylls saw it coming. Take a look.

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John Carlin started his career in the NY art world as a curator, writer and college professor in the 1980s while a PhD student at Yale where he worked with and helped support artists who later became well known like Keith Haring, Art Spiegelman and David Wojnoarowicz.

He then became an entertainment lawyer after graduating Columbia Law School and produced one of the first major AIDS benefits, *Red Hot + Blue*. He left the firm to run *Red Hot*, eventually producing over 20 projects and giving away millions to help fight HIV/AIDS around the world (www.redhot.org).

At the same time he started and ran one of the first digital design companies in New York, *Funny Garbage*, which created some of the most important early media websites for *Cartoon Network*, *Comedy Central*, *VH-1* and many others. The cornerstone of the company's work was pioneering the idea of sites as destinations to spend time watching content, playing games and joining communities. Because of that work the company became a production studio and branched out into broadcast animation, notably *Crank Yankers* for *Comedy Central*, several shows for *Adult Swim* and pilots for *Disney*, *MTV* and *ABC Family*.

He is currently reinventing *Red Hot* for the digital era and developing several new technology platforms.

John Carlin was the author of *Doubletakes*, published in 1985 for Vaughan Grylls' American debut exhibition. It is reproduced in the catalogue for this exhibition.