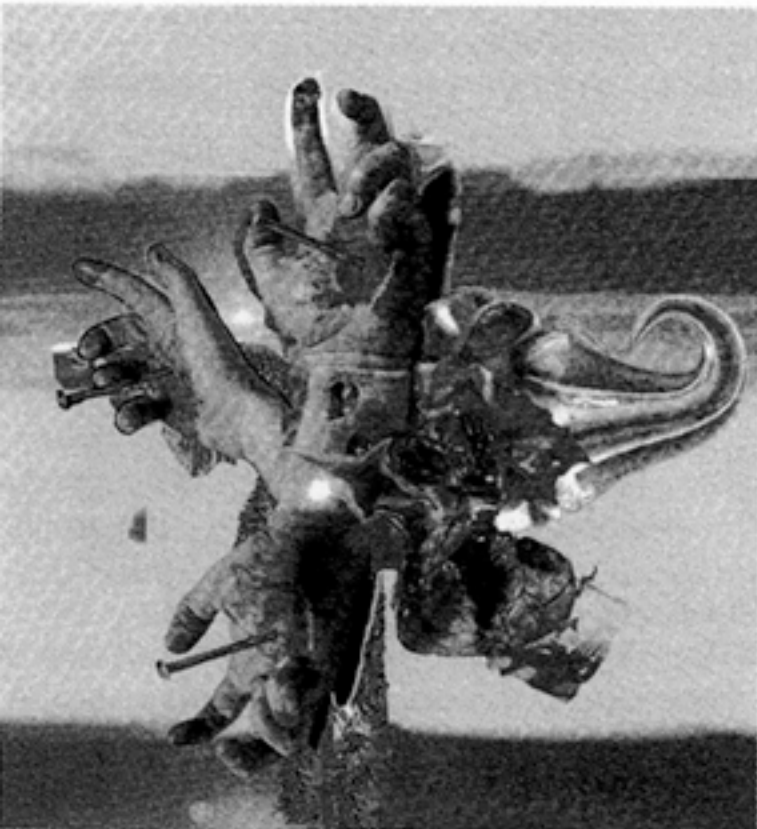


NORWICH (UK)

JOHN RUSSELL

NORWICH GALLERY



JOHN RUSSELL, *Hand Idea: Phantasies of Realism*, 2005. Laserjet on vinyl, 244 x 231 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

“Labelled the dead son of Bourgeois mysticism, the GENIESS is back... and s/he is pissed.” So runs the text of one of John Russell’s suite of laserjet painting/objects, an eye-popping assault of digitally collaged imagery that collides a pop-cultural repertoire of viscera, brains and dismembered organs with sumptuous color and a baroque, decorative intensity. Russell’s provocative invocation of the (now gender-inclusive) modernist ‘genius’ is critical art at its best; that is, art at its most contradictory and confrontational.

Confronting the zombie-like revival of “aesthetic” painting, Russell’s laser-printed vinyl canvasses echo the incursion of popular technology into the persistent cultural privilege of contemporary painting — getting your holiday snaps printed onto ‘art’ canvas is a common pursuit nowadays — yet they purposefully transcend the insipid tones that are the limits of amateurism. Russell’s images present a

JJ Charlesworth.
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confrontation between the brute physicality of existence and our intellectual and cultured apprehension of the base matter from which we emerge, charting a densely philosophical reflection on art, body and politics that winds from Marx through Nietzsche to Deleuze, in the newly populist and democratised language of high-technological affect.

Russell's super-charged violent/beautiful commodity/art objects are significant in their subversion of the fashionable polarization of anti-aesthetic 'critical' art on one hand (art that affects society in some direct, political way) and the supposedly 'anti-political' return to an idle, pleasure-seeking aesthetics on the other. If images of an imaginary violence can invoke pleasure through the aestheticization of repugnance, then pleasure and violence are in some way transformed by their move to the artwork and the art gallery. Such images implicate us in a more complex reflection on the political valence of aesthetic visual experience, of how the outside world is inscribed, hidden or revealed in an artwork. In the crazed language of the press release, Russell's zones of visual intensity throw down the utopian challenge of 'transforming all viewers into potential geniesses and visionaries.'

JJ Charlesworth