

Colin Self: Collage and Everyday Myths

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A few deft ink and pencil outlines of Colin Self's *Self-Portrait* (2001) capture his fox-like features atop a natty coat, but they have been drawn not on a sheet of paper but on two unexpected found items: a torn-open envelope and a handwritten list of the great rivers of the world. While the envelope, its inside printed with a green pattern so as to protect the contents from prying eyes, might have come from a bank or a government department, the discarded list – as the artist himself has recounted – looks to have been written by a schoolchild, and dropped in the street ready for him to rescue and repurpose it.[1] The word play of *Self-Portrait's* title might be inevitable, but is it coincidence that Self has chosen to identify himself specifically with collage – that avant-garde anti-tradition of art making whose spontaneous, impertinent methods can be traced back to the *papiers collés* of Picasso and Braque from around 1912, or the provocative tactics of Berlin Dada a few years later? Self's recollection of finding that crumpled scrap of paper links the lucky find with auguries from the gods in Greek legends: what looks like chance is actually always a sign or a portent, a tiny link to deeper knowledge. This collision of the mundane and the mythical – of messages, adventures, secret connections wrapped in paper scraps – seems to be one of the things that keep bringing Self back to the recurring practice of collage.

Playful, interactive, to do with form yet informal, collage connects Self to that wider history of the twentieth century avant-garde he knows so well – to artists such as Max Ernst, Jean Dubuffet, Meret Oppenheim, to Cubism, Fluxus or Nouveau Réalisme – which is just one of the reasons why it would be short-sighted to pigeonhole him as a Pop artist. While in one sense his lifelong work might be characterised as collage-like, since it willingly adopts and combines a great range of media and processes, along with a really diverse array of source materials, at the same time Self's use of collage as a practice has been unusually promiscuous. Sometimes it helps the artist move nimbly between assemblage, drawing and painting, where found items are introduced either for their material or decorative qualities, to stand in as a reminder of something else, or alternately to retain their

own identity as images or flattish objects. At other times, the found materials become the very ground on which the artwork is made, where the spontaneous, ready-made form of some opened-out packaging, for example, sparks an image from the artist. Often prompting a lively dialogue between different approaches to art making – and especially between assembling and drawing – on other occasions collage looks like a kind of invasion of the world into the studio, a benign virus that short-circuits ideas and processes, inviting the artist to complete a work that the everyday realm has already plotted in advance. Found everywhere as a principle in his practice – notably the innovative printmaking techniques using an array of found objects instead of printing plates – collage seems to offer Self a way to stay in the moment, alert to his surroundings, and at the same time to never make the same work twice (no mean feat for an artist this prolific).

As pieces of flotsam washed in on the world's tides, collage's potential to inspire narratives and to combine imagination and drama is summed up in *New York Disaster* (1998), made from a vintage jigsaw displaying a BOAC de Havilland Comet aircraft coming into land over New York above a scene of skyscrapers and ocean liners. Idyllic as the picture-postcard scene might appear – especially to any youngster brought up in a post-war era of optimism, travel and technology – the possibility of a more brutal reality isn't far away. Like a fast-forward rerun from childhood fun to adolescent rebellion, Self has first pieced together the jigsaw, then ripped the plane from the sky and flung it to the street in pieces, with the catastrophe burning all the lower jigsaw shapes in the process, while the missing sections leave a plume of smoke in the sky. Any air enthusiast of the 1950s would have known that as the first – and British-made – commercial airliner, the Comet's successful launch in 1952 was quickly stalled by three in-flight accidents with multiple fatalities due to design flaws and metal fatigue. In less spectacular mode, this vulnerability, the story each object tells of its survival from a particular place and time, is a vivid characteristic of the found materials Self uses. For the most part they haven't been bought specially to make art with: more likely they have been found in the street, scavenged from rubbish tips, or are simply leftovers from everyday events. As such, they can be pristine but more likely gleefully grubby or shabby, as unkempt but triumphant as children coming home from their games. Sensitivity to how each element can be beautiful and mournful at the same time, to the promise or forlorn

nature of objects as materials, gives each collage a duality: one foot in the artist's ever-fertile imagination, the other in a specific history and location, a redundant but not forgotten original purpose and appeal. Made three years before the New York attacks of 9/11, *New York Disaster* would also have been plugged into Self's own memories of journeys and encounters – particularly his 3-month trip across the USA in 1965 that began in New York, and recalled in photographs that were later made into artworks in their own right. No matter how immediately rooted in his local landscape and history much of Self's work might appear, it is made in an awareness of worldwide events and problems: collage, with its objects and materials sourced from all corners of the globe, brings this world home, and connects it to personal experience.

This sense of combining intimacy with a global context, of the huge and tiny co-existing in a constantly unfolding body of work where few individual pieces are very large, but lined up together they might fill a museum, is still in play in a recent sequence of paintings, the *Thunderbird* series (2019-21). Here, instead of collage elements adorning a drawing or a painting, the found object becomes the work itself: cardboard packaging has been opened, flattened and sprayed with bursts of fluorescent paint, against a darker, mottled ground as though the box had been left to moulder for months in the open air. Laid out vertically the segmented cardboard outline, flaring out at the lower end, symmetrical flaps on either side towards the top like the arms of a cross, have sparked an association with traditional Native American totem poles planted in the rugged landscapes of the Pacific Northwest Coast peoples, often crowned with the figure of a giant bird with outstretched wings. Celebrated by many North American tribal cultures but especially in the Pacific Northwest, the thunderbird is a powerful mythological spirit, and a protector from evil. It's small wonder that this potent mixture of myth and strength made the name itself a recurring reference in more recent North American culture, from the classic Ford T-birds of the 1950s and 1960s or the Gibson Thunderbird bass guitar to Thunderbird fortified wine. Small-scale but reaching out to global mythology, Self's *Thunderbird* collage-paintings have something of this same mix of allure and mystery. While the flecked dayglo paint and darker textures suggest both commercial modernity and weathered tradition, the abstract splotches on the die-cut cardboard re-route Abstract Expressionist painting (the obligatory reference point in 1950s British art schools

against which as a student Self had to persist with his own emerging ideas) towards a deeper and more relevant mythology that could be ancient and contemporary at the same time.

Among Self's collages, it's not uncommon for such complex associations to start from the humblest beginnings. The cardboard packaging for the *Thunderbird* works are specifically boxes from Tick Tock rooibos tea, a staple in many British homes, and once again the global and the domestic collide. A native species of the Cederberg coastal mountains in Western South Africa, rooibos (redbush) tea was first gathered, then cultivated by the family-owned Tick Tock company since the early twentieth century. Though it isn't clear what use native populations made of the plant's properties before the arrival of European settlers, as with the Thunderbird legends, once again this might be a story of deep knowledge and wild landscapes against a colonial context, a marker in the historic trade of materials, goods and ideas that makes its way from the far side of the world to Self's kitchen table. It's relevant here that Self says he would rather work in his kitchen than in a studio: a space of intimacy, family and conversations, the centre of everyday life rather than a peripheral and 'professional' workspace.[2] Is it possible that Self's collages could for a moment be viewed in the light of cookery rather than fine art? Ingredients not 'media', sustenance not aesthetics, convivial gatherings and the deep knowledge of handed-down recipes adapted afresh depending on the larder and the season...

Neither a found and flattened cardboard box nor the warm familiarity of the kitchen look likely places to be thinking about myths, but the French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that the mythopoetic thinking associated with tribal and premodern cultures was precisely such a 'science of the concrete', a logic that makes connections between things or ideas that used to serve one purpose and can now be given a new function. In particular, he contrasts the approach to problem-solving in industrial societies, characterised by engineering and narrow, specialist technologies, with the attitude summed up by the untranslatable French word *bricolage*, where a *bricoleur* is someone who comes up with practical or intellectual solutions in an ingenious and ad hoc way, with whatever materials come immediately to hand.[3] With its emphasis on chance, on the canny repurposing of familiar materials that prompt new patterns of thinking and connecting, it's a short step from

bricolage to collage in Self's kitchen domain, in a process that can be practical and profound in the same gesture.

In this context, is it significant that many of his collages have specifically drawn upon packaging? It's a category of material that keeps moving between two and three dimensions (constructed / flattened, wrapped / unwrapped) – and indeed four dimensions since, as Self himself has noted, as a historical, time-specific item, packaging is almost always discarded and eventually becomes a rare artefact.[4] It connects the personal to the global, a tiny element of the networks, systems and especially economies of value and exchange mapping the world's countless, collage-like things and ideas, and through these to questions of power, politics and ideology – though unlike the enthusiasm for the pleasure and novelty of commodities that characterises much of Pop Art, Self's attitude to the rapacious economy of capitalism is altogether more critical. With this questioning attitude, one can imagine him turning each package over in his hands, thinking about brands, logos and eye-catching product design, but also flipping it inside-out, as with the *Thunderbird* works. There's a sustainable 'make do and mend' ecology at work here, getting by with scarce resources by re-using what's already at hand, though what matters in this case is not the product but its container, necessary but disposable, and the sense that the problem of capitalist modernity's beguiling explosion is not so much the commodity objects themselves as the way they are promoted and made seductive. But in in this instance we don't see the enticing outside of the package design, but its inside: not the product itself but the inside of its outside, the reverse of the exterior. This attention to the back of the surface of things, as a critical tactic to open them up to new ideas (and perhaps also older but forgotten ones) is one of Self's distinctive contributions to the practice of collage.

Unlike many collages by artists aligned with surrealism - a movement whose tactics Self's work sometimes refers to – his collages are not usually driven by the shock of disparity or contradiction: on the contrary, connectedness through visual analogies creates patterns of new, unexpected familiarity, so that from now on corrugated cardboard will always also be a ploughed field, or a postage stamp a human portrait. Aware of his own childhood experiences and family roots, Self is also mindful of the richness and significance of what he has termed 'people's art': everyday objects,

images and symbols seen and used ad infinitum by ordinary people, in contrast to museum-based art's elite pretensions.[5] In this sense, perhaps – and to circle back to Lévi-Strauss's idea of mythopoetic *bricolage* – what Self's collages seek is a connection, a resonance not just with things and ideas, but with people, with communities and their cultural histories. Teeming with 'ordinary' but extraordinary materials, Self brings an ethnographer's eye to his collages, like a late outgrowth of the Mass Observation movement launched by poets and anthropologists in the 1930s, whose task was to gather and understand the popular rituals, beliefs and activities of the British population. An imaginative gathering of the shared fragments of history and society, morals and ideologies from which individual creativity can begin its work, Self's collages are a mythical and practical archive of life in his particular times and places.

NOTES

1. Simon Martin and Marco Livingstone, *Colin Self: Art in the Nuclear Age*, Lausanne and Chichester: AVA Publishing / Pallant House Gallery, 2008, p. 100.
2. Colin Self, *Colin Self's Colin Selves*, London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1986, p. 10.
3. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966, chapter 1.
4. Martin and Livingstone, *Colin Self*, p. 94.
5. Martin and Livingstone, *Colin Self*, p. 14.