

M. L^EBLANC

The Specter of What's to Come: Mark Verabioff's FORSAKEN STATES

Subverting right wing conspiracy theories, pop culture memes, and cultural hierarchies of high versus low, Mark Verabioff's latest exhibition, *FORSAKEN STATES*, is the perfect foil for our deeply troubled times. In the three large-scale collage paintings and floor decal on view, the artist's signature mix of appropriated text and imagery concocts an absurdist, equivocal vision of America where "gouty Karens and Kens", hunky models, white trash antiheroines, and queer patricians hold sway.



Maude's Dilemma (Part II), 2020, Maude's Dilemma (Part I), 2020

Maude's Dilemma (Part I and Part II), 2020, for example, both bear the phrase LIBBERNAG, a blending of the words Libber and Nag, inspired by the television series, Mrs. America. The artist has long relished in lacing together provocative strings of slang words populist, political, and academic alike to create a word salad of insurgent nonsense. In this Trumpian age of Fake News such wordplay eerily mimics the dissembling nature of propaganda that continues to threaten our sense of democracy. Baudrillardian critique of media, or aping of simulacra. Rather, like his isolated appropriation of Gore Vidal's comment, "Well, the

Constitution has not yet been pregnant", stenciled alongside the canvas edge of Part I, the stripping of language from its narrative context - here, an abortion rights discussion on the Ali G show - renders it paradoxically compelling and nonsensical. It's notable that Maude's Dilemma takes its name from an episode of the titular 1970s sitcom wherein Maude has an abortion (the first representation of an abortion) on prime time TV.

The artist's iconic page tears, ripped like headlines from fashion and art magazines, similarly hijack their glossy origins by weaponizing their glamour with dark wit. Long a staple in his work, most notably in his *ANTIFA* and *abercrombie AF* series (2018-2019), these repurposed ads serve a queer feminist agenda yet preclude easy readings. In recent years, they've migrated onto black canvases where they remain marred, annotated, and redacted with spray paint swirls, prison tears, gum lesions, strips of artist tape, and pools of acrylic medium. In *FORSAKEN STATES*, the artist adds to his gestural lexicon with the inclusion of political buttons à la "Gay Karen And Angry", which are emblazoned across Part II like a marching slogan.

Several of the page tears in *Maude's Dilemma* come from vintage sources. A photo of a man taken from the book, *Transformations: Crossdressers and Those Who Love Them* (1990) by Mariette Pathy is featured in Part 1 (adorned with the button "How Dare You Presume My Gender"); and a 1973 Blackgama furrier ad with Liza Minnelli under the brand's slogan, "What Becomes a Legend Most" holds court in Part II. Enlisted as actors-cum-soldiers in Verabioff's army of glamorous insurgents, these figures summon the political rhetoric of trans rights, and anti-fur campaigns, without finger-wagging indictments.



ANTIFA, 2018, page tear, acrylic medium, HP-564, artist tape, black zig memory system, 12 x 9 in (30.48 x 22.86 cm)

The 1970s-era image of Vidal whose face appears in the lower left corner of Part 1, adjacent to his excerpted speech, does much the same. The white viscous smear of medium that runs off it to the right suggests a visual portmanteau of analog video wipes and hookup apps à la Grindr and Scruff. The layers of cut-up white tape that cover his mouth also have multivalent associations, conjuring bandages and gags, and despite being applied pre-COVID, the masks that have become the pandemic's defining - and most contentious - symbol.

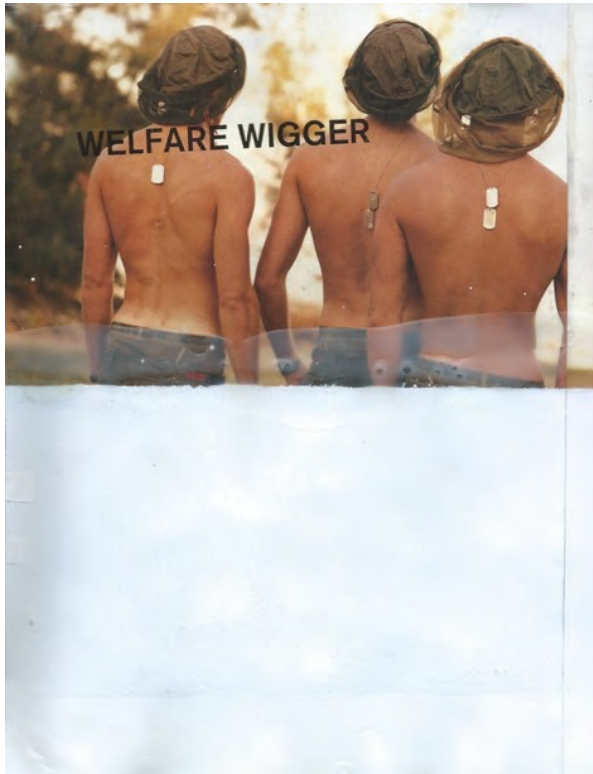
Verabioff's decision to couple Vidal's image with a Saint Laurent ad of two male models in American flag-patterned shorts offers another kind of portmanteau. Printed from an Instagram account, replete with handle (@gayhorror666) and cursor, the beefcake duo are positioned directly across from him. an actual flag, their eyes grafted with outsized prison tears. The latter invests their patriotic stylings with the

specter of murder, a menacing association enhanced by the sandwiching of the models between a blood-red rectangle and a portrait of Prince Andrew from his Navy days. The royal's honorable past and his recent disgrace in the aftermath of the Harvey Weinstein scandal seem to vie for posterity here; which version will his-tory remember best?

Verabioff's mashup of references in Maude's Dilemma, both within and between images, finds its apotheosis in the fictional character Darlene, from the television show, *The Ozarks*. Represented by the largest page tear in the series, she anchors the "left" corner of Part II, taking the position of Vidal in Part I. Known for her wily redneck persona, at a crucial point in the show she unexpectedly morphs into an ally, protecting her female nemesis, Ruth, by shooting off a man's "pecker". Echoing the white buttons that surround her, which turn the popular Karen meme/slur on its head, Verabioff turns the antiheroine into a "sister" for the cause. Exactly what cause that is remains deliberately open-ended.

The giant floor decal, *PRISS MORAL CORRECTNESS SUSPICIOUS SNUFF QUALITY CUL-TURE*, 2020, echoes this refusal of coherence. Its title runs along the bottom edge of the work like a dialogue of friendly fire below a shirtless muscular man in blue jeans who leans against a Harley Davidson customized with an American flag. *Action Pants IV* (2020), one of the artist's totem sculptures made of repurposed pair of Acne jeans sits on top of it. Spray painted black, its vertically knotted, wrapped, and rumpled form is artfully arranged onto a metal pole.

Dark and attenuated, its gothic silhouette hovers deliberately between abstraction and figuration. Upon closer look, one finds a set of dog-tags on a necklace dangled around it; one tag repeating the decal/title, the other bearing the most charged word in the show: QANON. Perhaps we're looking at one of the



abercrombie AF, 2019, page tear, PG-245, spray paint,
artist tape, black zig memory system, 10.75 x 8.5 in (27.31 x 21.59 cm)

Fascist Bros that Verabioff identifies in other works, perhaps even a gay one. The artist though, with his penchant for re-appropriating slurs, suggests it could stand for Queer Anonymous instead.

As always, these slippages - like the work itself - find a surreptitious appeal in their resolute defiance of logic. As we face a future in which the very notion of truth may become as obsolete as our latest devices, such derailments become harbingers and folly alike. The refusal to make meaning cohere serves as a clarion call as well, confronting us with the specter of what's to come. In the end, Verabioff's *FORSAKEN STATES*, with its absurdist theater of resistance, asks us to become our own insurgents, questioning the world around us, and the world within, even if we can't make sense of either.

- Jane Ursula Harris, September 2020