



SINGER

IAIN CHEESMAN

SAMPLER

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AN AUTOMATIC WELCOME

"If we choose, we can live in a world of comforting illusion."
- Noam Chomsky

"*Odi et amo*"
- Catullus

An Automatic Welcome (perhaps punning on 'automatic' weapons) is a multimedia installation by Dunedin-based artist Iain Cheesman. It explores the things of war through the dichotomy of Sex and Violence (at the heart of all Western culture from Shakespeare to Hollywood, J. G. Ballard to Georges Bataille) as "a camouflaged form of anti war protest" – something highly meaningful and relevant in these internationally dangerous times. Thankfully, Cheesman's resilient humour survives the harrowing seriousness of his subject. The aesthetic might have been borrowed from a 19th century brothel with its kitschy-sensual fabrics and frills, and its whorish mauves, fuchsias and puces, making ironic erotic fetishes out of the signifiers and pomp of war.

Cheesman's current practice is in creating a large, coherent body of work concerned with the idea of responsibility for world events, where individual social values are assessed in connection with military action and re-action, the war in Iraq for example. The Physics Room installation is part two of this project (continuing from Cheesman's Blue Oyster exhibition *Contact* earlier this year).

The right-wing media already fetishises war when trying to be patriotic (the left calls it 'war porn'), but Cheesman's satire goes further. He takes the boy-child's obsession with war, its heroes and villains, as his starting point. Violence exudes an almost sexual charisma – the ultimate *Amour fou*. Even terrorism has a certain undeniable glamour for some, the Patty Hurst case being an example of profound seduction by a dangerous cause. We usually, however, learn our political enemies at the breast.

"A small boy learns to play war on the living room carpet..."¹

The childhood element becomes quite apparent in the sculptural and toy components of the installation. The creation of scale models, psychology tells us, reflects the desire to exert absolute control over our environment, again something intrinsic to war. And yet the masculine nature of war has been completely subverted by the feminine colours and furbelows.

One wall is dominated by an enormous swastika (still one of the most charged of symbols) formed by four gun silhouettes made of pink and sage green carpet. It suggests fascism has a friendlier and less obvious face these days. The audiovisual component forms a narrative that suggests fire and guns. Two toy dogs represent Britain and America, inspired by the bronze corgis outside the Physics Room on High Street. John Wayne (sampled from the 1949 war movie *Sands Of Iwo Jima*) spouts propagandistic gibberish from the bulldog's rear end.



The central feature of this installation suggests another sigh of our times: airport security – that most transitional place of flux. This is evoked by a construct that is part quilted purple sarcophagus, part wendyhouse, nuclear submarine, toy Noah's Ark, tabernacle and x-ray machine for examining suitcases (but with the campest of drag queen ruffles). Occasionally there are hints of the bedroom which add a further sexual angle and link to the 'French boudoir' aesthetic of the overall installation. "Home is the sanctuary to most, but respect for another's home is not always considered."² These reflect a vertiginous reoccurring dream from Cheesman's childhood, in which he was in a bed slowly edging its way off a cliff (In Freudian analysis, this is usually considered an unconscious metaphor for fear of losing control – particularly associated with the adolescent discovery of orgasm).

The arrival lounge becomes a kind of sexual orifice as if from the imagination of William S. Burroughs.

"I place my bag on the conveyor belt, it disappears from my view, through a heavy curtain, an enclosed Berlin wall that curiously provides almost all of us with an electronic absolution."³

Indeed, suitcases and baggage form a regular part of Cheesman's work. Here we find briefcases (with chrome car lettering – aggressive names live Victor, Hunter and Avenger), symbolic of the relationship of Big Business with the military, each holding a toy weapon in coffin-like padding, acting as portable *wunderkammern*.

Cheesman's art often works within the realms of communication, words, image and insatiable desires. In the context of this work he writes: "It seems today more than ever, that the GUN is more prolific than the WORD. Media affects the environment for us, it is clever with its associated visual devices, the image is presented as a mightier force than the word, the image is truth (unless it's a proven fake), and so what are we confronted with? Visual truths of war and violence, the good and the bad, the righteous and the wrong, a photo or film of a gun or a tank or a missile is wrapped as an unjust cause or a justified reaction."⁴

The Barry Levinson De Niro/Hoffman movie *Wag the Dog* (1997) and the linguist/philosopher Noam Chomsky have both laid bare the nature of media control, and Foucault made a pretty good argument that truth, right and wrong are all merely decided by elitist consensus. The art suggests we play closer attention than merely readily accept the sugar coating of what consensus directed by political and media authority would have us believe, dulled as we are by carefully edited media bombardment and semiotic saturation. But then again, perhaps art itself is simply another form of propaganda. Both try to stir the passions in order to persuade you to their point of view. Are the viewers anything more than, as Cheesman puts it, "inert participants who are constantly being fooled"?⁵

Andrew Paul Wood
June 2004

¹ Artist's statement, 2004.

² Ibid.

³ Artist's statement to The Physics Room, 2003.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Iain Cheesman was born in England, but raised and educated in New Zealand. He graduated with a BFA in painting from the Otago Polytechnic School of Art in 2002 and lives in Dunedin where he is a member of the Blue Oyster Art Trust.

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