

Christian Jankowski's sublime horror in New York's The Kitchen

'US AND THEM'

Besides being sardonically funny there's something utterly disturbing about the latest show of the German media artist Christian Jankowski at The Kitchen in New York. Exploring traditional horror film conventions, Jankowski's approach is quite surprising: in his view the genre becomes a vehicle for transformation, revenge and redemption. Although this new work displays usual clichés such as dark nightmares, scary monsters and bloody slaughters, it is above all a painful analysis in which a nasty but foremost human aspect of horror is established.

Niels VANTOMME

Although he had already caught the attention of the art world while he was still studying, Jankowski's career would truly launch in 1996 when Belgian artist Guillaume Bijl invited him for a group exhibition at Lokaal 01 in Antwerp. Jankowski executed a remarkable performance: he hired magician Wim Brando to transform him into a dove onstage at the opening of the show. During the exhibition, the dove would live in a cage at Lokaal 01 as a substitute for the artist, while Jankowski disappeared from the public eye for three weeks. At the closing of the event, the magician returned and transformed Christian Jankowski into his original human appearance. In this early performance all the elements that would later define the artist's career were already present: juxtaposition, transformation and sly humor. By combining different media and putting them in relation to one another, the borders

between fiction and non-fiction, public life and private life, dissolve. When asked why his work often refers to commercial film genres, Jankowski explains: "It developed from doing performance-based work and then it went from performance to documentation of performance. When you start thinking more about the recording, you become aware of the angle in which you record an event. So you start thinking about different approaches, different structures also. How can you tell a story and how can you tell about an event or a site? That's how I came naturally to different film genres, because they provide you with a frame."

He got the inspiration for 'Us and Them' last year while he was attending a lecture at MIT by film theorist Henry Jenkins about the work of Matthew Barney and its relation to horror film. Being a performance artist he was attracted by the physicality of the genre: "Especially the horror genre is related to performance. It's a very effective genre: I don't know any other genre that has such a direct reaction on your own body by just looking at the films." Jankowski started collaborating on the production of a commercial, straight-to-DVD, werewolf movie. He was involved in the project as an actor and started filming additional scenes while the crew was shooting the initial film.

ALIENATING

The resulting work, 'Lycan Theorized', consists of a video and several sculptures. The extra scenes he shot are quotes on the horror genre declared by film theorists and recited by the actors of the film. Re-editing the original material with his footage, results in an alienating narration. Body parts get pulled off, people get eaten alive and blood flows continually while the actors are quoting earnest theoretical reflections on horror, as if meta-commenting their own actions. In another exhibition room the pulled off heads, fingers, arms and legs used in the film are exhibited. Jankowski displays a devilish form of humor here: the body parts are exact replicas of the body parts of the film theorists that are quoted in the video.

Jankowski unravels the film world in relation to the art world and art theory: props become art objects and film conventions are analyzed on the spot. Although convincing in its confrontational character, the work is also a little bit too smart for its own good. There is another part of the show in which he gets straight to the heart (or rather the "dark hole"?) of horror psychology: 'Angels of Revenge'.

Jankowski went to a horror convention while working on his project, found out there was a horror costume contest and decided instantly to rent a conference room in a neighboring hotel. He set up a film set and invited some of the already dressed up visitors. He asked them to write down the worst thing anyone has ever done to them and what they would do if they had the opportunity to take revenge. He then took pictures and shot a film. The text accompanying the picture of the Clown reads: "I thought you were my friend. We were best friends, but you lied to me and stole from me. When I get revenge, I will not kill you. I will tear you limb from limb. Starting with your feet, then your legs then hand and arms until you're nothing but a torso. You will not know it was me until right before I tear your eyes out. So the image of my face will be forever burned in your mind and no one will ever know it was me because all what is left is your ears so people will laugh at you and say how disgusting you are and you will hear them."

While the approach in 'Lycan Theorized' is merely intellectual, the tone of 'Angels of Revenge' is one of true pain and despair. The power of the work lies in the theatrical tension between a staged visual and an authentic linguistic representation. The notes written by and the pictures of the characters are hung side by side on the wall. It is a ghostly remainder of a creepy semi-fantasy human-interest performance that embodies an ultimate truth: the horror is not the monsters and the creeps; it's what defines us as human beings.

Christian Jankowski, 'Us and Them', The Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, New York, until December 9
www.thekitchen.org



CHRISTIAN JANKOWSKI "ANGELS OF REVENGE", 2006
16 MM FILM TRANSFERRED TO VIDEO (11:06 MINS) AND 24 C-
PRINTS (30 X 40 INCHES EACH)