

Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY



Ryan Trecartin, *Mark Trade*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 73 minutes 30 seconds. Mark Trade (Murphy Maxwell).

From his undergraduate days onward, Ryan Trecartin has displayed the sort of raw talent that inspires recourse to German: *Wunderkind*, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, *Zeitgeist*. In this respect, and several others, the most salient point of comparison to Trecartin's career is Matthew Barney's ascension in the 1990s. Call it the Clark Kent Effect: The art world keeps coronating fresh-faced male phenoms from the heartland. Like Barney, Trecartin combines cinematic video suites with baroque sculptural installations, maintains from project to project the same close-knit cadre of collaborators (chief among them Lizzie Fitch), situates narratives in alternate realities governed by warped yet ironclad logics, and turns repeatedly to the theme of human transformation, across the gender spectrum and along a more fantastical axis spanning the feral, the mythological, and the cybernetic. What separates Trecartin from Barney is Reddit, Red Bull, and *Real Housewives*. Barney casts actors as mute functionaries engaged in obscure rituals; Trecartin renders them as glitchy video-game avatars chattering in chipmunk Auto-Tune. Barney's pacing is glacial, solemn; Trecartin's is dizzyingly rapid and damn funny.

I offer this comparison to pose a question. If Barney's post-"Cremaster" output is any indicator, preternatural assurance plus unflagging acclaim is an easy formula for Ouroboros-like closure. Trecartin is inimitable, but what keeps him from becoming an imitation of himself? In this New York debut of recent videos and installations, credited to Trecartin and Fitch as a duo, numerous tropes from prior works reappear. Actors sport circle contact lenses and metallic face paint, as if primed for a bachelorette party at the Mos Eisley cantina. Mosaic patterns of handheld footage and digital animations stream more quickly than human physiology can fully process. Dialogue thrums to the confessional and combative rhythms of reality television. Yet the videos also import a new set of conventions, largely from horror movies. In *Stunt Tank*, 2016, characters wear GoPro headsets and operate camera-equipped drones; whenever the footage switches to these sources, the effect suggests the viewpoint of an unseen assailant spying on hapless victims. *Temple Time*, 2016, recorded at a former Masonic Temple on LA's Wilshire Boulevard, borrows the classic premise of staying overnight in a haunted house. An installation of benches and beanbag chairs arranged over dock-like wooden planks evokes a lakeside cabin or summer camp—the backdrop for countless slasher films, where sex, drugs, and other mindless pleasures lead inexorably to gore. The absence of any actual violence in these videos is analogous to the perpetually deferred catharsis in Beckett's tragicomedies. No one dies because no one lives.

Trecartin departs most significantly from his prior work with *Mark Trade*, 2016, best described as a postapocalyptic remake of *Easy Rider*. Murphy Maxwell stars as the title character, a scraggly-bearded, rubber-limbed redneck emcee who alludes frequently to a long-past "human era" as he and a film crew travel through the American West. (Like Godard's *Alphaville*, the video is sci-fi without any explicitly sci-fi trappings.) In a moment of overly enthused improv, Maxwell kicks and cracks the windshield of the group's rented RV. "That's fucked-up," he says, breaking character. "Camera off." The perpetual performance comes to halt at the moment when a screen shatters. It's an apt metaphor for other signs of fissure. Trecartin's videos have long featured actors who, like Maxwell, speak in a Southern drawl, but increasingly this lower-class burlesque affirms a grim irony of the digital economy: The same technologies that promote fluid identities online stifle upward mobility elsewhere. This election year, the ugliness of these social divisions has been amplified by a presidential candidate who, with his orange skin, absurd coif, and *Celebrity Apprentice* IMDb credits, is essentially a Trecartin avatar come monstrously to life. And then there are all those drones, humming and hovering, the consumer-grade versions of military weapons controlled by a generation of pilots who grew up playing first-person-shooter games. When the next screen cracks, let's hope Trecartin keeps the camera running.

—Colby Chamberlain