

19 June - 5 September 2010

Bjarne Melgaard/
Rod Bianco
"Super Normal"

zie ommezijde voor nederlands

**Events in het kader
van de tentoonstelling:**

zon. 11 juli, zat. 4 sept. om 15 u.
Gratis rondleidingen door
de tentoonstelling

zon. 5 sept.: Finissage:
De Zondagsschool, 16 u.: een beeld
uit de tentoonstelling wordt aan
'close reading' onderworpen door
Edwin Becker, hoofd tentoonstellingen
van het Van Gogh Museum.
Reserveringen: reservation@deappel.nl.

**Events in the context
of the exhibition:**

Sun. 11 July, Sat. 4 Sept. at 3 pm
Free guided tours of the exhibition

Sun. 5 September: Finissage:
Sunday School, 4 pm: one work of
the exhibition becomes subject
of close reading by Edwin Becker,
head of exhibitions at Van Gogh Museum.
Reservations: reservation@deappel.nl.

de Appel Jongensschool / Boys' School
Eerste Jacob van Campenstraat 59
open: Tues till Sun 11am - 6pm

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Solo Project

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'Fiction interests me much more than real life. I always prefer when somebody's telling me an interesting lie rather than a boring truth.'

Bjarne Melgaard

The current exhibition by Norwegian artist **Bjarne Melgaard** (born in Melbourne, 1967 - lives and works in New York) is firmly rooted in the mental world of Rod Bianco. Melgaard is a gifted storyteller who constructs narrative microcosms by means of visual and textual indications. His work evolves at break-neck speed owing to his continual introduction of new themes, ideas and story-lines linked to a variety of subcultures and semi-imaginary characters. Earlier work saw the presence of colorful figures such as Rob Bo'Bel, Bernard St. Summiere, Mr. Black Pearl, Rummelsnuff, Joey Stefano, Frost, Yolanda the Jacksmith Penguin and Les Super.

Painter Rod Bianco is the latest protagonist; he is neither an alter ego nor an avatar of the artist Bjarne Melgaard, but a fictional personality who may simultaneously be regarded as a 'production unit'. Bianco seems to belong to an elaborate fantasy world but has lent his name to a new existing commercial gallery in Oslo. Rod Bianco is equally an artistic outlet for producing works across all mediums: graphics, press, curating, merchandising of all kinds, and art exhibitions. He has made a cameo appearance in a show at Leo Koenig's gallery in New York entitled "You Always Move in Reverse" (2007) and features in the group exhibition "Don Juan in the Village" (2010) at Lars Bohman Gallery in Stock-

holm. The entirety of work and activities that develops under his auspices is legible as a multilayered visual novel.

Bianco reminds us of "The Encyclopaedia of Fictional Artists", an overview of non-existent artists who feature in the canon of Western literature (from 1605 until 2000), 'fictitious artists as represented in fiction'. Editor Koen Brams concludes that the majority of the artists who feature in the book are 'losers, tricksters, suicidal maniacs, iconoclasts and ridiculous figures'. Most of them experience 'artishood as a nightmare' and are downright lamentable if not despicable, isolated and abandoned.

Individuals stigmatized by society frequently appear and disappear in the artistic microcosm of Bjarne Melgaard. Despite the fact that Rod Bianco does not seem to belong to that category of social outcasts, he does resemble the artists featuring in The Encyclopaedia as he, like them, lives in between the 'real' and the 'fictitious'. He is, however, not the brainchild of a novelist but simply a name in writing, with a universe of images, preferences, likings and exploded stories attached to it. He is evoked almost as spirits are during a séance. Like most of the characters that pop up in Melgaard's work he is namely present as a suggestion or idea; he does not have a biography and does not receive a specific physical form in visual representation.

The tacit premise of this game is that we do not commit 'the crime of biographism' and regard him as being equivalent to the artist or real life person Bjarne Melgaard. Bianco might be a product of the imagination but is far from being a second self; nor a pseudonym, alias or 'nom de plume' for the artist Bjarne Melgaard.

Bianco is a painter pur sang who is interested in form and probes the nature of painting in the present-day. Bianco believes in the intuitive approach and cultivates the spontaneous, unpremeditated artistic gesture - he proclaims and subscribes to the New Art Brut that exists outside the boundaries of official culture. Nevertheless his world is replete with an abundance of references to high (and popular) culture. Bianco is an iconophile: an image addict, an avid collector and consumer of the visual. Bianco's taste is eclectic and he does not shy away from cultural appropriation. He is interested in gender politics, toys with images of twisted masculinity and femininity, by both affirming and subverting (stereotypical) gender roles. Bianco is interested in dramatic, violence-infused and abusive relationships. He focuses on interracial sexual relationships and he is fascinated by the way 'the black male' is represented as a symbol of macho virility in popular culture and in a variety of subcultures that have become mainstream such as hip-hop.

Throughout the exhibition we get hints and suggestions of who and what Rod Bianco is. He can however only 'come into existence' through relentless creative activity on the side of the viewer-receiver and is the product of a collaboration between Melgaard's inspiration and our imagination. In order to create him, we viewers need to co-construct him on the basis of the raw, fragmented material that Melgaard has provided. In the following text you find a number of topics and issues that are part of that raw material.

Super Normal

Melgaard's work is never a comfort for those fond of political correctness. Chaos, violence and excess, injuries and dependencies as well as emotional ambiguity are recurring motifs in his work. He has become notorious for explicit, homoerotic and violent imagery, as well as for his fascination with extreme, transgressive behaviour such as substance abuse, extreme bodybuilding and steroids addiction, self mutilation, gay S & M, barebacking, scarification and man-boy love.

"Super Normal", the title of Rod Bianco's exhibition, has no connection in any way to the exhibition "Niet Normaal" (Not Normal), which was recently organised in the Berlage Stock Exchange (Amsterdam),

but there is a direct relationship with Melgaard's interest in everything 'transgressive' and 'abnormal'. Can something be supernormal, more normal than ordinary normal? Exceptionally normal? Or is supernormal comparable to paranormal, strange and of a different order? After all, in Melgaard's work norms and conventions are always subjected to a 'resistance test' - how resistant are they to aberration? What is 'normal' behaviour, and what sort of behaviour is deviant, bizarre or unacceptable? To what extent can we tolerate behaviour that is over the limit? What do we consider to be not done, immoral or unacceptable, taboo? Are there, in fact, any taboos left in our 'permissive society'?

46 **Untitled, 2010, Rod Bianco Posters,**
printed posters, 66×91 cm
On sale at the Reception desk

Barcelona

Representations of a painter in his studio - busy forming a mental picture of a future work of art, or actively working with a brush and canvas - have been made since classical antiquity. In this kind of self-portrait the artist expresses his views on art, on himself and how he wants to represent himself. But what if a self-portrait is not made by the artist himself but by a different painter? Is the description self-portrait appropriate in that case? Like a contemporary Rubens, Melgaard has recently had his works painted by other artists from his studio, a remarkable development for a painter who actually became known for his own highly personal, expressive signature.

In fact, in contrast with the protagonist Rod Bianco, Melgaard is 'visible' in the exhibition with this series of portraits. He commissioned this series of photorealist paintings, which are based on a series of rather unflattering personal snapshots, in which he is standing in his former studio in Barcelona in an intoxicated or drugged condition. He added an extra layer himself by covering the canvases with his characteristic sketched drawings and 'dark' diary-like texts. The paintings emphasise the romantic clichéd image of the bohemian artist: an eccentric outcast with a destructive spirit who loses himself in his work and

in life, surrounded by paint and canvas.

Self-destruction, (drug) abuse, self-harming and violence against others, physical disintegration and addiction have been constantly recurring themes since Melgaard's earliest work. In this regard Melgaard consciously allows the boundaries between fiction and autobiography to become blurred. He plays with multiple identities and leaves the viewer not knowing whether something has or has not been taken from his own life. In vain we look for the real artist in his work, and constantly find a partly fictitious self-portrait, an artistic construction.

- 1 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 193×289.6×5.1cm
- 2 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 193×289.6×5.1cm
- 3 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 193×289.6×5.1cm
- 4 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 193×289.6×5.1cm
- 5 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 193×289.6×5.1cm
- 6 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 193×289.6×5.1cm
- 7 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 193×289.6×5.1cm
- 8 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 193×289.6×5.1cm

Child soldiers / Sierra Leone

For many years Melgaard has been concerned with the contrasts and 'irreconcilable' elements which characterise certain (sub)cultural phenomena and (sexual) customs and practices. For example, in an earlier exhibition in the trilogy concluded by "Super Normal", Melgaard explored the controversial NAM-BLA (North American Man/Boy Love Association), an organisation that has been fighting for thirty years for the acceptance of the reciprocal love between men and boys (not to be confused with paedophilia), probably one of the last sexual taboos. He raised the question: 'Can childlike innocence and adult sexuality exist together?' Melgaard does not pronounce a moral judgement on this, but on the basis of his fascination with the proverbial dark rooms and margins of society, he explores the limits of what is admissible.

The series of paintings of portraits of child soldiers and their victims in Sierra Leone can also be seen in this light. How can childish innocence be reconciled with killer instinct and blind aggression? There is absolutely nothing left of the carefree, playful and ingenuous nature of children in the murderous minors and their amputated victims. The pre-pubescent African boys who are depicted are completely drugged up and

behave like violent adult men, hiding behind their impressive weapons. The non-descript and impressive decorative style of these slick paintings of photographs contrasts with the raw subject matter, just as Melgaard's own virtuoso lines and beautiful use of colour briefly often conceals the shocking content of his work. Like a graffiti artist, Melgaard added a visual commentary to these paintings, and the question arises to whom and to what these comments actually apply.

- 9 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 88.9 × 148 × 4.45 cm
- 15 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 139.7 × 137.7 × 4.4 cm
- 16 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 139.7 × 150.5 × 4.4
- 17 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 152.4 × 104.1 × 4.4
- 18 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 178.4 × 115.6 × 4.4cm
- 19 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 152.4 × 100.3 × 4.4cm
- 20 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 183.5 × 134 × 4.4cm
- 21 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 127 × 127 × 4.4cm
- 22 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 100.3 × 165.1 × 4.4cm
- 23 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 152.3 × 114.3 × 4.4 cm
- 25 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 127 × 127 × 4.4cm

- 27 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 102.9 × 137.2 × 4.4cm
- 38 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 102.9 × 137.2 × 4.4cm
- 39 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 102.9 × 137.2 × 4.4cm
- 40 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 102.9 × 152.4 × 4.4cm
- 41 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 102.9 × 152.4 × 4.4cm
- 42 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 102.9 × 152.4 × 4.4cm
- 49 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 152.4 × 86.4 × 4.4cm

The dingo and the platypus

Rod Bianco's visual universe contains a colourful collection of constantly recurring animals, in addition to a series of striking characters. While the chihuahuas Tine and Gro in Melgaard's earlier work referred to unconditional love (of the dog for its master - no matter what), the collection of hybrid animals from the country of Melgaard's birth, Australia, now appears to refer to notions such as 'cultural corruption', 'transcultural mixtures' and 'abnormality'. Melgaard's assistants in his studio painted this series of paintings of dingoes and platypuses from saccharine images found on the Internet. Melgaard

himself added the powerful sexual and emotionally loaded phrases and sentences like graffiti tags to the cartoon-like drawings of the 'Tasmanian Pademelon' (a mini-kangaroo), the platypus and various bats.

The dingo - which looks like a cross between a dog and a wolf - was imported from Asia to Australia as a pet by the original Aborigines thousands of years ago, but developed as a wild animal in the natural world. It may invite you to stroke it, but this conceals a dubious reputation. After all, in the popular imagination the dingo - with which the Aborigines have a special relationship - has been demonised as a bloodthirsty 'child snatcher'. This image arose not least because of the successful docudrama, "A Cry in the Dark" (1988), in which Meryl Streep plays the desperate mother Lindy Chamberlain, who tries to prove that she did not murder her baby Azaria, but that her daughter was abducted and killed by a dingo.

Like the dingo, the platypus seems to be a 'mosaic' of different species- a mole, a duck and an otter. It appears on the Australian 20 cent coin, and was also the official mascot for the Sydney 2000 Olympics. Because of its bizarre 'composite' appearance, the platypus is like a creature from a fable, like the chimera from Greek mythology, which has the head of a lion, the body of a goat and the tail

of a snake. The platypus - an animal that is less prominent in this exhibition, yet often crops up in Melgaard's work - is a remarkable mammal because it shares a striking number of characteristics with birds and reptiles. For a long time it has been a mystery to zoologists and taxonomists and was considered to be 'totally uncategorisable' (abnormal).

- 28 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 83.8 × 111.8 × 4.4cm
- 29 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 68.6 × 101.6 × 4.4cm
- 30 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 101.6 × 76.2 × 4.4cm
- 31 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 100.3 × 100.3 × 4.4cm
- 32 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 111.8 × 83.8 × 4.4cm
- 33 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 111.8 × 83.8 × 4.4cm
- 34 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 88.9 × 101.6 × 4.4cm
- 35 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 101.6 × 83.2 × 4.4cm
- 57 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 101.6 × 177.8 × 4.4 cm
- 60 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 128.5 × 177.8 × 4.4 cm
- 61 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 167.6 × 121.9 × 4.4 cm
- 62 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 182.9 × 127 × 4.4cm

- 63 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 130.8 × 182.9 × 4.4 cm
- 64 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 118.7 × 167.6 × 4.4 cm
- 65 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 121.9 × 113 × 4.4 cm

The Pre-Raphaelites and Vogue / Ballroom

In this series of canvases copies of the works of Pre-Raphaelite artists such as John Everett Millais and John William Waterhouse serve as the background for silhouettes of 'Vogueing' figures and texts with a sexual innuendo. The idealised and fairy-like imagery of the nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood - which was inspired by ancient myths and legends and advocated a return to the 'primitive' art of the pre-Renaissance Italian artist Raphael - contrasts strongly with the direct and raw quality of the foreground.

The above-mentioned silhouettes were taken from the video clip of the 1998 space-disco hit, "Deep in Vogue". With this clip, in which the legendary dancer Willi Ninja plays the leading role, the late, multi-talented Malcolm McLaren made 'Vogueing' mainstream, even before Madonna did so. Vogue - a dance style characterised by imitating various poses

of photographic models with striking geometric, stylised and exaggerated, effeminate arm movements and the fragmented parading of an imaginary catwalk - was initially an underground phenomenon. It caused a furore in the so-called 'Ballroom' scene of Afro-American and Latin American homosexuals and drag queens in New York. The followers of Vogue are grouped in 'Houses' - such as the House of Ebony and the House of Ninja - which engage in dance battles during so-called 'extravaganzas' in clubs or ballrooms. In addition, the Houses serve as a sort of surrogate family, which allows members to express, without any shame, their own sexual orientation for which they often encounter discrimination in their home environment. This subculture represents a black homosexual identity rooted in elegance and frivolity, pleasure and entertainment. It is in complete contradiction with the glorification of violence and heterosexual virility, which all too often determine the image of the black man in popular culture.

Although they are based on real 'models and muses', the women in the Pre-Raphaelite paintings are nymph-like femmes fatales, dreamlike creatures, the embodiment of male fantasies of 'ultimate femininity'. They are often depicted as 'victims of tragic love', a concept that is closely related to the Victorian

view of the inherent 'weakness' of women. The historian Jan Marsh wrote that the way in which these women were represented 'tended both to glorify them, raising them like Hollywood film stars above the level of ordinary mortals into a mythic realm of tragic heroines and fatal sirens, and paradoxically to diminish them, reducing their real, complex lives to flat figures in a fantasy landscape and taking away from them all sense of active life'. Their passivity and submissiveness are in stark contrast to the stars of the Vogue and Ballroom scene, who actually emphatically and actively express their own sexuality and identity and independently create an 'artificial hyper-femininity'.

44 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil and krink markers on canvas,
198.1 x 114.3 x 4.4cm

45 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil and krink markers on canvas,
134 x 198.1 x 4.4cm

51 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil and krink markers on canvas,
198.8 x 119.4 x 4.4cm

52 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil and krink markers on canvas,
123.8 x 198.1 x 4.4cm

53 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil and krink markers on canvas,
198.8 x 113 x 5.11cm

54 **Untitled**, 2010,

oil and krink markers on canvas,
198.1 × 141 × 4.4cm

55 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil and krink markers on canvas,
141 × 198.1 × 4.4cm

56 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil and krink markers on canvas,
198.8 × 96.5 × 5.1cm

66 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on Canvas, 152.4 × 152.4 × 4.4cm

Black Panthers

References to the 'image of the black man', as directly and indirectly presented by the Black Panthers, can be found in various places in the exhibition. During a commemoration of the murder of Malcolm X in 1966, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, members of the revolutionary student movement at Merrit University (Merrit Junior College) in Oakland, suggested setting up an armed militia. The movement rejected this, and Newton and Seale therefore decided to found the Black Panther Party, which was based on the right of the black population to use violence to defend their rights, forming an alternative to the existing, moderate civil rights groups. Members of the party wore a black military uniforms, were visibly armed, and did not shun violence. Although the BPP was essentially a movement aimed at achieving the social

emancipation of a entire population group, the media representations often emphasised the macho culture promoted by the leaders of the BPP, in which the physical strength of the Afro-American man had a central place.

- 36 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 182.9 × 141 × 4.4cm
- 37 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 182.9 × 141.6 × 4.4cm
- 43 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 118.1 × 182.9 × 4.4cm
- 58) **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 167.6 × 132.7 × 4.4cm
- 59 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 167.6 × 137.8 × 4.4cm

Kurtis Blow and Horse Meat Disco

From the musical point of view, both Bianco and Melgaard are 'omnivorous'. The black metal bands Thorns and Satyricon and the alternative American metal band Fantômas, as well as the music of the Techno DJ Chris Korda (who was also the predecessor of The Church of Euthanasia), the feminist electro clash band Le Tigre, the singer Gro Melgaard and the singer-actress Olivia Newton John all left their mark on Melgaard's work. In Bianco's world there are references to the infamous gay disco parties of the London collective

- 26 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 127×127×4.4cm
- 47 **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 101.6×101.6×4.4cm
- 48) **Untitled**, 2010,
oil on canvas, 101.6×101.6×4.4cm

Benin

'Cultural appropriation' is a tried and tested technique in the visual arts, which is also frequently adopted by Melgaard. He borrows elements from non-European cultures, for example, the shapes and techniques of traditional woodcarving from Greenland and Alaska. In Rod Bianco's imagery we find contemporary replicas of pre-twentieth-century West African bronze and copper sculptures. Just as Picasso, Braque and other Cubists were influenced by the dramatic geometric shapes of African masks and totems, Bianco is inspired by the technically highly sophisticated figures which were made in the former kingdom of Benin from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century. The Kingdom of Benin was a pre-colonial state in the present state of Nigeria from 1440 to 1897. During the Golden Age of the Kingdom the autocratic rulers (known as Obas) and the Queen Mothers (Iyobas) commissioned remarkable sculptures, including 'portraits' and 'leopards', which are unlike any other

contemporary sculptures from the rest of the African continent. In the context of the exhibition it is also striking and relevant that from the sixteenth century, great (political) power was assigned to the figure of the 'Queen Mother' in the Kingdom. She played a matriarchal role and held the same position as the top chief. This entailed many privileges, including the privilege normally exclusively reserved for the Oba to have 'sculptures' made for personal use.

24 **Untitled**, 2010,
Installation: marble sculptures,
photoprints, aluminum-mounted
photoprints, paint supplies

50 **Untitled**, 2010,
bronze cast, various sizes

David Wojnarowicz

Bianco repeatedly refers to the enigmatic work of the über-painter Rene Daniëls (1950) and to the polymorphous oeuvre of the American enfant terrible David Wojnarowicz (1954 - 1992). In the 1980s, a time when (geometrical) abstraction was the norm, the Dutch artist Daniëls produced playful figurative canvases, replete with bow ties, swans, weird exhibition spaces and ironical and associative art historical comments.

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