



Laurence Figgis, *Costume for Styrene (study)*, 2016, crayon on paper, 42x29cm

Cold War. In Figgis's work, a similar agenda is at play. In *The Mar'ge* (2017), a royal procession is seen through cleaned-for-the-Queen, blood-red pillars, the crowds in shadow, an anonymous prole throng. A foxed, tarnished present is reflected back to us in the gaudy gilt objects of *After the Mar'ge* (2017), ripe for the bonfire of the vanities in Austerity Britain. Amongst the tableware, an image of a rocket, rendered in ice-cream colours, decorates the dinner plate of a sinister papal figure or corrupt Medici priest. The image of *The General* (2017), could have been lifted from Oskar Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet, but this heavy automaton figure could also be a latter-day iron maiden, a metal burka for men, a contemporary Pharisee, a suit of armour for a paranoid dictator. *The Club-Grande* (2017) is part Versailles, part Met Ball, and surrounded, everywhere, by watchful eyes: Rhianna meets *La Reine Margot*. Velásquez's and Picasso's Infantas become *The Goddess of Land Services* (2017) in architectonic, draggy crinoline. All of these works could be read as allegory: what was once deemed stupid, reactionary, even implausible in this day and age is, once again, political fact, ushered in and made possible by 'seductive pageantry'<sup>1</sup>.

*Bad Retail*, Figgis's prose-romance, was produced in parallel to the paintings and prints in *(After) After*.

Seen together, the verbal and visual elements become a kind of contemporary illuminated manuscript, populated by characters who appear across both narrative forms. In its written form, the language of political spin and *corporatese* is taken to Dada-esque extremes – protagonists speak in an argot populated by buzzwords, in-jokes and neologisms recognisable to any institutional or academic worker disorientated by committee-speak and acronymic dialogue. A bureaucratic nightmare, akin to a phone call to the city council, communication in *Bad Retail* is bound up by labyrinthine codes. Figgis's tale also refers to the authoritarian language of classic dystopian narratives by Ursula Le Guin, George Orwell or Anthony Burgess. If, in Figgis's work, 'the tyrant becomes an administrator'<sup>2</sup> the pompous patois of admin is used to extreme comedic effect – the embedded, decontextualized fragments of Glaswegian dialect, Figgis's adopted city, are cases in point.

The text, like the visual works, constitutes an act of pillaging and self-plagiarism: references to earlier works in the artist's oeuvre are manifold. Through his verbal and visual forms, 'full of tell-tale fault lines and stitches'<sup>3</sup>, Figgis has sought to dramatise the equivalence of collage to anachronism, using the fractures and glitches created by both ways of working to foster a reading of 'period' costume, setting or speech which acts in the same push/pull manner as flatness in Modernist painting. Can we be in both places at once? Are we *here* or *there*?

#### ENDNOTES:

1. Figgis, L. (2017) 'Bad Retail: A Romantic Fiction', *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, London: Intellect (forthcoming).
2. Strauss, L. (1991) *On Tyranny* (expanded edition). New York: Free Press, p.255.
3. Figgis, *op cit*.



## AFTER (AFTER)

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In February 2003 the US Secretary of State Colin Powell made an official statement to the Council and the international media on the decision to invade Iraq. Behind him, on the wall of the anteroom to the UN Security Council Chamber, hung one of a number of full-size tapestry copies of Picasso's *Guernica* by Jacqueline de la Baume Dürnbach. The image was deemed an 'inappropriate' backdrop to this formal announcement and was quickly covered over with a blue curtain. The episode – the veiling of politically-



Laurence Figgis, *Athener*, 2017, acrylic paint on canvas, 90x60cm

loaded imagery which both prefigured the destruction to come as well as memorialising another, earlier twentieth-century atrocity – became emblematic. *Guernica*-inspired imagery was subsequently used on countless placards in the marches and gatherings held in opposition to the invasion. The re-appropriation of *Guernica* in this way, as a horribly ironic political allegory, is apposite in considering the critical intentions underpinning Laurence Figgis's *(After) After*. Evolving from an interest in art-historical citation, and, specifically, the strategic use of anachronism, the works are concerned with the way the past becomes the present, again, and ever after.

The artist's research for *(After) After* was informed by two bodies of work produced in the late 1950s: Pablo Picasso's 1957 series of paintings after Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) and Robert Rauschenberg's 1958–60 drawings illustrating the thirty-four cantos of Dante's *Inferno* (1308–1320). Along with Picasso and Rauschenberg, other visual inspiration comes from the work of British illustrator Eric Winter, known primarily for his contributions to Ladybird Books' *Well-Loved Tales*, and the US painter Eyvind Earle, who worked for



Laurence Figgis, *The Goddess of Land Services*, digital print on canvas, 2017, 118x168cm

Walt Disney, amongst others. Figgis's figurative paintings and digital prints implicitly ask how mid-twentieth-century and post-war visual culture might inform contemporary narrative culture. How might we look to these works as reference points for current anxieties about technological progress, social inequality, gender and sexual politics? Following Picasso's Cubist take on Velázquez's painting, Figgis's own works similarly aim to generate a critical dialogue between art of the past and present. In looking back to earlier historical periods, the works simultaneously speak to their own particular moment in history.

The reflection of Cold War-era politics through the lens of historical allegory in the works by Picasso and Rauschenberg form the basis for Figgis's own imaginative fiction, a cross-genre narrative referencing gothic romance, dystopian literature and fairy tales. Employing *anachorism* as well as *anachronism*, the settings of these works could be amalgams of Picasso/Velázquez's Royal Court, Rauschenberg/Dante's Hell and the fairy tale worlds of Winter and Earle. The courts, kings and queens of Figgis's tale also echo the speculative fictional worlds of the Glasstown Confederacy, Angria and Gondal, those settings



Laurence Figgis, *The Mar'ge*, 2017, digital print on canvas, 84x118cm



Laurence Figgis, *The General*, 2017, digital print on canvas, 200x141cm

of Brontë juvenilia which teem with duplicitous political scheming, *coup d'états*, and intrigue. If the island colonies of the Brontë children's books and poems can be read as fictional parallels to the Empire-building events of the 1820s and 30s, the spaces in *(After) After* are intended as more deliberate, satirical comments on contemporary culture, in all of its dark, kitsch incongruity.

In their variations of *Las Meninas* and Dante's *Inferno* Picasso and Rauschenberg saw historical appropriation as a way to satirise or respond to the present. Before Picasso, Francisco Goya's 1778 etching of *Las Meninas* and his 1801 painting *Charles IV of Spain and His Family* depicted an altogether less sympathetic portrait of royalty than its source, considered to be a satirical jibe at the corruption and decay of the royal family (a painting within the painting shows the biblical figure of Lot and his daughters). For his part, Picasso's court of King Phillip IV of Spain points to 1950s Spain under Franco, an arch-monarchist, while Rauschenberg's evocation of Dante's Hell was composed of mass-media imagery in the age of McCarthyism and the