frieze
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Pierre Bismuth

Lisson Gallery, London

The wall behind the gallery reception was painted a cheap, over-saturated pink. Whenever the assistant bent to straighten a pile of press releases or tap something into her computer, the word 'dazzling' appeared, flouncing across the fuchsia plane in fuzzy-edged silver spray paint. This was Pierre Bismuth's *From Hot to Something Else* (2003). Although its title sparkled, it was a pretty drab affair, like the T-shirt that looks great on the beautiful boy in the club but looks thin and tawdry on your bedroom floor in the morning and the boy is snoring in your bed, his pimples and panda eyes exposed to the cold light of day.

Such grim calling cards littered Bismuth's Lisson show 'Collages Fit For General Audiences'. Not all of the works were collages (or at least not in the scissors-paper-glue sense), but each of them dealt, in its own way, with familiar things that generate familiar fantasies: action films, pornography and newspaper front pages. Bismuth takes these things – I suspect he'd call them sign systems – and tweaks them until their meaning is suspended, neutralized or critiqued. That, at least, is the theory; in practice there's a problem.

Take Bismuth's *Respect for the Dead – The Magnificent Seven* (2003), in which footage from seven films – including *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Dr No* (1962) and *A bout de souffle* (Breathless, 1960) – flickers out the moment the first on-screen death occurs (usually in a matter of minutes). The piece is less about Bismuth's indignation at cinema's *laissez-faire* attitude to suffering than about the discursive function these deaths play; the way in which they foreground threats, frame arguments and validate violence to come. Although the piece has a nice Oulipian poetry (only arbitrary rules, it seems, guarantee a perfect, deathless world), I can't shake the feeling that I've come across this idea before. In Mike Myers' spy spoof *Austin Powers* (1997) an anonymous henchman's death is followed by a self-aware gag about cinema's 'unknown soldiers'. Crucially, this doesn't defuse the fact that Myers is still trading on the fight 'em and fuck 'em thrills of the action genre. At a time when Hollywood films are hip to their own workings – and, more importantly, are happy to expose them – Bismuth's piece seems strangely bloodless.

The series 'Collages for Men' (2003) is similarly anaemic. Here Bismuth has enlarged several glossy shots from porno mags and primly covered the models' bodies with white paper garments. These blank robes speak of the absence that's at the heart of desire, and the series proposes a half-funny scenario in which the artist misunderstands the function of pornography so badly that he intervenes to replace the 'missing' clothes. This is fine as far as it goes, but the images Bismuth 'edits' have more in common with the arty pornography of Terry Richardson than with mainstream masturbatory material (magazine porn is currently in circulation free fall, while its low-res Internet counterpart fizzes on half the world's desktops). Like dressing paper dollies in period costume, 'Collages for Men' is good, retro fun but it's not a game for the contemporary world.

Newspapers feel important right now, and maybe that's why the works in Bismuth's 'Newspaper' series (1999–2001) were the most powerful in the show. Here front pages were reproduced with their lead photo doubled so that, for example, two images of Sarah Payne sat beneath the *Evening Standard*'s headline 'It is Sarah, it is Murder'. What is intriguing about this device is how, depending on the pictures, it plays itself out. Twin images of Gilbert and George become a game of Spot the Difference, while a pair of solar eclipses transforms the *Irish Times* into an interstellar gazette. The most striking front page featured a doubled shot of the second plane hitting the World Trade Center, as though this were the inevitable outcome of the event's brutal maths (two towers, two planes, two '1s' in 11 September). For all this, though, Bismuth's newspaper series seems to reprise the truism that the medium is the message. This is too blunt an instrument with which to critique the popular press, and a bad salve for human pain.

> Warhol observed that Western art isn't becoming more commercialized, commerce is becoming more artistic.

Pierre Bismuth
Respect for the Dead – The Magnificent Seven
2003
Video still

Andy Warhol once commented that the thing about the 1960s 'was not that Western art was becoming commercialised, but that Western commerce was becoming so much more artistic'. Bismuth's work may deal with late capitalism's sign systems, but it fails to acknowledge their sophisticated co-opting of many of the methods he employs. Like last night's pretty boy, there's more to modern pop culture than may at first appear.

Tom Morton