

Art

MONTHLY

FEBRUARY 2017 | No 403 | £5 €7 \$8

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Simeon Barclay

TOM EMERY

The London-based, northern artist defies expectations in both his life and work

Winner Takes All
2016 details



In Simeon Barclay's recent exhibition at Cubitt, 'They Don't Like It Up 'Em', the cartoon character Andy Capp follows you around the room. Rendered in neon, he lingers in the reflective surfaces of the exhibition's other works, a constant reminder of the sort of regressive working-class identity that Barclay defies through his work. Capp represents the negative stereotype of working-class identity, a backwards-looking, narrow-minded figure, standing in opposition to those like Barclay who aspire to escape the expectations of being working class. In Barclay's case, these aspirations are made concrete through his practice.

Simply through being an artist Barclay defies working-class expectations, in a climate where artistic practice seems more and more of a luxury for those who can afford to study art and the uncertain prospects of earning a living that typically follow. However, Barclay provides a conflicted voice; he is at once the northerner heading down to London to put it 'up 'em' as well as the artist who references fashion and theatre alongside more typically masculine, working-class pursuits such as sport. Much of Barclay's work lives on this knife-edge, such as in *Winner Takes All*, 2016, a

'They Don't Like It Up 'Em'
installation view
Cubitt, London



three-panel construction of blue acrylic featuring an image of a rugby player straining to catch the ball juxtaposed with an image of Kate Bush, who positions her body in a similar pose.

This particular image selection also demonstrates Barclay's interest in gender boundaries; the rugby player and Bush may find themselves in similar poses, but they could not look more different, he representing masculinity with his mud-covered kit and straining muscles, she presenting an effortlessly graceful pose. Included in *With the thrust of their frames they cut new forms*, 2016, is an image of the actress Maxine Peake as Hamlet, her androgynous appearance suggesting a less binary attitude towards gender. This is developed further when Barclay looks at masculinity specifically and the apparent risks of breaking away from traditionally masculine appearance and behaviour.

Again within *Winner Takes All* – demonstrating the depth of material found in his work, despite its minimal aesthetic – Barclay presents an image of the 'Spice Boys', aka Liverpool FC's team in the mid to late 1990s. The image shows them at their most notorious, dressed in matching white Armani suits ahead of the 1996 FA Cup final, which they would go on to lose to their hated rivals Manchester United. The suits live on in infamy as being representative of an overly cocky attitude, somehow contributing to the loss. Relaxed and dandyish, the players in the image seem more akin to Peake or Bush than the rugby player, and the implication is that the negative attention that they attracted was in part due to their straying from traditional masculine appearance and behaviour. On top of this, the image plays into Barclay's class politics, with footballers typically coming from working-class backgrounds and, as such, finding themselves easier targets of negative press and public opinion.

The Spice Boys are an example of another thread running through the work, that of the tragic, Icarus-like figure, often an athlete, experiencing great success but also failure, apparently due to their own flamboyance. With the *Gatefold Series: I Wish I Knew Then What I Know Now*, 2016, it is Diego Maradona, perhaps the greatest footballer to ever play the game, yet equally well known for his cocaine and doping problems, and, particularly in England, as a cheat, which Barclay refers to here with an image of the infamous 'hand of God' episode. While in earlier works the role was assumed by Eric Cantona or snooker player Alex Higgins, among others, notorious as much as successful individuals who reached the top of their profession only for their own flamboyance or temper to undo them. These are figures who could not help but express themselves in the way they played their respective games, but the desire for freedom and creative expression could lead to failure and public scorn. With the risks inherent in pursuing a career in art, it is not so surprising that Barclay should identify with these personalities.

Gatefold Series is a particularly multi-layered piece, a triptych consisting of Barclay's typical industrially manufactured panels, sparsely adorned with the 'hand of God' image, a brass plaque featuring the outline of a hand and the barely visible text 'SLIGHT'. At once it is a portrait of a man becoming iconic as he transcends his sport by transcending the rules of the game with his illegal goal, a pun on 'sleight of hand', and a moment of victory against colonial power. Barclay refers to his Afro-Caribbean heritage as informing the latter interpretation, the position of the underdog being reversed, rather than the world's greatest player resorting to cheating in order to win, it is a moment of cunning that humiliates the old colonial power.

While Barclay's ethnic background has a presence in his practice, he nonetheless works against the cultural expectations of being a black artist, resisting the pigeonholing that can be forced upon artists from ethnic minority backgrounds. This is perhaps a luxury afforded to him as an artist following the ground broken by those who preceded him, but it also connects with his desire to defy the expectations of being working class, to read *Vogue* as well as to watch football, to practise art rather than continue to work in engineering production. In all areas, Barclay strives to defy external expectations.

The aesthetic of *Gatefold Series* is typical of Barclay's 'structures', as he refers to them: industrially manufactured panels, often in groups of twos or threes, adorned primarily with pop culture imagery. This gives the work a minimalist-pop aesthetic, with their austere uniform surfaces interrupted by the images pasted on, the roughness of which is the only indication of the hand of the artist. There is a distinct lack of fuss where the images are concerned, pulled from the most immediate source to hand, often Google, and unless the work specifically calls for it, little regard given to the quality of the resolution. This creates a scrapbook, or bedroom-wall effect, heightening the personal in contrast to the industrial surface they are found on and allowing the viewer a tangible feeling of the artist's presence.

The choice of colour and finish of the surfaces can be equally as important as what is applied to them, such as the mirrored surfaces of *The Physical Weight*, 2016, *Winner Takes All*, *The smell isn't righteous*, 2016, and *With the thrust of their frames they cut new forms*, the pieces that make up the bulk of his Cubitt exhibition. These mirrored surfaces not only invite the viewer into the piece, but also allow the pieces themselves to interact, most notably with the aforementioned Andy Capp neon *Handicap*, 2016. With the relatively small space that Cubitt provides, and the addition of a looping disco soundtrack, this created an artistic environment for the viewer to be immersed within.

Hard-edged and uniformly shaped within their groupings, the surfaces for Barclay's 'structures' hold a minimalist appeal. They are industrially manufactured objects, but they have been manufactured with care, a manifestation of the material luxury Barclay aspired to when reading *Vogue* in his youth. Barclay's imagery, however, takes the work beyond abstract material appeal, demonstrating a visual wit but also combining apparently disparate concepts to tell multi-layered narratives about our society and the artist's place within it. ■

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