

Reflections on the Art of Jim Lambie

Brilliant colours, mesmeric patterns, glitter, voluptuous texture, sharp edges; cascading, ribboned, glossed, bejewelled gorgeousness. In the art of Jim Lambie, all of these qualities – visual, tactile, overwhelming – are collided with materials of humble origin. With the homeless and abandoned stuff of modern life – with the junked, the worthless and that which has lost its context. This collision produces an art which turns the periodic table of cultural and aesthetic status inside out – in the art of Jim Lambie, all that glitters is not gold but a joyous projection of rarity and a paste proposition of treasure. It is an art which shadow-boxes with its own ambiguity, too. On the one hand, you could feel that Jim Lambie is playing out the statement by Barbara Kruger, from her epoch-defining *Irony/Passion* memorandum of 1979: 'You sometimes like to act like you're not a professional.' For the art of Jim Lambie gilds the aesthetics of amateurism, almost but not quite as a badge of its own sincerity.

Then again, it is an art which seems to speak of the way in which postmodernism has evolved a visual culture approaching critical mass. The trend analyst Peter York – in another epoch-defining line – has described the advanced consumer landscape which we inhabit (and if you think you do not inhabit it yet, be warned – they are coming!) as nothing more than, 'so much of everything'. We are gorged on choice; culturally, perhaps, we are gorged on gorgeousness. More colour! More glitter! We have every style in every shade in the history of visual culture at our fingertips. Last year, I heard an MA student of Communication Design say: 'Everything is just another look these days.' And as Tom Wolfe said of Marshall McLuhan: 'What if he's right?' It seems to me that the art of Jim Lambie, whether consciously or not, is both addressing these concerns and, in part, is a product of them. He is very adept at rearranging context with his art. By sourcing an old glove with a fraying finger-end, and bejewelling it with buttons, and giving it a title – *The First Wave* (2001) – which wears its puns quite cheerfully, Lambie maintains an art-making

process which is at once disruptive, casually satirical, delicately crafted, flamboyantly dandified and more than capable of leaving a kind of sparkling sedimentary dissolve of rhinestone glamour. An artist who will dip a bunch of carrots in a tin of brilliant paint and call it '24 carats'? Bugs, meet Beuys.

To experience the art of Jim Lambie is to be drawn, firstly, to the tug of what we might describe as the gravitational field of sensory delight. His sparkling record decks, vinyl-taped floors, shining safety pins, lustrous pearls, plastic belts, velveteen Alice bands and constellations of single staring eyes – all are linked by the sheer charm with which they seem to greet scrutiny. With his exhibition *Male Stripper*, there is a refinement of Lambie's art, which is both an advance and a consolidation, it seems, on the work which has gone before it. The signature piece, *Male Stripper* (2003), comprises the patterning of the gallery floor with alternate strips of black and white duct tape, creating an effect which might be described as more Op art than psychedelic. But where Op art, historically, was an extrapolation of post-Impressionism, somewhat dismayed at its comparisons with head-trip patterns, in Lambie's work the ethos seems far less cerebral – and utterly at ease with references to pop and rock styling.

Not surprisingly, such a visceral, dizzying intervention within the gallery space as *Male Stripper* triggers a new relationship to the other pieces: a 'self-portrait', *Red Head* (2003), made of underpants, tape and glitter no less, which appears to survey the installation from a corner of the gallery with all the inscrutable insolence of a medieval, stone-carved Green Man looking down into the nave of a church. And perhaps most dramatically, *Rock Me Move Me* (2003) – a messily blue-glossed mattress, hanging in landscape format on the gallery wall and dripping curiously lascivious trails of paint to the floor. It is a piece which seems to typify the comic element in Lambie's art – a clownish relentlessness, just slightly unhinged.

In terms of its sensibility, the art of Jim Lambie reminds me of the rococo splendour of Blackpool's Tower Ballroom – that great conflation of theatrical pronouncement and swaggering, pop cultural fantasy, where the slow rotation of the glitterball dapples the Tizer-coloured dance floor with silver leaves of reflected light. And there is a sympathy,

too, between the visual language of Jim Lambie's art – that willingness to charm – and the quotation from Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1592–93) which runs in elegant italics above the Tower Ballroom's stage: 'Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear.' Aesthetically, Lambie's tape and glitter and safety pins and blue-glossed mattresses, might all be said to ventriloquise the subtle seductiveness of Shakespeare's invitation. For as the Tower Ballroom was conceived as a people's palace – mirrored and magical with coloured light and gilded cherubs – so Lambie's art appears to have its roots in a democracy of wonder: in the new, imaginary worlds conjured up by vivid patterning, luxurious texture and refinement of detail.

Into this mix – and Lambie has an interest in music, as player and DJ, which runs parallel to his interest in visual art – there is the whole unwieldy baggage of pop and rock mythology. The art of Jim Lambie has been likened to the jaw-dropping visual extravagance of funk styling from the early to mid-1970s: the kind of Bootsy Collins, Parliament and Funkadelic cartoon super-heroism, which, once one's retinas have had time to relax, would make Liberace's bathroom in Las Vegas appear Buddhist in its modesty. Then again, his colour schemes have been likened to the day-glo *trompe l'oeil* of psychedelia, while here and there you will find all those pop-hip references to everything on the art-school jukebox from Gary Glitter to Joy Division.

In a work such as *Graffiti* (1999), for instance, Lambie encrusts a record deck (with the exception of its volume control and central spindle) with blue glitter, and suspends from beneath it what seems to be a tangled hornet's nest of shining safety pins and gum-ball sized pearls. It is a work which would not look out of place in a Prince video; it seems to be contemporary art's equivalent of the classic Kustom Kars of West Coast auto-culture. For here is an object which delights the eye, first and foremost. It is also, indisputably, a product of Mass Age pop styling. Were it more sinister in tone (as opposed to a bundle of sparkling exuberance) you might think it a hybrid, neo-Surrealist artefact: *Smash Hits* meets Meret Oppenheim. Like much of Lambie's art, *Graffiti* owns no particular allegiance to any one system of interpretation. His work represents, for some viewers, the consciousness of popular music. To others, his art is in a lineage of shamanistic objects – in terms of investing commonplace

items with a quasi-magical significance. To academic anthropologists this would make Lambie, as an artist, a member of the tribe who had been chosen by supernatural forces to channel messages from the gods.

But I think of Jim Lambie as more 'sha-na-na' than shamanistic. His delight appears to be in rerouting the potency of pop styling to the formal structures of art, and, in doing so, creating both a homage to and a vivid cartoon of visual meaning. His work is filled with wit and puns, giddy on the intoxications of pure pop as much as pure colour. His *Psychedelic Soul Sticks* (2001) joins *The First Wave* of his single decorated glove as contenders for shamanistic accessories. (Michael Jackson and Gilbert & George have included the stick and the glove within their ceremonial repertoire.) Possibly Lambie makes reference to the badges of heightened consciousness, as much as to the history of art or the reclamation of pop-age detritus. Of necessity he retains his ambiguity, to keep the conduits open.

There is a theory, put forward by Tom Wolfe back in 1976, that artisan craft – meaning here the work of advertising art directors, industrial designers and commercial illustrators – is every bit as sophisticated, artistically, as the work of those artists who reference its glamour. And I like to imagine that Jim Lambie is an artist who would appreciate both the generosity and the contrariness of such an idea. 'The very term "popular culture", Wolfe writes, 'has unconsciously become a wall protecting serious art from the competition of the more sophisticated and gifted creatures, the platinum huns, as it were, in the... world out there.'

With its ability to appear both meaningful and meaningless, Lambie's art takes a place between decoration and enshrinement – derives its pleasure, perhaps, from a joyously easeful, simultaneous residence within those two states. What emerges from this happy coexistence across opposing states of visual culture – from gorgeousness to intimations of profundity and enigma – is a captivating tension of cultural status. In the mesmeric patterning, for instance, with coloured vinyl tapes, of a vast or ergonomically awkward gallery floor, is the visitor being presented with the latest affirmation of Aesthetic movement 'chic' – with the equivalent, that is, in terms of a postmodern reclamation of psychedelic styling, of a peacock feather and some blue and white china? Or is one witnessing the realisation – with profound art-historical respectability – of some

extraordinary experiment with colour, materials and form? Decoration or doodle? Art or artisan? Tabernacle or tabula rasa? The tension in Lambie's art appears to tighten between such poles; and to find its pleasure in responding: 'All of the above – or none. Or what you will.'

It seems important to his interest in context that Lambie is a graduate of Glasgow School of Art's Department of Environmental Media. In a particularly energised period, around the beginning of the 1990s, this department was also attended by Christine Borland, Douglas Gordon and David Shrigley. Subsequent to the intensely questioning, literary romanticism of the 'New Image Glasgow' group of artists in the mid-1980s – the paintings of Steven Campbell and Adrian Wiszniewski, in particular, seeming to articulate the confrontation between a vertiginous postmodernism and the romantic sense of identity – a reactive conceptualism seemed to enter Scottish art, one aspect of which was museological, the other based more on intuition. To generalise, the work of both Borland and Gordon appears more cerebral, while the art of both Shrigley and Lambie seems ambient, intuitive, and emotionally driven. The early 1990s was a period of reinvention within the contemporary art scene in Scotland. While New Image Glasgow explored the notions of a specifically Scottish anti-heroism, both reacting to the European expressionism of the 1980s and dismantling its intellectualism, the subsequent generation appeared more concerned with the proactive, pop-hip development of their local context. Sharing with their immediate predecessors the fact that they were more European in their outlook than British but culturally defined as Scotland-based, this generation would pioneer a school of trans-media, densely peer-networked art, much of which played with notions of amateurism, DIY low-fi aesthetics, intuition, narrative, and, importantly, the history and mythology of popular music.

This last concern was in part a generational response to having grown up with a personal sense of culture, in which the experience of rock or pop music was probably as important, if not more so, as the history of art, film or literature. In addition to becoming DJs or forming their own groups – both of which activities Jim Lambie pursued with enthusiasm – artists began to play with the idea of themselves as fans, mixers and samplers, producing bodies of work which adopted both the rhetoric of pop and the poised passion of the bedroom shrine to a particular array

of stars. Pop and rock music, perhaps, had become the equivalent of Nature for this generation of artists, and within it they saw their notions of heroism, faith or Utopia – their sense of history, legend and epiphany. As Warhol had noted nearly 40 years earlier, during his drive across America with Taylor Mead in October 1962: 'Pop wasn't an issue or an option for this new wave: it was all they'd ever known.'

Lambie's art pays homage to the aura of rock and pop music. It is an art which seems drawn to the synthetic material of rock and pop's costume, packaging and pagantry. In *Acid Perm* (2002), for example, Lambie montaged vinyl 45s and albums, on which the central label is replaced with a single, made-up staring eye (these look like the eyes of women modelling hair products); each eye seems to weep a tear, these tears described by thin belts, dangling from the record's central hole. The work is both eerie and impersonal; it has the air of some weird tribal artefact, made in the near future by scavengers of waste commodities. It might be an altarpiece for some arcane shrine in the bedsit of a pop-obsessed stalker. Clearly enjoying the ambiguity of his art, as its materials and titles play games with meaning, Lambie offers few clues as to what the work's intention might be – beyond whatever ideas or feelings it prompts in the viewer. In his glitter and cascading ribbons, there is tremendous exuberance; yet there is also emptiness – bejewelled and enshrined, perhaps, but presenting its vacancy like a gift. The belts might be said to pun on melancholy. Are these belts old or new? Bought or found? They seem to speak of the past – of youth remembered perhaps. There is the air of pathos which is often ascribed to abandoned clothes or the boxes of second-hand haberdashery in charity shops – the sense of life's residual clutter, with a slow dissolve between their appearance and whatever history we might imagine for them. In this much, the art of Jim Lambie seems to answer the equation put forward by the cultural historian Celeste Olalquiaga in her study of kitsch, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Sensibility* (1998), identifying both 'melancholic' and 'nostalgic' kitsch as products of a larger sensibility of loss.¹

'Loss' seems an important word in the art of Jim Lambie – that which has been misplaced or discarded. The word 'kitsch' derives in part from the German '*kitschen*', meaning 'to collect junk from the streets', and

much has been written about Lambie's use of commonplace objects and materials in his art to which he gives new purposes – a mattress is saturated with gloss paint, and hung on the wall like a painting, or a mirror becomes a table top, seemingly supported on a pedestal of brightly coloured, gently curling ribbons. Their presumed function tilted to surprising ends, rather than actually transformed, these materials become beautified: they are granted heightened aesthetic presence; they seem to become vivacious, even within the aura of pathos – or indeed absurdity – which accompanies their altered state. His *Midnight Adonis* (2003) is a sleek example of such a transformation – a Plexiglas eyelash suspended by interlinking silver chains. Its effect is that of a lovingly crafted icon, constructed out of a boutique of leftovers.

Lambie is perhaps best known for his mesmeric patterning, with vinyl tapes, of gallery floors – initially made under the collective title, *Zobop*. These pieces have an immediacy and a sheer aesthetic force. They are compelling in their form, composition and colour. Well described by Lizzie Carey-Thomas as, 'a sort of distorted architectural footprint',² these interventions have also been seen to represent Lambie's interest in psychedelia – that amorphous moment in the mid to late 1960s, when musical subculture merged with chemically heightened ideology to express the workings and inner landscape of the mind in terms of new art forms and new models for behaviour and social communities. In terms of their colour and intensity, the *Zobop* floor pieces might be said to replicate the aesthetics of psychedelia in its historical sense, just as *Male Stripper* refers, among other stylistic quotations, to the aesthetics of Op art. Yet there seems to be a consciousness of form which establishes their presence as utterly postmodern. In terms of the history of pop aesthetics, Lambie's roots are showing, and to spectacular effect.

The art of Jim Lambie twins the slapstick or the bizarre with the suggestion of aesthetic transubstantiation: these bits and pieces, which could have been found in a back bedroom or a corner of the garden shed, have now been elected, as though mystically, to the quasi-sanctified status of works of art. Mirrors and ribbons, gloss paint and glitter: these are all materials which suggest a kind of glamour – the glamour of rococo jukebox casing or pearlised tail fins. And the root of glamour, etymologically, is the conflation of 'language' and 'magic'. It is as if Jim Lambie

simulates the splendour of luxury goods (those affirmations of status, exclusivity and taste) through the medium of cheap, commonplace materials. They seem to share something of the visual tone of Art Deco – a similar dedication to extravagance – to proclamation as opposed to meaning. In its aggressive modernity, the intention of Art Deco was to render exotic the equipment of the modern world – a car, a cigarette case, a dressing table. As a style, Art Deco consulted the Casbah as much as Cartier: speed-lined Orientalism, proclaiming its exotica, was merged with urbane sophistication in one deluxe confection. Such punchy equations of object, material and context, I think, would appeal to Lambie. (How about beautifying the redundant equipment of the modern world, for instance?)

Even as much of his art fits (at an angle, perhaps) within the framework of Minimalism, his sense of texture and value seems always profound. The work, like most of Lambie's art, has an air of pride about it, a regal gesture, declamatory and dandified. Thus, as Lambie appears to play games with the idea of authorship and value, he also questions the status of art making and art made. There is often the sense of lost, worthless or abandoned objects being invested with a new meaning and importance. You might think of Mexican household shrines, or the kind of folk art – touching on Outsider art – which has been produced by obsessive fans for whom pop souvenirs are honed – willed, almost, as a form of Cargo Cult magic – into a form of tribal fetish or mojo. This is a further instance of the sense of transubstantiation which permeates much of Lambie's art: the conversion of baubles into treasure and reliquary, and the election of the worthless to the priceless. It is the postmodern sleight of hand when faced with the enduring modernist challenge: 'I have brought the great ball of crystal,' wrote Ezra Pound in his *Cantos* (1915–62), 'Who can lift it?' Too true, Ezra!

Jim Lambie: Male Stripper, Modern Art Oxford, Oxford, 2004, unpaginated.