

JORDAN BASEMAN INTERVIEWED BY DAVID BARRETT

Philadelphia-born, London-based artist Jordan Baseman was noted in the early 1990s for his object-based work, but then abruptly switched to narrative filmmaking. Here he talks about the ethics of collaboration, risk in art, the usefulness of abstraction – and unfortunate clown costumes.

BLACKOUT



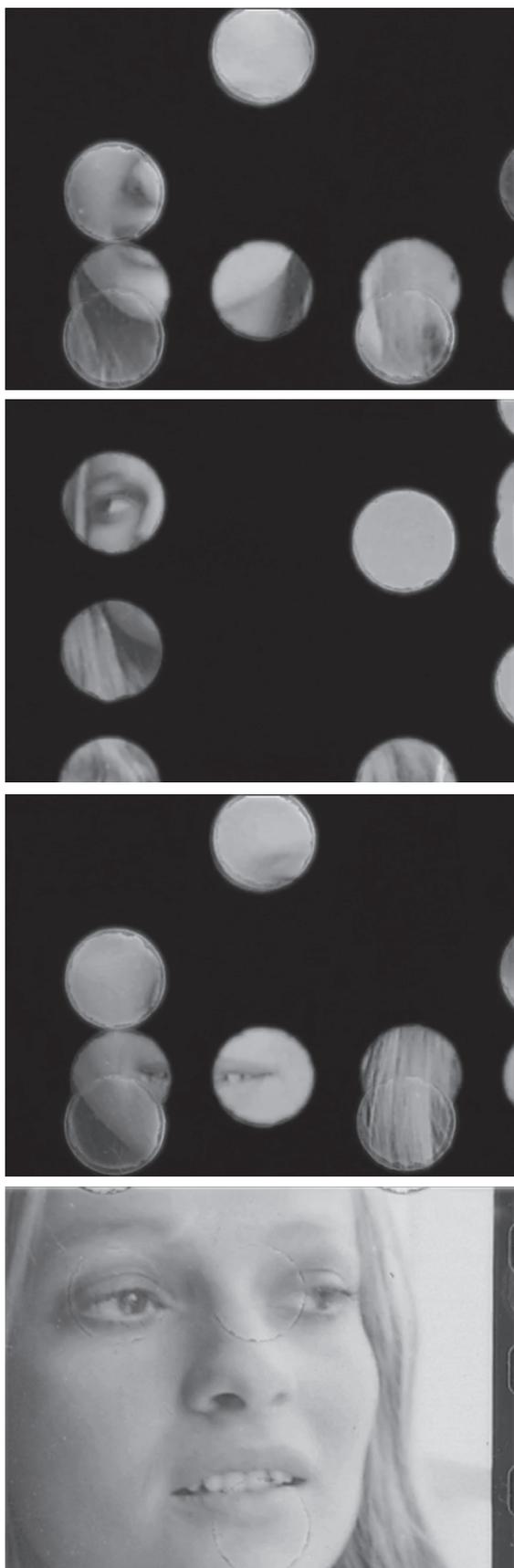
Blackout 2016 video

David Barrett: A number of your films, such as the new piece showing at TAP, *Blackout*, utilise documentary conventions but then swerve off in other directions.

Jordan Baseman: My interest is not in documentary or reportage, journalism, sociology or anthropology. I think about creative non-fiction, like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Dave Cullen's *Columbine* or Haruki Murakami's book on the Tokyo gas attacks, *Underground*. In all of these, information is heavily manipulated and readers receive it differently to how it has been captured. Same with *Blackout* – while its account is not inaccurate, neither is it terribly accurate, in that it was recorded over a couple of months and the hours of raw interview recordings were boiled down to 11 minutes.

When the credits appear, we see that it has been recorded in Omaha, Death Valley and London, which suggests that the whole thing is a construct.

It is important in all my work that there is this obviously constructed nature. In *Blackout* some of it is clumsy, so when she first says the word 'blackout' the screen cuts to black, which is kind of hokey but it establishes something, sets something up. I think of the films as portraits – artworks – not as testimonies. They may be truthful but they are not the truth, because there are multiple truths. With *Blackout* there was more than a year between when I made the recordings and when I returned to edit it, and that gap gave me the opportunity to be ruthless with the material. The interview process is emotional, speculative, spontaneous and out of control. Yet the editing is an intellectualised assertion of ideas that may not have been as evident in the original recording. So with *Blackout* she mainly talked about getting sober and I didn't want to



Perfume Disco Coma 2007 video

talk about that. I was interested in this perception of time when it is beyond memory and cannot be reclaimed.

So during the drink-induced blackouts that the narrator is describing, she is not unconscious, she just has zero recollection of what she did during those periods, is that right?

She has no memory of them whatsoever. She gets told about what she did but she has no recollection. During the interview she talked in detail about what she had apparently done, but I cut all that – I feel protective of the participants. That is a delicate line to walk: do you protect the participants from being judged too harshly or do you allow that judgement to play out only to be undermined, which is what I think happens in *Blackout*.

She talks as if it is someone else that takes over, like Jekyll and Hyde, although she then expresses remorse over her actions.

There is this clear schism. It was filmed a couple of years ago and she has been away from alcohol ever since, so now she has no desire to see the film because she doesn't want to revisit that time of her life – I mean, five years is a long time to lose, especially in that period of adolescence and early adulthood. The interviews were recorded in Nebraska but she has left all that behind, including her family, and moved to New York to reinvent herself as someone who doesn't drink alcohol. She had judged herself to have behaved pretty badly and wanted to escape that person. One thing that I try to be careful about is potential disparagement that might be cast on participants through the work. That is why at the end, when she talks about moving on to Ecstasy and not allowing her issues to define her, I think it is a really strong position to hold.

At first, it seems to be a familiar story of redemption, but then it becomes clear that she is still living a wild lifestyle.

Exactly, it is just that she now avoids alcohol because it has this one specific effect of causing blackouts, which she can't control. It was important to me that this work wasn't evangelical or promoting temperance.

Is she the only interview subject who has remained anonymous?

There have been a few. I knew that I would anonymise her when making the work. I also modified her voice very slightly so people she knows might not be able to identify her. She didn't ask me to do that but with all the interview-based participants I do feel a responsibility towards them because I am hijacking their experiences for other ends. They all know I am doing this. They are all complicit.

But the ends you are working towards are yours. The schism in her character, for instance – you highlight this to make the artwork more compelling. The version of reality you construct is not only different from an objective reality but it may also present the protagonist in a way that is at odds with their own self-perception.

That negotiation is interesting. It is definitely an exaggerated state that I present to the world, and I sometimes worry that the films are too compact and contained.

I am thinking in particular of the 2010 work The Dandy Doctrine (A Delightful Illusion) with Sebastian Horsley, someone who attempted to control his image and had a quite specific view of himself. I understand that he was surprised by what your approach revealed.

That was one of the last works that I made where the participant was visually central. There is always a moment where I deliver the work and go 'ta-dah', and the response is often one of surprise. No matter how much I have talked about portraiture or the creative process or creative non-fiction, or how many previous examples I have shown, there is always surprise. With Sebastian, his surprise was at something that I hadn't even noticed myself, which was his drug use. He saw himself in the camera's mirror and what was reflected back to him was a heroin addict. I was really naive – I didn't know he was using at the time. I think what he saw in the film was a functioning addict, and he was concerned that other people would see that too because he had said he wasn't using drugs any longer. He didn't really care about the work itself so much. Making that work with Sebastian, he was so used to answering questions about himself that he had stock replies to everything. It was almost impossible to get him away from that, and that was why it was interesting to locate that rote response as the centre of his perception of himself.

The hollowness of the stock reply?

He says so himself, he says: 'I love meeting new people because they haven't heard this tired old thing.' So he was very self-aware in that regard. The most difficult thing is when people want me to watch the film with them. This only happened once, with Steve 'Krusher' Joule and the 2010 film *Jump*. He was a heavy metal DJ at GLR but was sacked, he said, for refusing to play Def Leppard. Anyway, I returned to his dope-filled flat in the tower block in Millwall where *Jump* was filmed and sat with him as he watched it. That was awful. There was a long silence afterwards. Then he just said: 'I've never seen myself like that. That's not how I see myself, but it's obviously how I am.'

While some of the works play with this idea of documentary truth, others make the constructed nature of the work really clear, such as in 2006's Ask for It, Ask for It where you mic-ed up a youth football coach and we hear everything he said before, during and after a match. But you removed the pauses so it only lasts five minutes – the editing is front and centre.

A lot of people don't get that. I used to work with a guy who would ask in crits, 'where is the art in this?' A horrible question, but a good question to ask. For me that is where the art is, in the construction, the edit.

The power of editing was made clear in a comment by Francis Wells, the surgeon who performs the heart transplant in 2003's Under the Blood. Yeah, he said that the experience of watching the film was more visceral than performing the operation. But in many ways the film theatre is more dramatic than the operating theatre. There is no dramatic lighting in the operating theatre, for instance – it is really bright.

And the soundtrack you used featuring the preacher Billy Graham – that wasn't playing during the operation either.

Definitely not. A different kind of evangelism was going on in there.

As well as documentary conventions, you also utilise structuralist filmmaking tropes: the projectors are visible, the leader tape is visible etc. You demonstrate film's materiality.

There is a directness I aim for in the presentations. That is echoed in the films, too, where I try to present the least amount of information. But those compact moments are, I hope, conceptually expansive.

Documentary makes a claim to narrative truth while structuralism makes a claim to material truth. You co-opt them both to show the plurality of truth.

Whatever it takes, that's my attitude, I'm not precious about material. When I studied at Goldsmiths, people talked a lot about truth to materials and I never got it – it's all fake anyway, it's all artifice.

You use the materiality of the film not as an appeal to literalism but instead to produce a further imaginative leap.

Yes, absolutely. The structuralist thing – I'm not really interested in anything that is purist or totalitarian. I don't have such extreme rules.

In Perfume Disco Coma from 2007 we see the dots from the filmstrip but they are a metaphor for this imaginary disco that is

being experienced by the narrator at the edge of death.

I like the material of film and I like the physical aspects of cameras, both video and film, but it is not meant to be literal and I don't think about it as illustration. In the new work *Veil* there is a bubbling kind of visual effect which was made by layering together three pieces of film, spraying them with sugar and wine and then pulling the film through the projector in real time. The film is burning and losing its integrity, so the visual effect is the material failure of the film itself. I want this visual abstraction. I am abstracting things in the narrative anyway, and sometimes I think abstraction is the only way to represent things that are happening in the film. The visual filmmaking, at the point of capture, shares the unpredictable nature of the interview process, but through editing I can reclaim something useful. In *Blackout*, the stuttering effect is me jamming the camera and pushing it forward, so I didn't really know what I would get when the film was developed.

In the 2009 film A Hypnotic Effect, where the protagonist is rehabilitated after being attacked and set on fire, there seems to be a shot of a swimming pool but it looks as if the film itself is moving.

The camera jammed but I didn't notice at the time, so all that streakiness is the film wearing itself out as it goes through the camera, burning out. Recently, I have only recorded audio from the interviews and have produced all the visuals separately. The result challenges the viewer more, makes them less passive as they try to understand what the work is doing.

I guess nowadays your practice would be defined as 'moving-image work', but when I watch your films the image is moving not in the sense that the picture is animated but rather that the medium itself has velocity – you are aware not only of the camera moving through space but also of the film moving past the aperture or the projector's bulb.

That sense of movement is important along with a sense of time. I'm propelling a narrative forward. I'm also really interested in the optical thing, so you see streaks from road lights captured in long exposures and other such effects. Funnily enough, I have only just come to realise that I have quite bad eyesight, which must have been the case for a while, and which might also explain why a lot of the work is abstract.

Well, one history of art is a history of ophthalmic pathologies – Modigliani, Monet and so on. True, but I am drawn to an optical quality in the work where you are not sure what it is you are looking at. In Perfume Disco Coma, the stuttering nature of the images is meant to leave the viewer with an after-image of the woman in the footage. Same in the 2009 Alan Wakeman work, Nasty Piece of Stuff. I'm really interested in that retinal thing both as an idea but also as something that has visual impact. The narratives are quite impactful, I want them to have potency and meaning, and the visuals are used to reinforce that while also keeping the work fluid so that it cannot be entirely pinned down.

Your early work from the 1990s was object-based. Tell me about that transition from physical to optical work.

I still make things, I just don't show them. The special effects in *Veil* and *Blackout* are the result of physical experiments in the studio but I don't want to present those physical things to the world.

So what precipitated the shift from sculpture to film?

I had a series of epiphanies all in a row, back in 1998. I had some not great experiences with commercial galleries. I was confused about how to progress because I didn't want what was happening to continue to happen and I was unhappy with that model.

In terms of the commercial art market?

I was unhappy with it in every way, that model where I make something then give it to somebody else and they are responsible for its delivery in the world. I had never really challenged it, and then it was challenged for me because of some negative experiences where people were not entirely honest with what was happening with the work. Why I originally wanted to be an artist was changing and I didn't want it to change. The

money was great. It was great to sell work – but at what cost? I'll never forget that I had a gallerist saying: 'I've got people who would buy ten of those.' And that's fine but it was not why I wanted to be an artist and it was not why I wanted to continue to be an artist. Then I got a job at the Ruskin School of Art just as it bought a whole load of Macs. I had never used a computer before so I just spent about a year and half reading computer manuals and learning to edit instead of making work. I had made films as an undergrad, but that was pre-digital. So I was trying to figure out, and I'm still figuring this out, how to be the artist that I would like to be. I don't think that's a static thing – if you are lucky, it is a series of investigations and questions. So I think I'm making the same work as I was when I was making sculptures but the films are more expansive and ask other kinds of questions. For me, the sculptures I made were so singular that they didn't allow for any kind of expansion in the viewer. I might be deluded but I'm much more interested in the work I'm making now. I never show that sculptural work and I never mention it when I give an artist's talk.

That's why I'm asking about it, and because you are now head of sculpture at the Royal College of Art.

Those early sculptures are not a secret, it's just that, you know, I have a lot of more recent work – I've been around a while.

Me too and I remember those early works!

I have had a few people say to me, 'you know what, I don't like your films but your sculptures were great'. Thanks. But I think part of an artist's practice needs to be a constant questioning of what you are doing.

Questioning is also a theme in the work, where questioning perception becomes a question of belief insofar as we sometimes see what we believe we are going to see. This, in turn, leads to a strand in the work about belief and faith.

I'm from a really religious family. I don't practice or believe but my parents and my brothers are religious. I went to Hebrew school four days a week and I hated it. But it has created a real interest in the way that we structure our world and what is important to us. We're lucky because we live in this city where you can do anything, more or less. You can be anything and you can believe anything. But I'm not from that kind of background. I'm from a background where you either believe in one thing or you don't, and if you don't then you are excluded. I have always been in it but have always felt outside because I have never believed. I never hid my lack of faith from my parents and that infuriated them, especially when I was a child. I blew out the Sabbath candles when I was seven just to see what would happen. And nothing happened. I wasn't struck down. I just relit the candles and nobody knew. But I did.

In Perfume Disco Coma the narrator is talking about the lights that she saw in her coma, which she interprets as a disco. Yet someone else in that situation with different cultural baggage might have interpreted it differently.

True, and the visuals I hope allow that openness. That is where abstraction is useful, it is a form of representation but it isn't strictly representational. In the 2003 film *1+1=1*, where the transplant patient is talking about his surgery dream, the image could be the light at the end or it could be a scan or it could be

something you are moving through. I want things to feel as if they are fleeting – not that they are moving away from you or towards you, but rather that they are out of your grasp.

I'd like to ask about conflict, as you seem to end up in a few. I remember you once talked about a commission that ended up as a racism row in the press.

Yes, *I Hate Boston and Boston Hates Me* back in 2009. The narrator worked for the local council in Boston, Lincolnshire. She had worked there for five years and is probably still working there. She was originally from Portugal but became part of this long-standing, stable Portuguese community in Boston. Lincolnshire also has casual agriculture workers coming over from Portugal every summer to pick cabbages and the like. So I interviewed her about her experiences of living in Boston and she talked about the racism that she encountered daily for being different. She walked her daughter to school every day and they would get abuse every day – for being from Portugal. She told a friend that she was participating in this project, and her friend told somebody, and somebody told somebody else and then they threw a brick through her window. The police got involved. She wanted the work to go ahead and the Portuguese community wanted it to be shown, but I was anxious about her safety and I didn't want to be responsible for her getting hurt, so I pulled the film and never showed it. And yet it got all this attention because it was August and there was nothing else in the news. For something that was never seen, it got a lot of attention. But that wasn't because of the work, it was because of issues around migration.

*There is often a sense of the complexities and fragilities of human interaction in your work. In the 2009 piece *Dark is the Night* you even went to great lengths to film Soho without really showing any people.*

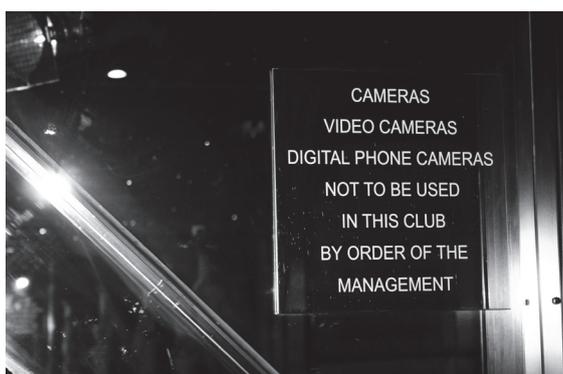
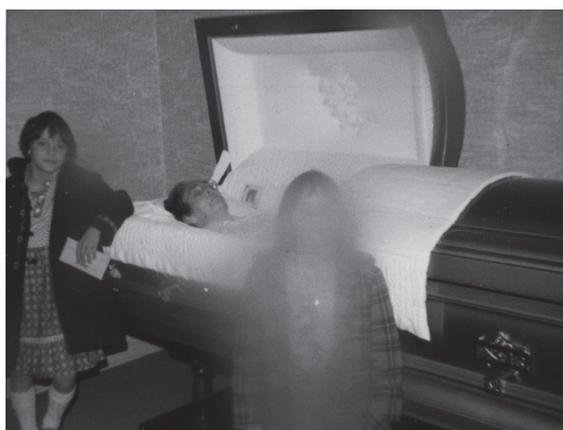
The process of capturing interview material is often the same, sitting down and talking with people, so I try to make the work visually different each time. *Dark is the Night* has no people, other than some homeless people asleep in doorways, because I made that a semi-formal rule when capturing the imagery in order to change the visual parameters of the work. The people are ghosts that move through it.

You often take on commissions and residencies in unfamiliar communities and institutions which put you in the position of being an outsider.

Back in 1998 when I stopped presenting physical works, I wanted to take more of a proactive role in how I was going to exist in the world. I didn't want to have a commercial thing but I still wanted to make work, so I started to look at residencies, commissions and grants. Also, I really wanted to get out of the studio, to look at the world and to be located in it. Making work out in the world feels really risky, genuinely frightening and exhilarating. It is never boring or static, always unpredictable.

You feel responsible for the representation of the participants in the film, but how do you avoid the instrumentalist do-gooding that commissioners might be looking for?

There is often a three-way tug of war between my idea of the work, the participant with their expectations and also the expectations of the commissioner. My allegiance is more towards the participant than the commissioner. Some funders know that what they are going to get will be unpredictable, and recognise that the final product needs to stand on its own as an artwork first and foremost, whatever else it might also do. The Wellcome Trust has come to understand this, commissioning *Deadness* in 2013 when in the past it had previously turned the proposal down. A counter example, though, might be *Perfume Disco Coma*, which was commissioned by a European housing development programme for the regeneration of Widnes and Runcorn. The interview subject, Wendy, is a librarian from Widnes. I went to speak to her because someone told me that she had seen a ghost in the library, but when we were talking she started telling me that she had once been in a five-week coma following an illness – I was way more interested in that. I asked all kinds of questions and buried within them were the things that I was interested in. That is often the case: it becomes clear to the interviewee that I am not interested in the ghost in the library, for example, at least not for the film. And at that point they either continue with it or they bail out of the project, and that has happened a few times.



The Dandy Doctrine 2010 video

Nasty Piece of Stuff 2009 video

Deadness 2013 slide-tape installation detail

Dark is the Night 2009 production still

And were the Widnes regeneration commissioners interested in the ghost or the coma?

The focus of the work was supposed to be the library and the social experience of the library.

That wasn't the focus of the film you produced.

No. I presented it to the commissioners at a meeting. I showed the work and there was silence in the room. Then they were like, 'this has nothing to do with what we wanted it to do'. And I said, 'well, she lives here and this is her experience of living here – it's not what you wanted but there you go'. They distanced themselves from it at that point. It has never been shown in this country. But I never go back to refashion something for the agents that are funding the work. Sometimes the participants are disappointed in the work because it is not what they wanted, and sometimes I will make them a film that does what they want just for them. This is a private transaction, a gift which is not an artwork or part of my art practice.

Is this to avoid the charge of exploitation that documentary or photojournalistic practices can struggle with?

The working process is mutually exploitative, I'm up front about that. The subjects want to participate for their reasons and I want them to participate for my reasons and we have all agreed on that early on. I'm really fortunate in that my survival does not depend on me selling artworks and I feel very lucky to be liberated from that whole thing. I would love to sell something, not in a mercenary way but because money is not a bad thing to have – it offers freedom. But if I did that, I would need to be able to look at myself in the mirror. I told Alan that if I sold *Nasty Piece of Stuff* I would give him half the money. We paid Sebastian but he sent the cheque back – he never cashed it and nor did we.

I think the Widnes regeneration team were being shortsighted because in Perfume Disco Coma what struck me was Wendy's story of her birthday, which told me everything I needed to know about the community in Widnes.

Me too. At the library, Wendy spent most of her time chasing kids with their cans of Castrol out of the building, but it was still the main community hub there. And in the film she describes how all the other librarians showed up at hospital on her birthday and she couldn't figure out how – had all the libraries been shut? But no, the staff had arranged for teams of temps that day so that all the librarians of Widnes could come and celebrate her birthday in hospital after her coma. I was really moved when she said that. But the story wasn't about the new homes they were building in Runcorn, so the commissioners didn't want it.

One final thing: for some reason, I feel that I should ask you about clowns.

Yeah? Go on then, ask me about clowns.

They seem to crop up a few times. You have made clown shoes as sculptures, your avatar on Vimeo is a clown.

There are a couple in *Blackout* as well, at the very end there are two fleeting shots of clowns. You know what it is? My parents didn't have any art at home but they did have pictures of clowns by this guy named Louis Spiegel. He was a clown painter from Cincinnati, Ohio and my dad loved clowns. I hate clowns, can't stand the damn things. My dad dressed up as a clown as a surprise for my younger brother's fifth birthday. I went with him to buy the costume. My dad was a frustrated entertainer – he was a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman, so it was the same talent. He had my little brother on his knee and my brother didn't know it was dad, and my dad said: 'Hey, sonny, where's your dad?' And my brother replied sadly: 'He's in jail.' My dad was devastated. I don't know where my brother got the idea from but it floored my dad. I remember looking at my dad and I kind of laughed, and my dad got really upset and very angry. But he was dressed as a frickin' clown. ■

Jordan Baseman is showing *Blackout* and *Veil* at TAP in Southend and *Deadness* at Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool until 3 April.

DAVID BARRETT is associate editor of *Art Monthly*.