

CURA.

26



9€ 8€ 12€

Few chart toppers so perfectly capture Britain in the early 1980s as ‘two-tone’ band The Specials’ *Ghost Town*. The haunting, eerie, infectious tune perfectly reflected the anger felt by many in Margaret Thatcher’s Britain, as unemployment grew and racial intolerance led to violent confrontations across the country. It’s a time that is also perfectly evoked in the work of Simeon Barclay, who was six years old and living in Huddersfield in 1981, when the song reached number 1 on the charts. In *The Hero Wears Clay Shoes*, his *Art Now* exhibition at Tate Britain (July–November 2017), the artist includes a portrait of The Specials, alongside a host of other culturally significant ciphers that lay out and re-evaluate notions of ‘Britishness’ then and now.

Looking at Barclay’s work reminds me of going through the contents of my teenage bedroom. Having myself spent those years partly in small-town New Zealand in the 1990s, my references were at times different, of course. However, I recognize the exercise of picking through old records, books, and comics, the objects that held special power at that exhilarating and painful time. They are the ingredients constituting that sometimes troubling question of ‘where you are from?’ At the time, they also seemed to whisper a siren call, signaling where you might go. That’s not to say the objects and images he excavates are only personal. It’s not Barclay’s formative years *per se* that have been put under a microscope. While he lays out a raft of references that pinpoint him in a certain time and place, he also asks how these cultural identifiers that influenced him personally are constructed, consumed, and perpetuated in society at large.

Andy Capp, for example, one of the first working class representations in popular culture, strutted in colorful neon across the walls of Barclay’s 2016 exhibition at Cubitt, cap pulled characteristically low. Plug, one of the rebellious *Bash Street Kids*, has made appearances; and,

in a huge leaning billboard at his 2015 exhibition at DAM projects, Elsie Tanner from early *Coronation Street*’s hands hovered perpetually over an ash tray. These references don’t just form an indexical list signifying ‘regional identity,’ they also tell a particular narrative about what that might mean. The iconic image of Vinnie Jones grabbing Paul Gascoigne’s groin, for example, points to the hyper-masculine expectations of football culture. A reference to Howard Gayle, Liverpool Football Club’s first non-white player, speaks of the resilience of a young footballer able to overcome and thrive in an overwhelmingly hostile culture of racism in the 1980s.

Barclay relays these metonyms on slick, polished, lightboxes, billboards, and posters, and within large, timber and metal constructions that are reminiscent of both advertising and Minimalism. They also draw on years of experience Barclay accrued working as an engineer before starting a degree in Fine Arts. His use of construction materials feels significant in a contemporary art world that may like to appear to stretch across borders, but in reality requires membership to increasingly narrow social strata. Despite the variety of non-art jobs most artists must do in order to survive—much of it construction or ‘technician’ work—such references to manual labor are often peculiarly absent from the way art is performed, presented, and seen. Barclay’s use of glossy, reflective surfaces also cleverly supports the content of his work. An overriding thread that runs through several of his exhibitions is how popular culture in the 1980s reflected a search for self-definition at a time of crisis and change, and how this search for self was (and is) shaped by the persuasive power of mass media.

Film, television, and celebrity culture are paramount in this conversation. A good example of this is his work *Royal Flush* (2017), which replays a scene from Alan Bleasdale’s brilliant 1982 television series *Boys from the Blackstuff* in which Yosser Hughes meets Graeme Sou-





ness. A hard-as-nails, no-nonsense Liverpool FC captain, Souness is the idol of the fictional Hughes, who has recently lost his wife, his job, and his sense of identity. Barclay is interested in the strange collision of fact and fiction in this scene. While he plays himself, the role Souness adopts in the film is nonetheless an identity of stereotypical white working class masculinity that most likely bears little relation to the more complex off-field, off-camera identity of Souness himself. In a double diptych, Barclay has them gazing at each other across images of ‘English Rose’ actresses Jane Seymour and an *Under the Cherry Moon* era Kristin Scott-Thomas. It’s a double-date scenario in which idealized, gendered, fantasy ‘versions’ of each character are mirrored and refracted endlessly in the eyes of the other.

The 1960 film adaptation of Alan Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is also an important reference, one that reaches back to a generation prior to Barclay’s own. As Albert Finney playing Arthur Seaton intones, brow furrowed moodily over a factory machine, “don’t let the bastards grind you down is one thing I’ve learned.” At his 2015 exhibition at The Tetley in Leeds, Barclay included this mantra in mock-Latin in the form of a lightbox spelling out ‘*non illigitamus carborandum*’. In a separate room was a billboard-sized image of Finney looking at himself in a mirror, all dressed up for a night on the town. The work captures a moment of self-scrutiny, in which Seaton is learning to strike out on his own. Using clothes and style he negotiates and authors a new sense of self.

What people wore, particularly in the period of relative affluence leading up to the 1980s, played a significant role in self-definition, offering a way out and up. Barclay’s work is interspersed with references to fashion. *The Hero Wears Clay Shoes* shows a number of Calvin Klein advertisements from the 1980s for the perfume Obsession. The videos are remarkable for the way they use the fine arts—drama, architecture, modern dance—as a language for something desirable that hovers just out of reach. “Romance, excitement, splendour, art, architecture,” reads Martha Rosler on cue in the nearby video *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue* (1982). As Rosler so aptly outlines in her work, *Vogue* is the ultimate aspirational escape. Its use of language, scent, typeface, layout, and

imagery whispering to you as though you already belong, an allure that is particularly strong when you feel you might not.

As Rosler makes clear, language has a powerful influence on us, especially when used in advertising. Language also underpins much of Barclay’s work, not only in the inclusion of lifted ‘ready-made’ sentences and images of hand gestures, but also in the coded way his particular mixology of images may be read. For example, in one poster-work, an image of Jerry Mouse sits next to the words ‘swamp rat.’ It’s a combination that instantly brings to mind Margaret Thatcher’s infamous statement in 1978 that “people are afraid this country might be swamped by people with a different culture.” Alongside an image of extravagant shoes sashaying down the catwalk, it’s hard not to read it as a reference to the current British Prime Minister’s ‘obsession’ for both expensive shoes and bringing down immigration numbers.

Certainly, the specter of Thatcher’s legacy looms large in Britain today. When in 2014, defense secretary Michael Fallon declared British towns were being ‘swamped’ with immigrants, we know the same rhetoric is being used again. Major shifts in identity are again being played out, along with the same ‘postcolonial melancholia,’ a misty-eyed nostalgia for a past era of ‘glory.’ Barclay’s work reflects an individual’s search to understand his place in that moment in time. But his personal ‘coming-of-age’ cannot be untangled from a wider British identity crisis that has more than a little relevance today. The implication of Barclay’s work is clear, popular culture—television, sport, fashion, and music—offers props in our search for self-definition. The potential new ‘selves’ on offer there may seem seductive, a kind of protective armor, but can also be rigid and limiting. It’s up to each of us to understand who we are within those restrictions. As with Souness playing ‘himself’ in *Boys From the Blackstuff*, however, it’s likely that at least some of it will be a performance.

Handicap, 2016 Installation view, Cubitt Gallery, London, 2016
Photo: Mark Blower (opposite page) Courtesy: Cubitt Artists
Truly, Madly, Deeply # 2, 2017 (p. 223) Courtesy: the artist
Royal Flush, 2017 Photo: © Tate, 2017; Mark Heathcote (pp. 224-225)

