

OPENINGS

Olivia Plender

BRIAN DILLON



Olivia Plender, *Machine Shall Be the Slave of Man, but We Will Not Slave for the Machine*, 2009, mixed media, video. Installation view, Tate Britain, London. From the 4th Tate Triennial. Photo: Sam Drake.

OLIVIA PLENDER IS A CONNOISSEUR of a certain mystical or spiritual Englishness. And mysticism, in England as in the United States, has frequently been inseparable from politics. Much of the London-born, Berlin-based artist's work has mined the territory between ancient or resuscitated belief systems and the imperial, communitarian, or utopian ideologies that have invoked them. Plender's drawings, videos, installations, and performances have been concerned with such narratives as the fraudulent beginnings of

Modern Spiritualism, the mystical-socialist movements of the early twentieth century, and the return of the gothic and the supernatural in British cinema of the 1960s. Like a number of artists in recent years (think of Susan Hiller's recourse to auras and telepathy or Susan MacWilliam's collaborations with mediums), Plender is a cultural archaeologist of irrationalism. Her singular skill, however, is in mapping the intersections of this history with art and radical politics during the past century.

Consider, for example, *Machine Shall Be the Slave of Man, but We Will Not Slave for the Machine*, an installation she made for "Altermodern" (Nicolas Bourriaud's iteration of the Tate Triennial) in 2009. This work revolves around the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, a consciously archaist outdoorsy organization founded in 1920 by one John Hargrave, a renegade Boy Scout commissioner who had turned against the late-Victorian militarism of the movement's founder, Robert Baden-Powell, and toward rituals drawn

from Saxon, Norse, and American Indian culture. The Kibbo Kift founded after World War II, but not before allying itself with a new philosophical-political movement called Social Credit and being approached (unsuccessfully) by Labour politicians to become that party's official youth movement. The video in Plender's installation, *Bring Back Robin Hood*, 2007, connects the Kibbo Kift to the present, bringing together the artist's hand-drawn black-and-white renderings of Kibbo Kift rituals and contemporary photographic images. The work's own title is borrowed from recent graffiti the artist saw in London and harks back to the appearance on Downing Street on February 29, 1940, of a Robin Hood-styled archer, who fired a green arrow through the window of No. 10. The array of artifacts and costumes that makes up the rest of the installation suggests Hargrave was as much inspired by Constructivist graphics as by ostensibly ancient motifs, so that this curious offshoot of occult English nationalism seems of a piece with contemporaneous revolutionary aesthetics.

Plender's most recent work at the time of my writing also taps a mystical vein. *Are Dreams Hallucinations During Sleep or Hallucinations Waking Dreams?*, 2011, is an installation comprising two videos, a graphic novel, and a set of table displays,

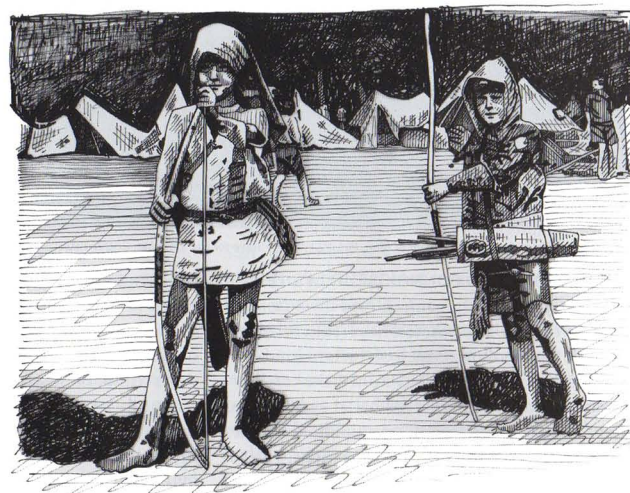
commissioned for the Folkestone Triennial. In the course of her research in this typically decayed English seaside town, Plender noted a preponderance of new age emporiums selling spiritual gewgaws, stores that seem curiously in keeping with the former port's older, Orientalized architecture: Palm Court, Rhodesia Hotel, Luxor Arcade. Like some other dilapidated coastal towns, Folkestone seems to suggest a fantastical past, or future, not least in the gloomy precincts of its Masonic Hall, where Plender's work is installed. Here, among lugubrious paintings of Masons past and plaques recording the names of the lodge's officials, the first video, shot in the room itself, proposes odd affinities between esoteric writing and modernist theatrics. A cast of local amateur actors carry out exercises derived from the dramatic-educational practices and theories of Jacques Lecoq and Jerzy Grotowski, but their gestures, inscribing enigmatic messages in the air, seem derived from some amalgam of mediumistic automatism and Masonic ritual.

The second video, shown on a monitor, is directly connected to Plender's earlier investigations of Spiritualism. It is based on the writings of Andrew Jackson Davis, the American Spiritualist whose mid-nineteenth-century books and lectures touched on mesmerism, clairvoyant healing, and supposed

conferences with the dead. In Plender's video, a woman advances to the camera and delivers a speech incorporating portions of Jackson's texts, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and direct references to contemporary economic collapse, resulting in a montage of historical moments. A graphic novel depicting related scenes was included in the installation, and was inexpensively on sale at the triennial's visitor center.

In fact, the graphic novel has long been a major strand of Plender's practice, pursued in *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* (2007), named after one of Davis's books and also concerning Spiritualism, as well as in *The Masterpiece* (2001–2006), a series of comic books named after Émile Zola's fictionalization of the life of Cézanne but drawing its graphic imagery from 1940s noir. Set in postwar London, *The Masterpiece* finds its painter protagonist trapped in a haunted mansion while mysterious rituals are set in motion around him. The overarching argument seems to be that the supernatural functioned in English culture of the past century as a site for the desire for social transformation that exercised more avowedly political modernist avant-gardes abroad. One figure exemplifying the UK's alternative tradition would be the maverick film director Ken Russell, whom Plender interviewed for her video *Ken Russell*

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Olivia Plender, *Bring Back Robin Hood*, 2007, stills from a black-and-white and color video, 30 minutes.

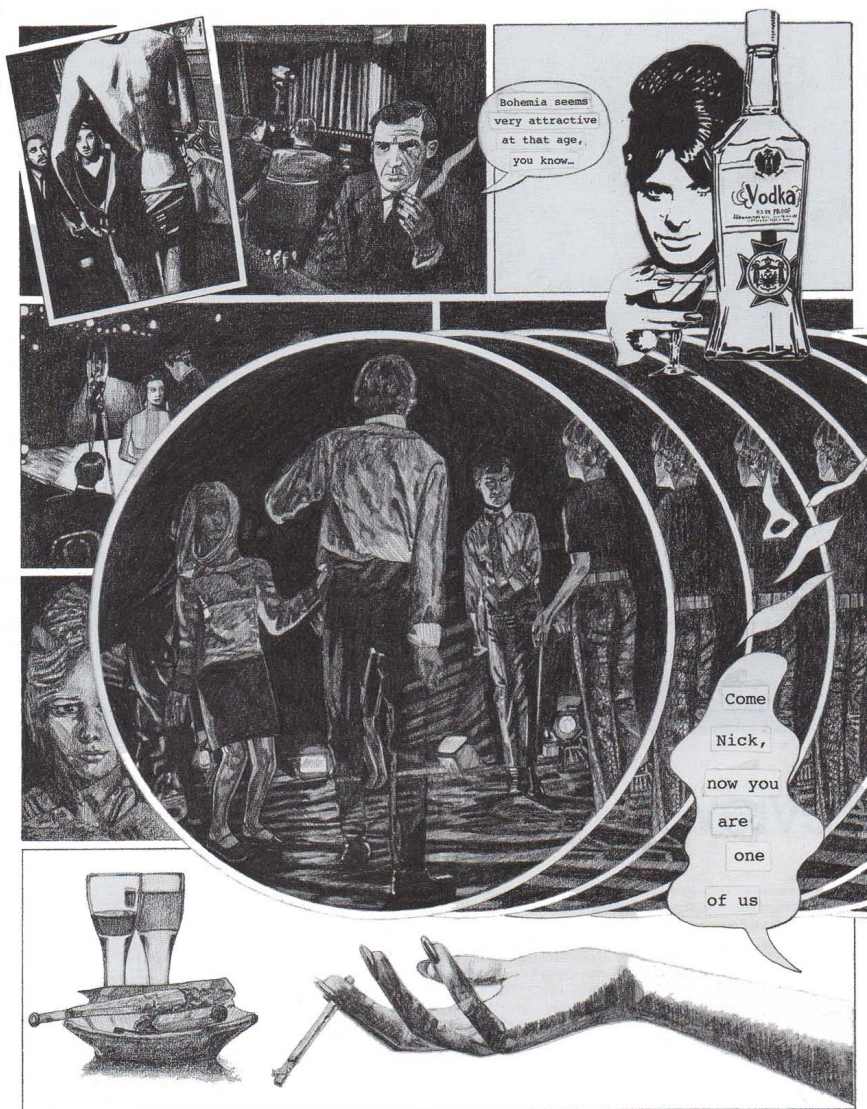


Above: Olivia Plender, *Are Dreams Hallucinations During Sleep or Hallucinations Waking Dreams?* (detail), 2011, still from a color video, 7 minutes. From the 2nd Folkestone Triennial.



Above: Olivia Plender, *Are Dreams Hallucinations During Sleep or Hallucinations Waking Dreams?*, 2011, mixed media, video. Installation view, Masonic Hall, Grace Hill, Folkestone, UK. From the 2nd Folkestone Triennial.

Right: Page from Olivia Plender's *The Masterpiece 3* (2004). "Evil Genius."



in *Conversation with Olivia Plender*, 2005–2007. Russell, whose discussion with Plender revolves largely around the role of the artist, moved easily at the end of the 1960s from producing energetic arts biopics for the BBC to making idiosyncratic versions of gothic classics, such as his grandiloquent 1988 adaptation of *The Lair of the White Worm*.

In much of her work, Plender makes the case that some version of a cultural underground is hiding in plain sight among the detritus of popular culture

and once vast, now forgotten, social movements. These last, especially, languish in archives and museums, and in the memories of their former adherents or enthusiasts. A good deal of attention in recent years has mined such forgotten aspects of Britain's past: We might think of Jeremy Deller's interest in the holdings of small local museums and the traveling "Folk Archive" exhibition he organized with Alan Kane; the critic Rob Young's history of a century of visionary and mystical influence

on English music, *Electric Eden* (2010); or the ambitious survey show "The Dark Monarch: Magic & Modernity in British Art" at Tate St Ives in 2009. Plender's own mediumistic ambition has been to reanimate the remnants of spirits past not merely in their uncanny or eccentric distance from the present but to summon their potential as suggestive avatars of the now. □

BRIAN DILLON IS UK EDITOR OF CABINET MAGAZINE. HIS ANTHOLOGY *RUINS* IS OUT THIS MONTH FROM MIT PRESS/WHITECHAPEL GALLERY.