

HALF-LIFE

Mark Pennings

In a world dominated by the sublime technological feast of global consumerism, the hyperreal flood of images and commodities turns our life into a thrill chase. We live in a quasi-dream state or proto-reality where advertising yells its instructions at us - how to live, how to feel, how to love, how to wipe our arse. We become tired pragmatists, overwhelmed by multiple-choice options. Under these conditions, consciousness is constituted by the half-digested snippets of data that we pick up along the way. We live a life in which there is always too much to do, so face death knowing our lives would have been only half-lived. We are always in process, waiting for the call to go through, or the link to come up. We wait for life to begin while being carried along in the luxuriant and teeming stream of consumer life.

If we get past the spectacular illusions of consumer culture we see the utter banality of it all. Like the humans in John Carpenter's film 'They Live!' who can see the aliens as they really are, we see the ugly, dead commodity as it really is. **Brendan Lee** steps into this degraded middle of the road world and laps it all up. He celebrates the endless futility of a good retail franchise and is intrigued by the human investment in empty proliferation. He loves the tired sheen of a good 'B' Grade movie. He knows that nothing can ever be as memorable as the broken glamour of low production values and the half-arsed appeal to the viewer's ability to suspend disbelief. Mad Max was a 'B' Grade movie that ascended to the cult pantheon. In his work, Lee intervenes into a Mad Max scenario and becomes the new director of the simulational re-make. He resurrects Sprog from the wheels of death and has him confront his own clone in a setting that would look great in a Jeff Wall cibachrome. Lee then directs a new death scene where Sprog gets to greet his own cloned absence in a space that time has vacated. Are we talking nihilistic gestures to symbolise the death of avant-garde cinema, or have we been thrown into bizzarro-land where the director's crazy imagination has come up with Wal-Martism as the perfect embodiment of today's vacuous half-life?

The global hypermarket generates various objet d'art for our delectation. Some of these are projected as iconic simulations on our television screens. The vapid heroes of series like Star Trek stay with us, and as fans we make monuments to them. **Frank Guarino** loves a crowd favourite and appreciates the clichéd grandeur of a paunchy Captain Kirk. The cliché is a remarkable figure. It is a mistake to think that it is so common that it loses all meaning and value. On the contrary, its absolute semantic insolvency gives it immense power. It is omnipotent because it is so pervasive that it means everything and nothing at the same time, and is therefore reassuring. Frank Guarino not only has the brains to recognise the value of the cliché, he has the manual dexterity to produce one of his own. He is thus able to reify the concept by producing a cliché that would be welcome in any Trekkie shrine. But, the object is not enough. He is also alert to the phrase heard a hundred times, in a hundred episodes, and maybe just one more time. So we wait for 'Bones' McCoy to deliver those iconic words "He's dead Jim", and now we know that life goes on, as we know it.

Celebrity is personality turned into a commodity. Most of us revel in the afterglow of someone else's celebrity, a manqué stardom that can only ever be half-lived, but this is no less fulfilling for those avid readers of New Idea. Celebrities are superheroes. They fly from partner to partner, from mansion to mansion, and from one holiday destination to another. They are often made of plastic or silicon and they are perpetually glamorous. **James Dodd** seems to appreciate their awe-inspiring presence as he plunders the detritus of late 70s, early 80s glam culture. His obsession seems in part a debt to childhood nostalgia, but there's also a kind of historical curiosity in the work. It's as if Dodds is an archaeologist of glamour. He searches



Above **Frank Guarino**
Title
Size
Medium 2005



Above **Marcel Cousins**
Title
Size
Medium 2005
Courtesy of Helengory Gallery



Above **Brendan Lee**
Title
Size
Medium 2005
Lambda [photo: Brendan Lee & Paul Batt] 2005

Below **Sanja Pahoki**
Title
Size
Medium 2005

for and comes across shards from the past and then tries to uncover the secret behind their auratic glow. On this occasion he has located an image of female celeb. in pink tinsel, polka dots, bad hair colour and pancake make-up. Dodds enters into the zone and seems enamoured by it all. In his hands the image is a sparkling and wondrous fragment, where the celebrity God attired in overblown cosmetic enhancement transcends the mortal realm.

Being a good consumer always takes time, and there is never enough time. There are always a thousand things to be, a million things to buy. While all of this is happening we experience time as a kind of compression chamber, or a vague half remembered shadow. After a while the past, present and future become interchangeable. On Kawara's date paintings demonstrated that the social understanding of time is predicated on an artificial symbolic system that categorises and orders the fourth dimension (which is actually a distortion of matter). We obey the departmentalisation of time and cling to it in the hope that it will see us through. **Robert Mangion** picks up on On Kawara's lessons as he also engages with time as an arbitrary convention. A piece of board bisects the wall and floor of the gallery. The two dates on the board, 31 years apart, are forced to confront each other as a kind of bisection or as dialectical protagonists. The dialectic in turn makes us think about the work as consisting of half the past and the present. The art object itself is also random, a useless artefact that evokes the relativity of art and time.

Marcel Cousins walks along a similar path, but he seems more interested in the way in which time and space are traversed or measured by dollars and cents, rather than light years. For Cousins, even the most mundane objects of classification can make powerful cultural statements about the way we define time, space and territory. He re-scales an old Met card (the ones that looked like shiny bingo cards) into two monumental art pieces. The

viewer is confronted by a duplex that holds the division of time, transport and its tabulated costs in a weird kind of thrall. This thrall is in turn transformed into analysis as we recognise the source as an historical document, an antique that was a cheap and ephemeral time clock.

In a sea of desire we are encouraged to want for nothing and to pay for everything, and sometimes in this spectacle we can't tell the difference between dream and reality. It is an easy step to seeing ourselves as living a half-life under such circumstances. A life determined by fantasy and velleities, not quite knowing whether the real goes after it has been pushed out in a game of musical chairs. **Brie Trenerry** writes about hallucinations, about the terror of destruction and the even greater fear that dream and reality cannot be differentiated. Her work suggests various dimensions of some wallpaper coming away from a wall, whose desiccated sheaves curl away to reveal a layer of decayed and fractured wall plaster. Beneath this is a backing board that has a hole in it and an imaginary fly appears ready to head into the chasm. It comes across as an imaginary landscape or a metaphor for the journey from dream to reality, from life to death.

For **Sanja Pahoki** the negotiation of the world is a process of becoming and possibility. The image shows the head of woman, as she waits to cross a suburban street. The work seems to be about existential anxiety in certain architectural spaces. It might be about a life mostly explored through potential experiences. There's a kind of trepidation suggested by the framing and the pervading anxiety suggests an impending accident, or maybe it's just about a generalised suburban dread. In any event, the meaning of life is much less certain and Pahooki seems unwilling to propose ready answers to such things, rather she offers openness to the chances that lie in wait in a half-life.

