

Herald St | Museum St

Pablo Bronstein's new film, *Cupid's Caprice*, is a Jacobean court masque transplanted onto 1950s gameshow format, peppered with a camp bitchiness. It's queens slagging off queens, in both senses of the word. Spectacle is layered on spectacle, tawdry allegories of Venus and Mars slapsticked onto a crude, exaggerated theatrical set that is literally falling apart at the seams. The illusion of a 'magnificent palazzo' – 'Cupid's palace of love' – is rendered obscene – laughable, even – with Herald St's flaking ceiling and the film crew's water bottles creeping into the frame. Choreographed ornamental subservience in thrall to power and taste is exposed for exactly what it is: a façade.

The theatrical masque genre emerged as a form of court entertainment early 17th century, combining choreographed dance and monologues by masked performers with the purpose of glorifying the nobility. It was a form of flattery – performed subordination – that increasingly involved the object of power in the production, blurring distinctions between spectator and stage. In Bronstein's masque, the artist has supplanted this central figure, playing the show's host, Mercury. Rather than receiving praise, he dishes out shade, refuting the liberal ideal of a universal queer brotherhood ('total bullshit', in Bronstein's words); instead it's just 'grim old queens' reading each other in a much closer representation of behind-the-scenes reality. This plays on the artist's physical language of *sprezzatura* – an embodied nonchalance or defensive irony – developed over the last 15 years. There is a studied carelessness to the way Bronstein delivers his offhand, throwaway snubs, yet there is also a kind of airy whimsy that floats above any malice. It's 1970s *Fawlty Towers* preposterous back-and-forth, ostentatiously absurd in its interweaving of bitching and dance, of historical periods and genres. It's decadently heavy on innuendo. Signalling the approach of Mars, all decked out in military gear and heavy boots, Bronstein (or Mercury) declares, 'There's a big crack up my masonry.'

At Museum St, a series of drawings of clocks continues Bronstein's symbolic vernacular of taste. Clocks – themselves highly stylised objects – are containers of the grand European project of scientific knowledge and enlightenment, choreographing trade routes, time zones and hotel lobbies into synchronised uniformity. Bronstein has been making drawings of clocks for several years, yet this is the first standalone presentation of this body of work, showing a new divergence from objects of time-telling towards representations of buildings that also serve this purpose. A fascination with the macho self-flattery of 'world's largest' categories led the artist to the Colgate Factory in Jersey City – an Edward Hopper-esque promo of the American Dream, which turns out to be not much more than a ramshackle façade – and surpassed as world's largest clockface by the Mecca Royal Hotel, which measures 43 metres in diameter. In Bronstein's watercolour, the tower – part of a \$15 billion project – looms large and stalwart above the Hajj, a watchful eye over the site of holy pilgrimage. Both clocks are shameless monuments to capitalist aspiration, flattened into mere imagery, dead stand-ins for virile bawdy ornamentation.

Other clocks in the show are what the artist terms 'hypothetical but plausible'. Some timepieces tend towards the natural: an ornate flower clock embodies a kind of Disneyland kitsch that butts heads with the Mies van der Rohe skyscraper it is designed to be viewed from. Both structures are subsequently squashed down to two-dimensional optical illusion – bourgeois modernist taste compressed into a kind of diagram. In *Regency Toleware Clock in the form of a plant*, Darwin's monstrous side of nature has been allowed to run wild, recalling the savage exoticism of Octave Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices*, or *The Torture Garden*. Colonialism's brutal civilising project is on show in Bronstein's unnerving, unnatural hybrid clock-plant. It presents itself to the viewer in its theatrical frame, performing a kind of lugubrious monologue that gestures towards the darker side of Regency England: empire, slavery, war. Another work, *Greenwich Pendulum mantel clock*, subverts the international traveller aesthetic of hotel lobby clocks in different time zones. Greenwich Mean Time takes prominence top and centre, with cities from around the British Empire placed in subservient position underneath. It's almost a court masque in itself – laying bare the spectacle of empire, the theatricality of power. There's a *sprezzatura* to time's authority, its relentlessness seeming absurd at moments, ironic at others. In *Arcades*, a row of bourgeois Haussmannien arcades stretches on and on limitlessly, clocks perpetually marking 7pm. In Bronstein's world, the leisurely glamour of the middle classes is a pageant, the city is a stage set, and the choreographed performance of time makes subservient queens out of us.

Text by Phoebe Cripps

Pablo Bronstein (b. 1977, Buenos Aires) lives and works in London. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Conservatism, or the Long Reign of Pseudo-Georgian Architecture*, RIBA, London (2017); *Tate Britain Commission 2016: Pablo Bronstein*, Tate Britain, London; *Wall Pomp*, Pallant House Gallery, Chichester (2016); *The Grand Tour*, Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, and Chatsworth House, Derbyshire (2015). In 2019 Bronstein will have a solo show at the Fondazione Sviluppo e Crescita CRT, Turin, and in 2020 he will have a solo exhibition at Sir John Soane's Museum, London.