

Chasing Napoleon / Napoleon Devisage

Tony Scherman in conversation with Sanford Kwinter and Bruce Mau

SK: *When did you first start thinking about Napoleon?*

TS: When I was a kid we lived in Paris. I was five, going to a school there, but not speaking the language yet. I remember going to Les Invalides to see Napoleon's tomb, and seeing this big, brown, incomprehensible thing, the spookiest shape, clearly Napoleonic, Empire-style but at the same time not. It looked like a table with a curve in it or a fucked-up chaise longue or a weird box. It didn't have any program to it as a shape. The first time I saw a photo of Little Boy and Fat Man [the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki], it gave me the same revolted, awed feeling...awe as well as disgust and fear. Little Boy looks like a bomb, but Fat Man is almost like a box, very strange, not so different from the tomb. It was awesome, yet at the same time, there was something revolting about it and I didn't know what it was--excess perhaps. His tomb was excessive, no question about it.

SK: *A piece of furniture?*

TS: Yes, like a huge, weird kind of piano. It entered into a section of my memory and I did not recall it until later . . .

My mother died when I was nine, and this really sparked a tremendous anxiety in me about death. It was 1959 and I was back in England. I spent a lot of time going to the library and getting books out on the atomic bomb and on the effects of the bomb blasts on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and I got completely into it. I learned, as far as one could in those days, how to actually build one. I mean, I knew almost everything about it.

I got interested in the chemistry of fallout. I read accounts of human damage at Hiroshima, and I became obsessed with death and, at the same time, remained very interested in the French Revolution from my earlier years as a kid in France-- I remember seeing the film *Marie-Antoinette* by Jean Delannoy in '56. It was around that time that I saw the first photos of those two bombs, and I remember Napoleon's tomb having the same kind of strange largeness to it, you know, in its design: a weird opacity and at the same time a menacing set of identities.

Design signifies things obscurely, like the way art sometimes foretells the future. The design of the bombs could not have been made for anything other than something both obscure and monstrous.



Marat

1997

encaustic/canvas, 102 x 102 cm

Private collection.

Marat

Jean-Paul Marat, a highly effective orator and martyr of the Revolution, was immortalised by Jacques Louis David in the painting of him in his bathtub, dead from a stab wound inflicted by Charlotte Corday. His habit of swooping down on his enemies with biting and hyperbolic rhetoric led his contemporaries to liken him to a bird of prey. Marat was among the first to use the daily press as a political tool, calling for the blood of the aristocrats and the clergy alike. He suffered from a painful skin disease which led him to bathe incessantly.



Waiting for Marat: Goebbels

1995-97

encaustic/canvas, 76 x 76 cm

Private collection, Vancouver.

Waiting for Marat

Joseph Goebbels (1897-1945), Hitler's minister of propaganda, was expert in the use of documentary cinema and feature films as political tools to incite hatred of the Jews, Gypsies and other ethnic groups, and to create the popular mythologies of the Third Reich. Some say he was a greater rhetorician than Hitler himself, availing himself of blistering metaphors to make a point. Goebbels had a club foot.



Chez les Robespierre II

1996-98

encaustic/canvas, 152 x 152 cm

Private collection, USA.

SK: *What do you mean by paganism?*

TS: There are two aspects, one of which is best introduced through a discussion about Jacques-Louis David and Albert Speer. David and Speer occupied very similar positions. David was the official painter of the French Revolution and organized all of the festivals. He was doing for the French Revolution what Speer was to do for the Third Reich: creating the architecture of the new republic. They both went to prison. After prison they both managed more or less to enjoy life. Speer gave interviews to the BBC for the rest of his life and basically said, I had to do what I was told to do and I really did not know about the atrocities. David, after prison, went on to paint Napoleon. These guys are fucking unbelievable. David is a great artist, all right, but a despicable human being. Even though David is a great hero in France, most people agree that his behaviour as a human being during the Revolution was less than heroic.

I thought it was bizarre that these two should share such a similar trajectory, and, while researching David and Speer, I began thinking more generally about the Nazis. How strange, I thought, ever since the Fall of Rome, the rise of Christianity, there have been only two instances when pagan religion, that is, a non-Christian religion, has appeared in the Western world: once during the French Revolution, with the Cult of the Supreme Being, invented by Robespierre and organised by David, which was a sun-worshipping religion, and once in the Third Reich. France had started to de-Christianize in 1790. Churches were sacked, and there was mass murder of clerics. The calendar was changed. Thermidor, for instance, was the month running from mid July to mid August, and the dish 'Lobster Thermidor' gets its name from that period.

What makes this Cult of the Supreme Being so interesting is that it is in fact a cult of nature. The propaganda around breastfeeding remains unparalleled, even now. We think that feminism is big in the late 20th century but it was, in many respects, bigger then. There were enormous billboards encouraging women to breastfeed. Wet-nursing was a huge business. And all this propaganda had to do with naturalism coming out of Rousseau's philosophies.

This borders very much on the occult centre of Nazism. It did not worship the sun, although the swastika is a sun sign, but it was clearly anti-Christian. The Third Reich was very much a naturalistic cult. There was vegetarianism, for example, and the more you study, the more you begin to see a kind of parallel obsession with the idea of cleansing positioned as a major ideological component. Hitler practised a sound body and sound mind philosophy--gymnastics before breakfast, the whole bit.

The Cult of the Supreme Being lasted for about a year and then they lopped off Robespierre's head and it was over. They kept the new calendar until, I think, 1806.

It is almost as though there is a certain range of character types in the world, and every time you have a historical shake-up, these types rise to the surface. So you always have a kind of Goering character or you have a Robespierre character, you know, the burly jovial type or the demented virgin type, who perpetrate equal amounts of horror but look very different.



The Terror: Tricoteuse
1998
encaustic/canvas, 213 x 213 cm

The Terror: Tricoteuse

The tricoteuses--literally knitter women--earned the nickname from their habit of gossiping and knitting during their regular attendances at guillotine executions.



Albert Speer
1997
encaustic/canvas, 102 x 102 cm



Robespierre's Head

1998

encaustic/crayon/ vellum,
61 x 48 cm

Collection: High Museum, Atlanta.

SK: *What about Elvis?*

TS: I started looking at Napoleon and I thought, God he looks like Elvis. You know, he has incredibly symmetrical features, a very horizontal brow, his forehead is square to his nose and he has an exceptionally big jaw, a large chin. Not only is the physiognomy similar but they both metamorphose in a similar way. They both start out lean and beautiful and then get progressively less lean until they are obese and grotesque. They both die of drug-related causes.

I subscribe to the idea that Napoleon was murdered. There is much evidence to suggest that he was poisoned slowly by arsenic. When they disinterred his body in St. Helena, his hair and his fingernails had grown unbelievably and there was very little decomposition, which are strong signs of arsenic poisoning. Many argue that he was murdered by the British because so long as he was alive, even on St. Helena, he posed a threat. Europe was still populated with Bonapartists. They were an extremely strong force, so maybe he had to be got rid of completely. Elvis was found on the floor of his bathroom, awash with drugs, with his tongue bitten off.

SK: *What is this strain?*

TS: In my mind, they are both Dionysian figures. In other words, they are not hard, crisp, incisive masculine players. They're softer. Their edges are softer. In fact, they are more feminine in many ways and they leak, like with Jim Morrison and Marlon Brando. I mean, these Dionysian figures begin to leak, literally leak. They leak power. They leak anima, which makes them all the more fascinating. I think the obesity is a form of leakage.

Neither Elvis nor Napoleon ever went to England. They both had violent tempers. There are tenuous but compelling comparisons--including the incredible similarity of their physiognomies. Then I throw in Marlon Brando, who played Napoleon in *Désirée*. Then you've got Elvis who decides to wear Napoleonic garb right at the point in his career when he is beginning to come apart. So in the 1970s, he dons a Napoleonic collar and grows his hair, only he is getting the hair part wrong. (Napoleon had long hair when he was young.) So Elvis takes on Napoleonic garb as a kind of last grab for presence or power, but he grows his hair long, at the wrong age, at the wrong time. As he is getting fatter and falling apart, Elvis strives not only to look like Napoleon but to become him in some demented way, on stage in any case. It's bizarre. Then we have Brando playing Napoleon, sort of going the same route. The three of them converge in my little world. For me, the Napoleonic world includes Elvis, and Elvis's world includes Napoleon and they are dialectical. For me, time is reversible, even if Napoleon didn't know that Elvis was coming.

SK: *In almost every one of your paintings, there is an area that is not primarily painted but rather bears the trace of an iron burning through it. What's that all about?*

TS: The removal of the paint. Within the painting you can see an archaeology, the trace and the absence of paint. It does not exist in every painting because not every

painting calls up the similar way of arriving at what I refer to as the punctum. The punctum in my work is a notation of the real, its purpose is to reveal the light behind the painting which is the bare canvas. At another level, the punctum also operates metaphorically. The effect of the metaphoric being punctured is very much like the way Hitchcock appears in his own movies.

So, I have been playing God making the picture, and there is a point of revelation that tells me I was always working in a world that was already lit. It is a philosophical statement, a reminder of my presence as something that passes through, leaving a temporal trace. The thing about encaustic is that it lends itself well to this exploration. It's somewhere between watercolour and oil painting. It uses the light of the surface as a base like watercolour does, or drawing which, as I said, is an irreversible trajectory, but it also allows you to add light through tints. I play with the tension using both forms of light. The one light represents the reversible world where I am God and I can make light and take it away, and the punctum is the revelation of another light behind, which continues to shine through.

I just saw this effect in Spielberg's movie, Saving Private Ryan. There is a great moment in the opening sequence, repeated in the last sequence with the American flag. The sun is streaming through the American flag and the flag is transformed by light into this sort of gelatinous thing with no colour in it. The punctum is this light that comes from behind the picture which is not my light, not the light that I made but which I nonetheless use.



Elvis, 1977

Elvis, in mutant Napoleonic garb, in concert in Florida six months before his death. As his career collapsed, he adopted the Napoleonic look and grew his hair long.

Napoleon, First Consul, 1801, by Lauros-Giraudon.

Napoleon started with the long, 'Directoire' hairstyle and progressively lost hair due to fashion, genetics, and poor lifestyle.



Retreat from Moscow (detail), 1820, by Paul Delaroche.

The autopsy of Napoleon, dated 12th September 1823, states that all the organs of the body were covered with unusual amounts of fat.

Marlon Brando in A Dry White Season, 1989

Brando puts on weight everywhere but his hands.



Elvis in concert, mid 1970s

Hitler rehearsing for a public appearance

The effects of a simulation are indistinguishable from the effects of the real, as Jean Baudrillard has observed, but the structure of simulation is very different from the structure of the real.



La Vendée

1996-98

encaustic/canvas, 152 x 152 cm

Collection: Owen B. Shime, Toronto.