

CRAZY FOR YOU CANDICE BREITZ ON POP IDOLS AND PORTRAITURE

INTERVIEW BY CHRISTY LANGE

WHEN SHE WAS COMMISSIONED by T-B A21 Vienna to make a work in Jamaica, recently, Candice Breitz decided to deliver Bob Marley's *Legend* album from the 'Babylon' of consumer culture and to return it to its Jamaican fans. Breitz tracked down dedicated Marley fans and invited them into a recording studio to perform the *Legend* album *a cappella* from start to finish. The resulting installation was a composite portrait of 30 performances shown on 30 monitors – a bumpy, variable chorus of Marley's most devoted fans.

Following *Legend*, Breitz decided to pursue this method of portraiture in the depiction of two more superstars, Michael Jackson and Madonna. *King (A Portrait of Michael Jackson)* and *Queen (A Portrait of Madonna)* are the result of two album-length re-recordings of *Thriller* and the *Immaculate Collection*, as sung by devotees of the superstars. Their performances are alternately reminiscent of the anxious anticipation of stardom seen in the straining faces of *Pop Idol* contestants, and the unselfconscious enthusiasm of amateurs. Breitz found her *King* imitators in Germany, where Jackson's reputation was apparently untainted by his recent trial. One performer, who runs a Jackson fan website, had met the singer after orchestrating an accident between her bicycle and his car. The youngest fan arrived at the studio accompanied by his pushy father, a German postal worker who sews costumes for his son in his spare time.

Queen stars 30 Madonna fans from Italy singing their hearts out to their idol's songs. Breitz describes the experience in the studio as 'something like a singles' club'. The vast majority of those who responded to Breitz's ad were gay men. Performers brought their own props, negotiating their way through Madonna's multiple identities. One Madonna wannabe croons in a deluge of confetti, another constantly reapplies his lipgloss between songs.

Through these individual portraits, Breitz extracts the redeeming potential of mass culture – its ability to provide a vehicle for undirected expression. As previous works by Breitz paradoxically suggest, mass culture can be both monolithic and malleable. While Marley, Madonna and Jackson may play a lopsidedly central role in shaping their fans' lives and identities, these fans play a reciprocal part in resurrecting the stars' original appeal, which has been subsumed by the celebrity culture that created them. The culture of stardom may thrive on a series of cheap imitations, mimicking an elusive idea of 'celebrity', but even in this concatenation of simulated identities, a few authentic portraits can still be discovered.

CL: You call these works 'portraits', yet the subjects of the portraits never appear.

CB: When I decided that I wanted to make a series of portraits, I knew that I wasn't interested in a monographic or monumentalizing type of portraiture. Avoiding an overtly iconic representation of the pop star is a way to suggest that the star is, on some level, a mirror in which the collective desires and fantasies of her fans are reflected, rather than some kind of fixed, unchanging entity. Madonna and Michael Jackson are therefore portrayed in their absence, as composites of the elaborate projections of the fans who buy their albums, who hero-worship them, and who made them stars in the first place. The first portrait was a portrait of Bob Marley, which I shot in Jamaica and titled *Legend*. After that, I decided to tackle the King and Queen of Pop. We filmed the portrait of Jacko in Berlin, and the portrait of Madge in Milan a week later. A series of hardcore Madonna and Michael

Jackson fans were each invited into a professional recording studio and given the opportunity to individually perform the entire *Immaculate Collection* or *Thriller* albums, from the first song through to the last. I wanted to replicate the experience that you have at home when you listen to an album that you love and sing your way through it, albeit under professional recording conditions. Other than this, I made no attempt to direct the fans – they chose what they wanted to wear, if they wanted to bring props, and how they wanted to interpret the album. Some sang and danced like there was no tomorrow. Others shyly fought their way through the experience.

CL: How did you find the fans?

CB: We advertised on fan websites, in magazines and newspapers, and on notice boards in public places, always making a simple call for serious fans of the relevant star. Those who responded were fully informed about the project, and were asked to write to us in detail to tell us why they should be a part of it. The responses were amazing. One Michael Jackson fan told us in her longhand letter that she had been in an East German prison for several years, where she was part of a group of ‘cultural prisoners’ who would demonstrate the cultural dimension of prison life to official visitors from Poland or the USSR by singing and dancing for them. One day the director of the prison gave her a tape of the *Thriller* album and suggested that she include it in her repertoire. At the time, she couldn’t speak a word of English, and had never seen a picture of Michael Jackson, but she nevertheless learnt the album off by heart, and built it into her routine. Another young woman from Linz wrote to us requesting the chance to prove that her two greatest passions in life – Michael Jackson and belly-dancing - were absolutely compatible. She belly-danced her way through the whole *Thriller* album, swirling a red scarf that she had hand-embroidered with blue sequins to read ‘Michael, I love you’.

CL: I can’t think of anything in my life that has played that big a role. Can you?

CB: I’ve been a huge fan of many people, though perhaps not to the extent of some of these fans. In the end, it’s just a matter of degree, the degree to which a star like Michael Jackson or Madonna gets woven into the fabric of one’s life. Some of our serious fans told us that they visit Michael Jackson websites every day, or that they had stayed home from work several times to watch the recent trial. The degree of their devotion can feel unhealthy at times.

CL: But *King* seems to suggest that there is something redeeming in the fans’ relationship to Michael Jackson, whereas in some of your other works you are more cynical about the audience’s relationship to pop culture.

CB: I have two different ways of working. On the one hand, I often work with found footage, cutting it up and re-animating it. These works tend to be something of an attack on the ‘somebodies’ who occupy and control the space of publicity. On the other hand, when I work with fans, those who fall outside of the spotlight and who are subject to the forces of publicity and marketing, my approach tends to be much softer. I don’t see these people as victims, but they are certainly subject to very powerful forces that can shape their fantasies and influence their personal formation. I’m interested in the biographical dimension of pop, the way that it can become the soundtrack to a life. A pop song can trigger very personal memories, prompting you to remember the first time your heart was broken, or where you were when you last heard the song.

CL: Do you think it is only art that has the potential to interpret or critique mass culture? Doesn’t pop culture sometimes do that itself?

CB: I think it's less about what pop culture can do, than about how it is used. Pop culture in itself, or any work of art for that matter, only starts to be interesting in the moment of reception. As you absorb pop, you decide what you want it to mean, what you want to take from it. There's a moment of translation rather than an inherent potential. Like art, pop can fill a void, but not every void is the same.

CL: As an artist you are somewhat removed from the creation of these portraits – the portraiture takes place on the level of splicing and editing, rather than being expressionistic or biographical.

CB: I'm less interested in the portrait as an externalization of some kind of interior essence, than I am in the portrait as a reflective surface. I think a lot about Warhol's portraiture (his *Screen Tests* in particular) when I make these portraits. Warhol's portraits speak very eloquently about the conditions in which they were made, and about how the individuals portrayed would like to imagine themselves, rather than pretending to be able to give us an insight into who their subjects really are.

CL: Warhol definitely seemed to predict the arrival of shows like *Pop Idol*, where everyone would be given a chance to be tested for his or her 'star potential'.

CB: I'm still trying to figure out the relationship between my portraits and series like *Pop Idol* or *Big Brother*, where humiliation is part of the deal. Like those programmes, my portraits explore the widespread longing for 15 minutes of fame, the desire to appear on TV at any cost. Some of the fans who we worked with gave us demos of songs that they had written or asked us to assess their creative potential. We took care to explain to them that we weren't going to be able to open any professional doors for them. I want very much to avoid caricaturing the people who perform for us. The shoots are unrehearsed and extremely intimate. The fans are incredibly generous in their performances and it's important for them to be able to trust us. I want them to leave the studio feeling like they've had a positive experience.

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