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MICHAEL NAJJAR

the future has come for everyone

Berlin residing Michael Najjar can be easily considered as one of the most important visual artists of our time, riding the ideas of relevance and maintaining an air of vision and spirit in tumultuous times. Like a lot of series he has done in the past, his latest project Bionic Angel picks out the future of mankind as a central theme, through a unique combination of nanotechnologies, genetics, robotics, information and nanotechnologies with the Italian Renaissance and images of ancient Greece. Lodown had the chance to catch up with the conceptual artist in early April.

Michael, were you already working in the field of photography when you started at the Bildo Academy in Berlin? In addition to that, have you always worked independently since graduating?

I got my first camera when I was 15 years old, which was when I started taking pictures, but just for fun at that time. During my studies at Bildo Academy in Berlin I learnt to use the camera - in combination with the computer - as an instrument to produce art. And I learnt during five years of studying, that using a machine to produce an artistic expression requires a strong conceptual base and profound media reflective knowledge. And yes, I always worked independently. I always needed the freedom to follow my ideas and to decide by myself what I wanted to do.

In my opinion, the two series that stand out from your impressive archive of work are the stories you did in/on Cuba and Tokyo... because you kind of told the stories yet from a rather neutral/outrist p.o.v. and they're not as conceptual as the majority of your other work. Had you visited those places before you developed these ideas? I am sorry, but you are totally wrong! Both series are completely conceptually driven.

The Cuban series was created in 1996; at first glance the photos seem straightforward in content and appearance, a classical B&W documentary. It is on closer viewing that digitally modified elements are revealed in each image that stand in clear contradiction to the viewer's knowledge and received perceptions. This work questions the so-called indexical reference, the supposed "authenticity" of photography. I did this in a very early time when digital image processing had just emerged from a distant horizon. Almost nobody was aware of the upcoming digital revolution in photography at that time.

The "Japanese style series" from 1999/2000 takes this concept further. The images all look like you say: as though taken from a rather neutral point of view, but they are composed of

dozens of different images or details. They look like a documentary, but they are pure simulation. I call this "hyperreality". The concept is about the transition of real urban living spaces into media-driven artificial worlds of perception. Taking Japan as a case study, the work translates this development into visual terms which carry a broad applicability for the future transformation of all other urban social spaces.

Please tell me a bit about your project 'Metropolis' and why you chose those particular cities for it.

'Metropolis' started in 2004. The work series is an exploration of the way global cities will develop in the future. Computer networks and the information society based on them are the main vehicles for a tremendous change in our megacities, the key elements transforming the face of our urban living spaces. In my opinion the complexity of a huge megacity is to be considered as material embodiment of information density. Telematic space endows the urban environment with a new form of structure, intermingling with it and giving birth to a completely unprecedented form of urban space.

I have chosen 12 megacities, Berlin, Beijing, Dubai, Hong Kong, London, Los Angeles, Mexico City, New York, Paris, São Paulo, Shanghai and Tokyo. All of these cities played an important role at the turn of the millennium; they are paradigmatic for a completely unprecedented and imaginary form of urbanity - the telematic metropolis. see New Pages

Your latest project is titled 'Bionic Angel', which deals (in a way) with the human dilemma to see its race as the pride of creation yet it still fails to accept its fugaciousness... I was wondering why you chose a rather 'retro-futuristic' look for it, you know, unified haircuts etc.?

The series "Bionic Angel" takes as its starting point the future transformation and technological control of human evolution. Rapid development in the field of so called "gen-technologies" (genetics, robotics, information and nanotechnologies) will change our bodies, minds, memories, and identities. The work is linked both visually and conceptually to two eras in human history, one is ancient Greece, the other is the Italian Renaissance. In this aspect I might agree to the term "retro-futuristic" look. The bodies you see in these pictures are all real flesh and blood bodies but they are no longer produced based on the current biological process, they are bio-technically enhanced. The unified haircuts or the missing bellybuttons indicate the fact that they all belong to a new species of human beings. We have to be aware of the fact that today we're at a dramatic turning point, on the edge of change. We are asking ourselves: what does it mean to be human?



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Do you see 'Bionic Angel' as a Utopia or is it closer to reality than the average spectator would like to admit?

I spent roughly six months reading and talking to a lot of scientists and doctors, in close collaboration with the Charité hospital in Berlin, which strongly supported my project. They gave me access to labs and to research departments, I was given lots of information about what they were working on in the area of e-r-l or technologies.

I also read and investigated a lot on my own, to get an overview of the subject. I put all these elements together and developed a projection into the near future of the probable results of these developments. In my opinion the scenarios shown in 'Bionic Angel' are much closer to reality than most of us are imagining. Human species will develop into new forms of existence in the next two decades.

What will be the next project for Mr. Najjar?

Well, after working 3 years on 'Bionic Angel' and the problem of physical limitations of the human body I felt the need to experience my own physical and mental limitations under extreme conditions. For this reason in January of this year I climbed the highest mountain on earth outside the Himalaya.



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the Mount Aconcagua in Argentina. After two weeks of extraordinary strain I reached the summit on 6,942 metres, an overwhelming experience. The new series will be about the relationship between nature and technology and the idea of 'surpassing physical' and mental limitations. The work will be first exhibited in September in New York at bitforms gallery.

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