



# AMERICAN BEAUTY

**Ben Turnbull** pulls the trigger on *American History X: Volume 1 – The Death of America*

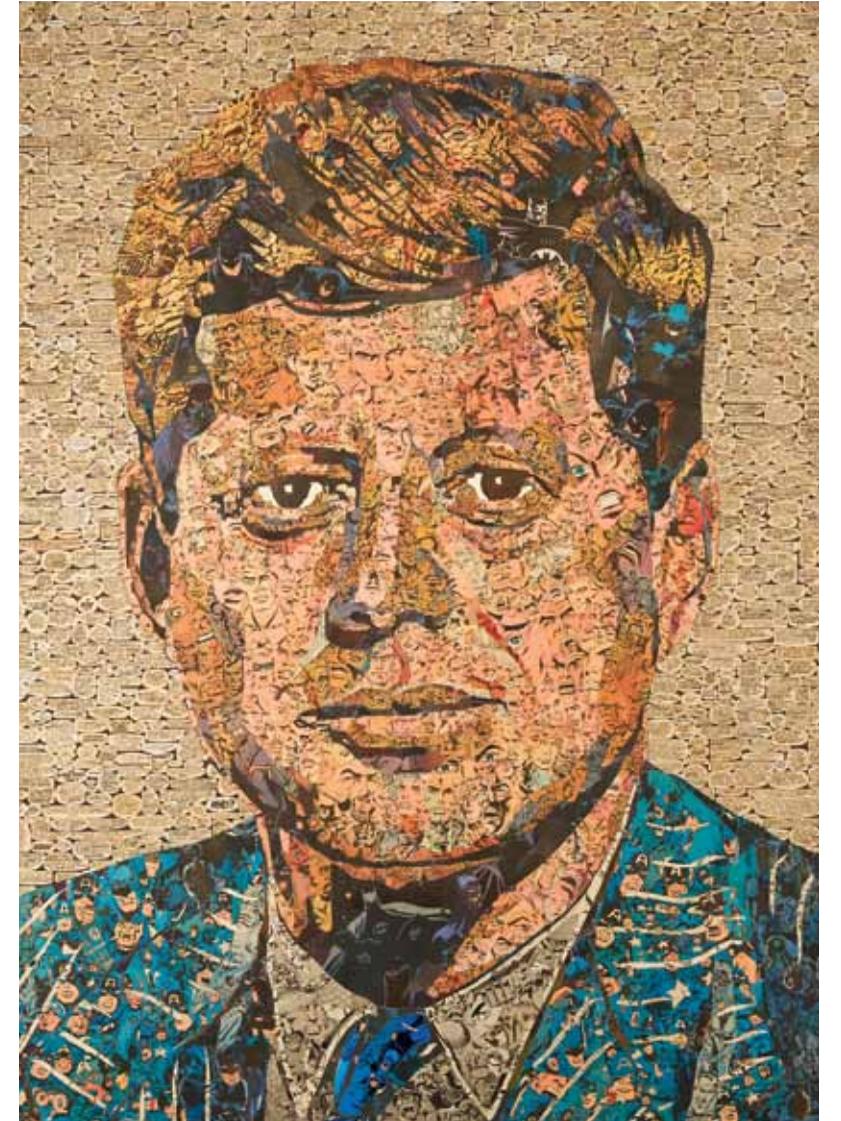
Words: Richard Jenkins

**I**magine a world where JFK had been allowed to live to 100-years-old, and Abraham Lincoln had decided to skip the theatre and stay home instead. A world where Martin Luther King Jr. is still with us, and Jack Ruby hadn't taken his revenge on Lee Harvey Oswald with a smoking gun in 1963.

These bleak moments in American history have shaped the identity of a nation. London-based artist Ben Turnbull has spent his career exploring these dark spaces and is now presenting the first of four volumes in his *American History X* series.

Turnbull tells AIR: "I suppose the beginning of the project started when I became a bit more independent. Most of the work I do tends to come from a sense of adversity; I thrived in just going out and doing something on my own. It began with some pieces that aren't actually in volume one, and that's why *American History X* became a series of volumes. I thought that I could really expand this; almost have different history lessons for each section."

Despite not visiting the US until 2008, Turnbull feels a deep affinity with the country due to a peripatetic upbringing. "I always intended to go to America," he says, "but I always felt that I would never be able to get



there. I had a pretty nomadic existence growing up, with a single mother. Reading American comics, I was almost creating my own America, and I very much took to the American pop scene in its early phases. I think it was like building your own miniature world and that's informed me with this series of works."

Volume 1 – The Death of America focuses on the country's grim history of assassinations. Collage portraits of John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald mingle with a revisited theme, Pez-dispenser presidents. Turnbull originally had the idea to place US presidents' heads on Pez dispensers in 2006, but saw his work plagiarised. The artist says: "I originally did a series of standard presidents as Pez dispensers. Funnily enough the American government did this themselves three or four years after that. And when the American government did their own series, the idea got copied by a couple of artists. I got sent a link

to some of the imagery and I thought, well... imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. By the way I didn't actually think that, I thought 'how dare you copy me!'. So when I was planning this project I thought I really wanted to make this series virtually impossible to copy and the only way to do that would be to embellish it all with my

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trademark stamp that nobody else could do, and for me that fit perfectly with the ideas behind this whole volume. The assassinations, the Hinckley Juniors, the Harvey Oswalds, the Kennedys... it just made sense to

change the lettering. It was so simple to use R-I-P. It just fit perfectly – and rubberstamped the BJT feel."

Pop-art collectors from Jared Leto to Harry Styles have bought works by Turnbull, whose profile is becoming bigger and bigger – a Banksy with a public face. However, anyone interested in commercialising the artist is given short shrift. "I won't name names but I was asked to put giant billboards down 5th Avenue in New York," Turnbull recalls. "I had a huge falling out with the gallery, not so much the people who asked me to do it – and it was a massive, huge name – but it was almost glorifying death and I just thought I can't do that. I have a massive integrity with my work, so much so that I've been asked to make numerous prints of various collage works, or the US flag, and it was a similar story. My work is too personal and steeped in memoriam. A lot of the work is to do with victims, the fallen. These works are done as one-offs, they're all

originals. It probably could have changed my career and I could have created a workforce instead of working alone, but in the modern day art world, you can't buy integrity."

For an America-obsessed Londoner, the exploration of the US has only just begun. What's the one thing he wants people to take away from The Death of America? "Education" is the emphatic answer. "What I really want people to take away is that it's a history lesson. The pieces are aesthetically nice and each work reveals different facets of the American culture, and they can be seen as coming from a very dark angle. But ultimately this is all true. I think that Truth, Justice and The American Way are very much in all facets of these volumes. Ultimately these are true stories being told but in a very unusual way, using very unusual mediums." *American History X: Volume 1 – The Death of America will run from April 3-18 at Brixton East, London.*