

Live Souls

Slater Bradley's art takes on fandom, from the inside.

by Marina Cashdan



Stroszek's Last Stand, 2009
Oil and palladium leaf on linen.
12 x 12 in.

THROUGH VIDEO, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND, MORE RECENTLY, PAINTING, artist Slater Bradley explores such everlasting themes as mortality, immortality, and reincarnation, all in the context of an Internet-savvy era. In addressing these topics, he uses popular music, in part, as a springboard, tapping into fan culture, revealing truths about passionate groupies and their collective unconscious, as well as about the industry that fuels them. In last winter's "if we were immortal," his sixth show at Team Gallery, in New York, and in many earlier works, his subject is the post-punk Mancunian band

Joy Division, whose brief existence ended in 1980 with the suicide of its lead singer, Ian Curtis.

Bradley's infatuation with Joy Division began concurrently with his interest in art. "I had SFMOMA [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art] in my backyard," says the Bay Area-born New Yorker. "I would spend all my time there studying Clyfford Still paintings, Rothko paintings. I was really into Abstract Expressionism. But at home [I had images of] statues and cemeteries, mostly from Joy Division posters, hanging on my bedroom walls." Brad-



ABOVE: Stills from *Factory Archives*, 2001–02. Single-channel video with sound, 3 min., 38 sec. **RIGHT:** Stills from *Phantom Release*, 2003. Single-channel video with sound, 8 min., 30 sec. **BELOW:** Stills from *Recorded Yesterday*, 2004. Silent single-channel video, 40 min., 57 sec. The three videos make up *The Doppelgänger Trilogy*.

ley, who is 34 and boyish-looking, with shoulder-length sandy blond hair and warm gray eyes, typically wears all black: clunky combat boots, eccentric pants from niche designers, and, this winter, a black shearling aviator hat. Initially, he can come across as moody and sullen, but speaking with him you quickly learn that he's genuine and sensitive. He has an idealistic, if not romantic, notion of the artist's role, defining his practice as the attempt to reach a goal beyond mere dollars, although he's quick to acknowledge that dollars make art possible.

Bradley graduated in 1998 from University of California, Los Angeles, where he experimented with all types of mediums but ultimately gravitated to video art. "Everybody has painted for all this time. At least with video, there's a limited history," he says. "It only goes back as far as Nam June Paik—1960 basically—so you've got a shorter history. And technology is always advancing, so you have more to experiment with." He moved to New York upon graduation and took a compilation tape of his video works to various New York galleries. After seeing video artist Maria Marshall's exhibition "When I Grow Up I Want to Be a Cooker," at Team Gallery, he introduced himself to Team's founder and director, Jose Freire. Less than two months later, Freire offered him a solo show. "I got lucky," Bradley says. "And now I've worked with Jose for 10 years."

His video series *The Doppelgänger Trilogy* (2001–04), which debuted at Blum & Poe gallery, in Los Angeles, in 2004 and then was acquired by the Guggenheim Museum, garnered the artist a lot of attention early in his career. In it the actor Benjamin Brock—who looks something like Bradley—plays the artist enacting imagined live performances by Ian Curtis, Kurt Cobain, and Michael Jackson. For Bradley, the doppelgänger is an intermediary, a "ghost broker of time and space," that allows him to access the immortality of the ill-fated stars. In the era before the pervasiveness of YouTube, Bradley's pieces tapped into a rich vein for video art. "The work was about the [as-yet-undiscovered] space of YouTube. [These figures] were the perfect tragic myths, ones that break the status quo, and I sought to locate that influence over the past decade in reconstructing forgotten, lost, and phantom performances and ephemera," says Bradley, who feels his *Trilogy* was a harbinger of YouTube culture. Although he believes YouTube is a valuable tool for amateur archaeology, he regrets that it has changed the way we value information and discovery. "The barrel of history is now not a barrel at all; it's an event horizon," he says. "You used to have to dig to find a record or book of an obscure artist you loved. Now the physicality of the long, lucky search has been replaced by guaranteed one-step digital transmission."

Joy Division emerged in the wake of the raw, raging sounds of the Sex Pistols, the Ramones, and the Clash. The band inspired successive waves of worshipers attracted to its dark, moody sound and youthful energy—and to Curtis, whose spastic moves ("chicken dancing," Bradley calls them, linking them to the final image of Werner Herzog's 1977 film *Stroszek*) and poetic lyrics about love, death, and personal torment resonated with a generation of U.K. youth who felt disenfranchised and dissatisfied in the country's residual class system. Joy Division's album designs, devised by Factory Records creative director Peter Saville, one of the music industry's greatest image makers, also introduced fans to fine art by appropriating historical works and recontextualizing them in pop culture. Ralph Gibson's eerie 1969 photograph *Hand Through Doorway* (also known as *Enchanted Hand*), for example, was printed on the inner sleeve of Joy Division's debut album, *Unknown Pleasures* (1979), which, with its cover picture of pulses from a pulsar reading, became just as iconic visually as it did acoustically.





ABOVE: *Mirrors and Windows*, 2009. Oil and moon-gold leaf on linen, 24 x 20 in. RIGHT: Performance stills from the "Hate" series, 2009. Photographed by Jason Schmidt

Upon Curtis's death, fans attempted to recapture the Joy Division experience—and in effect resurrect Curtis—by continually producing bootleg albums of unreleased versions of the group's songs. In reincarnating the music, they also attempted to re-create Saville's designs. Both the original images, like Gibson's photos, and the fan-constructed ones inspired Bradley's works in "if we were immortal." In *Mirrors and Windows* (2009), he replicates *Hand Through Doorway* in oil and moon-gold leaf on a large canvas. The monochromatic painting shows the frail black hand reaching through a narrowly opened door, the geometric shadows offering no sign of a body beyond. Unlike the fleeting moment of the photograph—a single-perspective vision of that single second—the painting offers a physical space in which the viewer can explore not only the subject but also the nuances of the artist's hand. With the help of the designer Haans Nicholas Mott, Bradley also reproduced the donkey jacket on whose back Curtis Tipped the word *HATE*. During the exhibition, Bradley staged clandestine

performances (which, like the photographs, were titled *Hate*) featuring Brock wearing the coat through New York's streets, museums, and galleries, and past newspaper kiosks and even a battalion of NYPD officers.

The Joy Division fan bootlegs were "made when personal computers were but a corporate dream," says Bradley, and his works play on the obvious paradigm shift in the reception and dissemination of what he calls "cultural artifacts, legends, and identity." *Mirrors and Windows* took months to produce, he adds, reiterating the contrast between artmaking and the speed of consumption. Appropriating the titles of the uncovered bootlegs for his own creations—*The sun ain't gonna shine anymore*, *Dante's Inferno*, *The money will roll right in* (all 2009)—Bradley comments that his (and all) artwork, like the rare bootlegs before the Internet age, should be valued. There are still many star-crossed stories to dig up and bootlegs to be found, so we can look forward for more to come—and more to covet—from Bradley. ♦