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AMERICAN HISTORY X

Dominic McGill on the lessons of the Death Wish generation

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AMERICA HAS OFTEN BEEN BEST anatomised by outsiders, by visitors not tipsy on its cocktail of myths or writhing in its web of appearances. One thinks of Alexis de Tocqueville, touring the States during the 1830s before sailing back to France and producing *Democracy in America*, a foundational text in US schools ever since. One thinks of Robert Frank, hard nosed Swiss photographer and roving buddy of the Beats, whose book *The Americans* (1958) first showed the country its own inequalities and glories in panoramic fullness. One thinks of the indelible Swiftian grotesquery sketched by Ralph Steadman – a gallery of puking, screaming, velour-clad insects – in the Englishman's illustrations for the late Hunter S. Thompson's scabrous Aquarian-age journalism. (Among those contemporary philosophes who would aspire to update De Tocqueville, however, one tries to forget Jean Baudrillard and Bernard-Henri Lévy.)

Plenty of American artists now position themselves publicly as involuntarily estranged from their own country, from younger practitioners such as Tom Sachs to elder statesmen like Richard Serra. Few, however, seem poised to deliver something like Dominic McGill's huge (1981 x 229cm) curving drawing *Project for a New American Century* (2004). Composed of thousands of overlapping pencilled summaries of historical events (and pungently apocalyptic snippets of imagery), its subject is nothing less than the *past* century, figured as a massive sequence of bleak nexuses. America is mostly at the centre: religion, race relations and foreign policy appear snarled up and intractable. One tiny snapshot from the overpowering whole: a preacher, arms aloft in supplication or triumph, ringed by spiralling texts that enumerate atomic tests, rising Bible sales, UFO sightings, paranoia over Communism, and escalating lynching. (This in the land of the free, of course, as opposed to the godless USSR.) Some of this material you'll remember from history classes. But it is usually apprehended in fragments. Only presented as a big picture does it coalesce into a portrait of a culture in freefall: ahistorical, irrational, insane.

And repetitious – the same spasmodic cycles of assassination, cover-up and conspiracy, the same fatal entangling of church and state, the same fights picked in the same locations. (Fittingly, McGill's drawing was originally intended to take the physical form of a Möbius strip.) It's a working model of Santayana's dictum that those who can't remember the past are doomed to repeat it – and, in its factual density, a potential bulwark against that fate. The theoretical verso of this picture is how it happens: with the consent of a public distracted by mass-media fireworks, massaged into inaction by state ideological apparatuses. And if *Project...* feels like a simultaneously fearful and objectively distanced take on this grim epiphenomenon, it's probably because its topographer is a New York-based Brit. It's been 15 years since McGill crossed the pond from London, where he'd studied art and then gone into the special effects industry. Today he describes his past self as an ingénue, aware only of the clichés of America: the classless society, the melting pot, the home of the world's best civil and human rights. "But the more I found out, the more I was interested," says McGill. "Like most first-world countries, America is very good at deceiving itself – only more so than others." He'd been hit hard and early by the influences of George Grosz ("still the best"), Guy Debord and "the man on Oxford Street with the 'End of the World is Nigh' sign". So perhaps it's unsurprising that McGill's art, now primarily comprising drawings and painstakingly handmade sculptures, has concerned itself with American history, group psychoses and spectacle.

Roll out a red carpet in Times Square and in 15 minutes you'll have a crowd, lured by the phantom promise of a star. No actual celebrity needed. McGill discovered this while working as one half of Standard and Poor (1995–2000), a performance pairing with artist David Henry Brown Jr. designed to test and manipulate public preconceptions. 'The Red Carpet Rollers' became a legitimate company, placing ads, printing flyers, and doing paid jobs: birthdays, rock concerts, airport arrivals. Which, in a way, was good: a future anthropologist wouldn't be able to tell if this was real or an artworld prank. But by 1999 McGill, who has a powerful moral streak, was tired of looking like "an artworld wannabe"; Brown "wanted to take it to the next level". Standard and Poor folded. Meanwhile McGill had been studying *Black Like Me*, John Howard Griffin's 1961 memoir of racial disguise and prejudice in the Deep South, and working on *The Portrait Project* (1997–2001). Disguised as a fat man, a priest, a Hasidic Jew, or, more riskily, a "cop with a Hitler complex", he would amble down to Central Park, clandestinely videoing public reactions as he went, and get his portrait sketched. (Occasionally, he'd get "busted" by a Jewish family.)

The foundations were there: a potentially history-fooling verisimilitude, an interest in America's powerful engineering of opinion. But it wasn't until a friend convinced McGill of "the importance of the archival object" – its potential for engagement outweighing its status as an elitist trinket – that he set to work in a studio. In 2002 McGill produced *Model for a Death Wish Generation*, a scale model of the first atomic bomb. Split horizontally, this dirty metal globe's upper half was raised to reveal, at its centre, an intricate faux-landscape depicting Bikini Island (scene of the first atomic test), a rumbling soundtrack causing the water surrounding it to quiver perpetually. McGill had examined photographs of the generals standing around as the test took place, felt the contrast between American military might and the powerlessness of the Bikini islanders. He'd looked at watercolours commissioned by the navy to commemorate the test ("pathetic in their banality"). And he'd read that the first atomic scientists couldn't be sure their device wouldn't, in fact, destroy the planet. The first A-bomb was effectively the first doomsday device.

Who cares, though, if you're going to heaven anyway? Elsewhere, McGill has dwelt repeatedly on the disturbing possible combinations of the Bible's revelatory teachings and moral codes. The sculpture *Love is the Only Shelter* (2002), for instance, depicts a typically American white-painted wooden church, built on a rock. Behind its sandbagged front door, a route leads down into the basement and finally into a catacomb built into the stone: a fallout shelter. McGill based it on the writings of Father McHugh, an early nuclear paranoiac who held that it was acceptable to shoot anyone who tried to force entry into your family's bomb shelter. America's permissive approach to gun control runs both deep and wide. The urge to violence can supersede all others. There is another force at work here, which dangerously rolls together Christian eschatology and nuclear Armageddon: Thanatos, the death drive controversially theorised by Freud after the First World War. Raised to a hysterical pitch by McGill's relentless amassing of material facts, it's this idea that constitutes his evidential work's bone-deep chill – that we may just be built this way, designed to rush endlessly towards the precipice. The glimmering hope expressed in his work is that the death drive is merely imposed as a useful mentality by our rulers; as such, McGill's accumulation of details might become keyed to a potential restoration of historical consciousness. But one senses he's less optimistic than philosophically resigned, the outsider as lucid eyewitness. "I have a healthy suspicion of the political establishment and do-gooder hippies," says McGill, in a break from drawing and sculpting cowering, gun-wielding and triumphant clerics wreathed in historical darkness. "I just want to engage people and get them to think about whatever the piece is about. There is nothing to be achieved by preaching to people."