



Noonan

The shelves in David Noonan's Hackney studio are lined with a cornucopia of old books, featuring pretty much every topic under the sun. From owls (there is an entire dedicated section) to Utopian collectives (60s and 70s, of course) to Japanese theatre (Butoh and Noh in particular), it's all there. And it's not just for show; the library serves as both research and source material for David's large-scale silk-screen montages, of which there are many propped up around his high-ceilinged, light-infused workspace. The artist's autumn solo show at Xavier Hufkens in Brussels is drawing near, and he's getting ready.

In addition to books, David collects photographs, documents, magazines and textiles, which he then photographs, overlays and combines to create his distinctive black-and-white tableaux. David began to work with found imagery and collage just over ten years ago, when he moved to London from his native hometown of Australia. Wanting to get to know his new home, David spent his early days in London walking around, looking in charity shops and second-hand bookstores. He began to amass a collection of source material, and that developed naturally into his current work. Combining the figurative with the abstract, his work plays with both the viewer's sense of memory and their concept of time and space. On choosing David, our guest art editor Linder said: "I love the liminal quality in David Noonan's work and the way that the images that he presents to us have

all the familiarity of last night's dreamscape, poised on a pin head between total recall and absolute amnesia."

Hunger: What drew you to found imagery and collage as your chosen medium of expression?

David Noonan: I've always collected images, and although I trained as a painter, all of my paintings referenced photography in some respect — I would set up my own scenarios, which I'd photograph and then interpret through painting. But I guess what I like about this current way of working is using existing images and combining them with other images to create new narratives and scenarios. Part of the interest lies in the fact that you never know what you're looking for until you find it. And combining it with something else, working out how things fit together... it feels like a kind of alchemy.

When artists work with found imagery, critics tend to talk about memory. Does that apply to your work?

A lot of people talk about ideas of memory in my work, which I actually think has a lot to do with the fact that I mainly use a monochrome palette — the pieces often look older than they really are. But in terms of the intention, I don't think about memory when I'm creating works. I do, however, think the double exposure element creates an internal sense of how you might try and remember something. It's not a clear feeling; it's more of a sort of impression. So it's almost as if they look and feel like how you might imagine a memory. ▶

photography ROBERT GLOWACKI
words MOLLY FRANKEL

all artwork COURTESY OF
XAVIER HUFKENS GALLERY

△ 'Untitled', 2015.
silk-screen on linen collage
▷ 'Untitled', 2015.
silk-screen on linen collage



What do you think about when you're creating works?
For me, the pictures are really about the visual elements. I'm always thinking about the formal aspects—the composition, the relationships between the images, the abstract elements combining with the figurative, and how they correspond, inhabit or relate to one another. I think in terms of how the picture works, and if it functions. The way in which I arrange things is very particular in that respect. It can look very random, but it's not.

And how do you know when a picture "works"?
It's a fine line between what works — what makes them function as pictures — and what doesn't. I think I've got a highly tuned yet unconscious aesthetic. It's almost like you know when it works, and when it works, it works. But 99 percent of the time things don't work!

Is production something you have to think about?
Absolutely. The production can be really difficult, especially as the source images vary in quality. There are limitations in terms of how much you

can blow them up, what you can combine them with, and things like that.

Often when artists work with found imagery, the act of appropriation is a response to what they're seeing in society. Is this the case for you?

Not really. It's more about looking and digging to find strange things that are already out there in the visual world, things that I probably wouldn't even think of. One of the reasons I stopped creating my own scenarios to paint was that they began to feel contrived, or self-conscious almost. The looking and searching is really part of the process for me.

Do people always want to know where the source material comes from?

People really, really want to know where the images come from and what they're about, but I try to find things that are not locked into anything, so they can somehow "float". I don't want to situate the imagery and I like that they're difficult to locate. For this show [at Xavier Hufkens], although I found some new images elsewhere, I actually mainly

mined my existing archive to try and see what was there, what I'd overlooked, and how my perception of the images had changed.

Do you think ten years of searching for images everywhere has given you a different perspective?

Yes. I've seen a lot of images, and I've become more aware of, and interested in, all sorts of cultural subjects, from dance and theatre, to craft manuals and textiles.

Theatre and performance appear to be prominent sources for your figurative imagery.

I like that the scenarios are photographed in a particular, evocative way — shot in black and white with harsh lighting and so on. They have a sort of immediate atmosphere to them.

Do you consider the relationships between the works?

I really think about the relationships between the pieces, so although each one is individual they're all in a dialogue with one another. In fact, I almost build a show around that.

What about the relationship between the work and the space it's in?

Very important. Sometimes within a gallery I'll do something to shift the viewer's bodily relationship to the space — subtly change the architecture, by, for instance, putting down a different floor.

Is there a strong link between the figurative and the abstract in your work?

Yes, particularly in the last few years. For this upcoming show I seem to have, unconsciously, chosen pictures with singular individuals in them, and in some ways the figures have almost become objects, or representations. It's quite sculptural. The abstract element comes from images of textiles, as well as existing textiles that I've collected myself, which are patched and sewn together to give an almost trompe l'oeil effect. It allows me to work with the surface of the images, overlaying and collaging them in response to the actual textiles themselves.

How do you view the finished pieces?

For me, collaging is a way of activating the surface of a picture, taking the work away from a flat, Warholian screen print. It's all about the construction of the piece, which is why I see it a bit more like a painting, in a way, or a little like a film dissolve — you're seeing two images at once, and they both inform one another.

Is there a narrative to your work?

In some respects, but it's not a set narrative, rather, you can construct your own. It's suggestive of narrative scenarios, but nothing's really "locked down" in that sense. I often feel that when you have a show the narrative scenarios happen within the space itself — you make connections between various rooms and pieces. The idea of repetition — certain motifs reoccurring or reappearing — is quite important to me.

Why do you think that is?

It has so much to do with balance. I often create a sort of harmony; certain pieces become a counter balance to other pieces and vice versa. With this upcoming show there's a kind of equilibrium whereby one room somehow balances out another. For example, in each room there's an owl piece and a paper mask piece. So there's a repetition that's not literal, rather there exist these links and connections, which I think I create when I make the work. Any given show is quite different, but each one has its own internal logic; every piece exists in relation to the others within that body of work. And that's quite intuitive, to some extent.

How would you describe your own work? It's been called surrealist...

I've actually never really related to surrealism. And with my early work there was this tendency for people to talk about it in gothic or cinematic language, but that was never really my intention. I guess what I'm doing is trying to touch on a certain atmosphere or tone. You know, when you're listening to music, particular songs or artists will have a particular atmosphere to their work. That's what I'm trying to achieve with pictures, to give the piece an ambience that you can't exactly pin down, but that sets a certain tone. I like to think of them as these little hermetic things that have a certain energy or atmosphere that can wash over

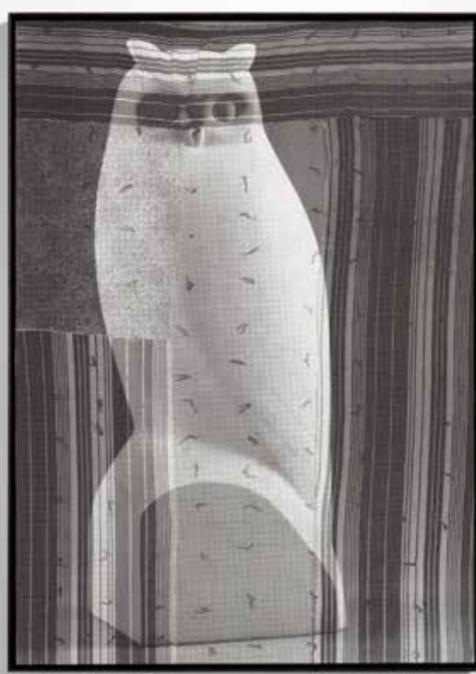
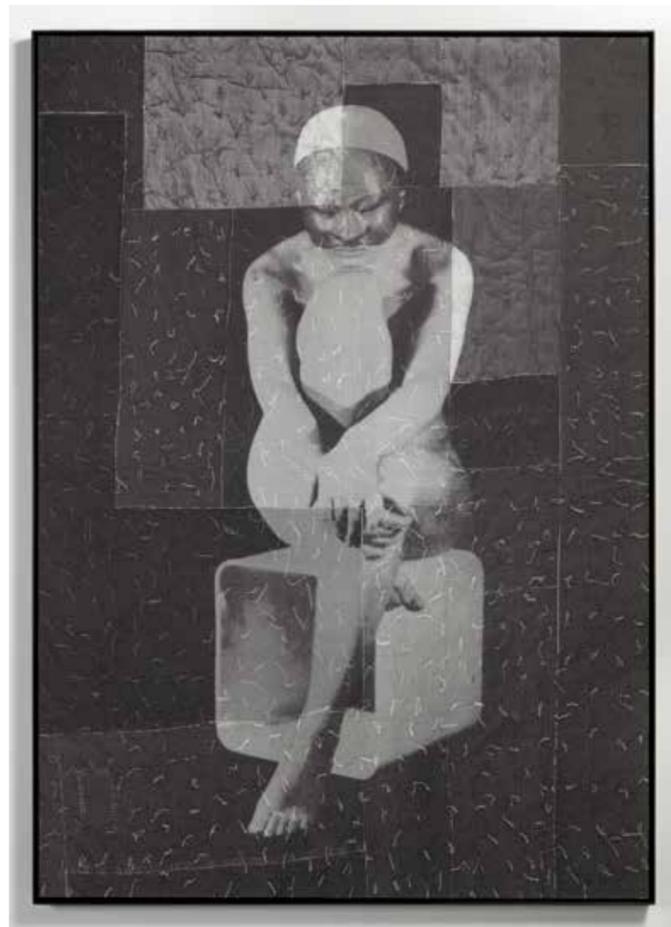
you, affecting your mood. I don't want to spell something out; my pieces are more about evoking something in a viewer.

So the idea is for each person to see and feel something different?

Absolutely. It's always interesting to hear how people respond to a piece, because it's often different to how I feel about it. You just can't control what people take from a work, what they project, and their own experience of it. You set a tone, but in a way that's all you can do. The rest is up to them. ■

A limited edition artist book of David Noonan's work will be published by Common Editions in May, 2016. His new solo exhibition will be on show at Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, until October 24, 2015.

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