

SI

Swiss Institute /
Contemporary Art

KALEIDOSCOPE

KALEIDOSCOPE
38 ST MARKS PL
October 4, 2018



Julien Nguyen

Interview by Franklin Melendez
From: Issue 33 FW18/19

Weaponizing the pictorial as holy archetype, the L.A.-based artist goes back to Biblical iconography to source the foundational micro-dramas and ur-narratives that have propelled Western mythology—all the while speaking to power, desire, fantasy and spiritual pursuit.

38 St. Marks Pl
New York, NY 10003

info@swissinstitute.net
swissinstitute.net

Tel +1 212 925 2035
Fax +1 212 925 2040

FRANKLIN MELENDEZ Robert Crumb once noted: “You don’t have to be a Fundamentalist Christian to be interested in the Bible. It’s really a fascinating mythology.” You go a step further for in the biblical you recognize the foundational micro-dramas and ur-narratives that have propelled the Western mythos in all its destructive glory. This holds true not just for the source scripture itself, but its expanded image universe as propagated from the Quattrocento on: the pictorial weaponized as holy archetype. This might be in part what animates your fascination with the period: the suturing of these origin myths onto their pictorial modes of dissemination until the two become inextricable (or are made so by the Renaissance masters). Your most recent solo exhibition at Modern Art / Stuart Shave in London, entitled “Ex Forti Dulcedo,” showed how your exploration is neither appropriation nor critique, but something much more subtle and profound: a re-staging that seeks to bring into relief these lingering structures as they inflect our current socio-political realities. This is also the germinating point for your latest undertaking, a solo at New York’s Swiss Institute, that tackles more recent histories as well as the artist’s first live-action film. This project is a full departure from painting. How did it come about?

JULIEN NGUYEN I had re-watched Oliver Stone’s Nixon (1995) and was looking for some clips on the Internet to refresh my memory. In this particular scene, Nixon (played by Anthony Hopkins) visits then-Director of the CIA Richard Helms (played by Sam Waterson) at his headquarters in Langley. Leveraging one another in a terse power struggle, what begins as a strategic negotiation of funding and rank escalates into an ominous rumination on geopolitics, hubris, mortality, and corruption. Waterson’s office is filled with orchids, and it ends with his eyes going black as he recites *The Second Coming* by William Butler Yeats. Watching this, the idea of the work came to me immediately. I had the sense that I could be inside one of my own paintings, and that if I replaced the actors with beautiful and eager young American men—with the look and energy that they would convey – and have them recite the complicated and disturbing dialogue, that there I might be able to make a film of my own. The camera was the only way in which I could convey this feeling to an audience. A painting of it wouldn’t make sense, and I was interested in the dialectical and formal relationship that recreating a fictional scene of a possible historic event in a new film would create. I thought there was something similar in this to how I sometimes take figures from the Renaissance and repurpose them for my own use. Or that it would be similar to the strategy of all the various versions of Shakespeare put to film—the text is the same, but the window-dressing changes to suit the time and interests of those putting on the play.

JN When I was given the opportunity to do a show at Swiss Institute, I saw it as a chance to make something that I would normally not be able to with the limited hands, skills, and resources that I am allowed with the paintings. To make something that illustrates that the concerns of my previous work extend beyond the individual objects, and that those objects are part of a larger attempt to process the realities of my life and of my position within the world as it relates to the civilization to which I am born. With a film and with this specific subject matter, I can show that my concern is as much with history itself as it is with any specific image from or moment within it.

In order to accomplish any of this, the work needed to be made with a level of technical facility beyond what I could do myself with friends and a camera in my hand, and in this I was blessed to work with the brilliant cinematographer, Sebastian Mlynarski and the production team he brought to the set. This needed to be something that existed halfway between the logic of conceptual video art and commercial production, that bridged the social, political, and economic structures implicated in each of those forms.



FM Movies are perhaps the most prevalent vehicles we have for contemporary mythologies, but they also expose how secularized we've become—no universal stories, instead fractured sects and fan groups. Is there a freedom to be found in this?

JN I guess I would say to this that history is ultimately a universal story, despite its tragedy. This is something people are waking up to—for the better, ultimately, but with violent fits and starts. The past has been a tale of differing paths for differing peoples. This is no longer so, and will cease completely to be the case in the future very soon—unless of course the flow of information, goods, and people across the planet is no longer possible and we are back in a situation where different communities around the globe must struggle again in isolation—without either the possibilities or warnings that concurrent examples in other communities provide. Whatever the current political climate, we are now a global civilization, and it is imperative we come to understand the processes that got us here, and how we might use this knowledge to influence the society of the future.

This is not the “globalization” of which the plutocrats speak. That was a now-dead cover for the economic and political project of the postwar consensus, a tool of the now-dead West. I think Newton's third law might very well ascribe to history: “for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” While Europe divvied up the globe, and America tried to fool the globe into believing it was itself, subjecting the rest to its rule and outlook—it did not establish complete control over or exterminate the conquered. We survived, and those that survived, even in their trauma, were changed for both the better and for the worse. In this transformation lies a possible future. Not that the east and the south will rule—for they died under the old order—but that imperialism eventually collapses under its own weight, that it has eaten what it cannot fully digest, that it will be digested in turn from within and that new centers will emerge for which new compasses must be drawn. I am speaking here of the demographic changes and the movement of peoples that have the world both ablaze and sprouting at the same time.

FM Is democracy our last spiritual pursuit?

JN I don't think so. Who or what exactly are “the People”? Can any of us say for sure? This is a crack in the foundation that leaves me skeptical.

“History is ultimately a universal story, despite its tragedy. The past has been a tale of differing paths for differing peoples.”

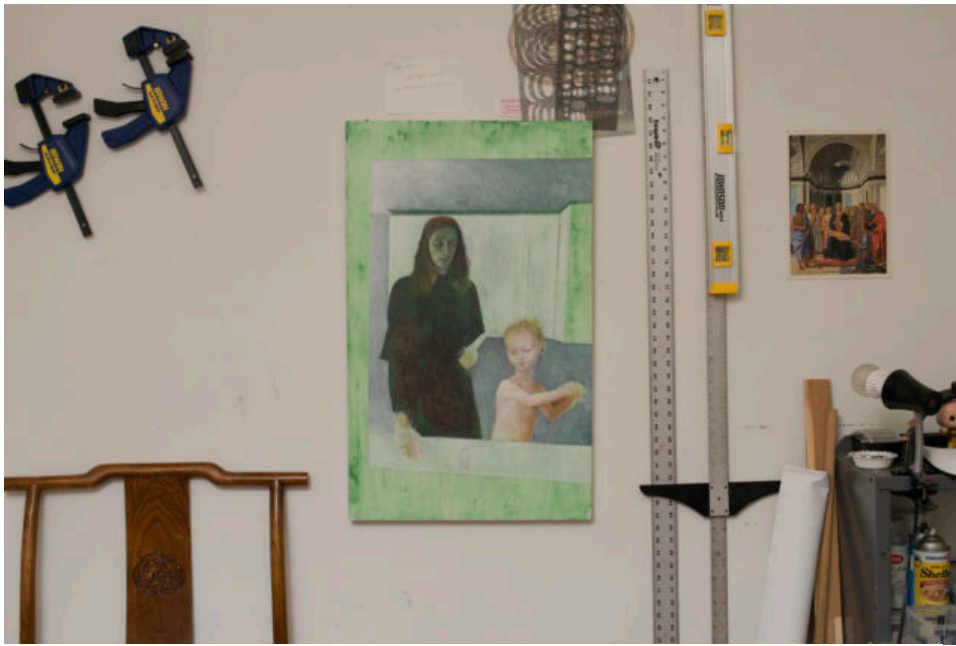
FM I want to talk about the idea of fandom, which seems to be rich terrain for you. Digital sci-fi and fantasy illustration, as well as deviant art have been sources of inspiration for you, and you draw on some of their idioms, but you also harness fandom as a potent conceptual strategy—for instance one could say making ‘fanfic’ works of Christian narratives or Renaissance paintings. Can you tell me a bit about how ‘fandom’ in this sense works for you?

JN As far as I can tell, fan-fiction posits desire as a rogue hermeneutic of perception. This goes against the key operations of my practice for several reasons. First, there cannot be a “queer” reading of the Renaissance inasmuch as two of its central pillars were openly homosexual (Leonardo and Michelangelo). Raphael is the exception—and his incomplete legacy (dead at 39) looms large. Venice takes over and from Titian is born the Baroque. Long as he lived, I hope he is now long wandering in purgatory. It is my strong belief that from the 17th century onwards much of western art slowly transforms into (bad) apologetics for imperialism—but not before! It is from before where we might still learn, if we could only remember.

Secondly, my religious work should not be seen as fan-fiction; if I have made a painting of the Virgin Mary, it cannot be understood as anything but an image of the Holy Mother. There is, funnily enough, a fragment of Clement of Alexandria in which he references the secret Gospel of Mark, which putatively contains references to an initiation into the mysteries of the church involving acts of same-sex love.

Finally, when we are talking about fan-fiction are we talking about a narrative unconscious? Is this narrative unconscious repressed? Or is it rather that desire is a means of reading anything according to the one true logic of everything: power. Did excited adolescents de-sublimate the incestuous ur-text of *Supernatural*, or rather did desire make itself real, impinging on the writers themselves to feed the ravenous drive for the mystery of same-sex-brother-love until the love object was itself brought into the world? Are these mysteries carried out by night hidden in shame or simply in acknowledgement of the absolute truth that reality occurs only in the intimacy of understanding and being understood?

If anything, I would like my work to be a virus in the biological, not digital sense of the word. A (positive, hopefully) infection within my country and the larger society of which I am a part by the product of one of its bastards. And by bastard I mean the Republic of South Vietnam.



Julien Nguyen (American, b. 1990) is an artist who lives in Los Angeles. His work on view at the Swiss Institute in New York through 11 November.

Franklin Melendez is a NY-based writer and curator and Editor-at-Large of KALEIDOSCOPE.

Photography by Nathanael Turner. Images courtesy of the artist and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London