

FOREWORD

America is a seductive country made all the more attractive by its social ideals of equality, democracy and prosperity; its fashions, trends and beliefs have long had an impact on the rest of the world. It is a country that acts as muse for Ben Turnbull, who celebrates and questions its conventions through his art. Turnbull's opinions are made forcefully and he has used the term 'angry pop' when describing his work; however, the energy of any anger should not be misconstrued as support for the controversial societal and political situations it comments on - instead the work seeks to raise questions and strives to put an honest interpretation of the truth squarely in front of us.

Turnbull's work has many characteristics of Pop art, an artistic movement originating in Britain but synonymous with America, not least in the manipulation, assimilation and referencing of objects to create a visually arresting and distinctive aesthetic. However, the Pop appearance and glossy toy factory feel is not simply a distraction; the craftsmanship and

finish of each work helps to amplify the message or commentary at its heart, and when married with Turnbull's dark satirical humour the work becomes both enticing and sinister. Social and ideological aims are confronted, and we are made to consider sensitive issues such as the easy availability of weapons, who ultimately holds them and the consequences when they end up in the hands of those who wish to cause harm. We are called to reflect on the political decisions that send men to war in the name of freedom, and who we should turn to in times of extreme peril; for who will step into the breach and prove themselves worthy when the super heroes we would like to exist simply do not appear? Turnbull's art is therefore openly political, the humour and striking appearance functioning as a vehicle for his social commentary. Although, perhaps, what makes the work unnerving beyond the difficult subjects it deals with are the associations with popular media and the objects, characters and narratives that fired our imagination in youth. From his unflinching criticism of political policy and

American society to the celebration of selfless acts of heroism, Turnbull's parodies and pastiches remain engaging and approachable; at first glance the work can even be welcoming and fun. We are then faced with the difficult 'adult' subjects that we struggle to understand and articulate being described and dissected through a visual language we learnt in our formative years.

Containing a rich selection of Turnbull's work produced in the last decade, this book has been published to coincide with the artist's first exhibition in a public gallery. In the pages that follow you will find an illuminating text written by the accomplished arts writer Richard Dyer in which the themes and ideas behind the work are examined, and the development and background of the artist is recounted in print for the first time.

Richard Smith
Exhibitions & Events Officer, Live at LICA



Since the age of eleven Ben Turnbull has collected American comics, along with their spin-off toys and memorabilia; these form the foundation of his artistic practice. Each work is carefully pre-planned down to the smallest detail; uncompromising vignettes of the triumphant and tragic history of the late capitalist empire which is the United States of America. Having built a career in workshops all his life, Turnbull has developed a deep engagement with materials; all the work is handmade by the artist, with very little assistance, demonstrating a strong work ethic and passionate understanding of the processes of production, an understanding sadly absent from much contemporary art. In many ways the work is a didactic enterprise, teaching a younger generation the true stories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – such as 9/11, its reasons and contexts – through the potent visual signifiers of the mythologically pre-loaded pop images of the post-war era. Turnbull is ultimately interested in the way world politics is developing and America's place in that picture. He travels frequently to the U.S., tracking down the latest hot diner to visit and scouring comic book and toy shops for hidden treasures to be up-cycled into his next creation. Like his superhero protagonists, Turnbull has always been a bit of an outsider; eschewing the British art school system with its emphasis on 'free self-expression', purely conceptual strategies and lack of artisanal training, instead learning his craft skills fabricating interiors for famous London restaurants such as Quo Vardis, J Sheekey and Marco Pierre White's Mirabelle. Born of an Irish mother, he and his Irish school friends grew up on a concentrated diet of American cult TV programmes such as *The Man From Uncle*, *Time Tunnel*, *Captain Scarlet* and *The Six Million Dollar Man*, and the central tropes of Marvel and DC Comic book super heroes and EC Comics' darker horror and Sci-Fi content; later the artist would become acquainted with more adult fare such as the films of Brian de Palma and Sergio Leone. The strongest underlying theme in the artist's practice is a close but cliché-free examination of our relationship to death, and how it is positioned at the core of much popular culture, even when that culture is aimed at children. Many of the works hit the viewer 'like a punch in the face', not demanding hours of contemplation, but requiring instead an

immediate emotional response, a jolt of recognition, an acknowledgement that 'this is what is happening now; this is what it is like'. They are raw, emotive and direct, so much so that on more than one occasion Turnbull has been cautioned by the authorities that displaying the work would be illegal, or even constitute a criminal offence. He was advised that his shot-sprayed London Underground signs, which he wanted to install in tube stations in the capital, would cause mass panic after the 7/7 bombings, and it was thought the gun vending machines may have broken laws about replica weapons.

In Turnbull's iconic fire alarm series, *Every Home Should Have One* (2006), he encases various firearms – handguns, pistols, machineguns – in facsimiles of the classic glass-fronted red fire alarm box, bearing the unaltered legend 'IN EMERGENCY BREAK GLASS', which now takes on a completely different and sinister meaning. This central trope of our all pervasive 'health and safety' culture – obsessed as it is with cotton wool wrapping every citizen in a state sanctioned armoury of laws, by-laws, restrictions and regulations – has here been turned in on itself, subverting its original appeal to the handy have-a-go-hero, and instead providing the solution to either personal crisis – in the form of a readily accessible suicidal solution to pressing personal problems – or a psycho-killer's instant answer to the question of how to express their dissatisfaction with the state of society. Similarly the artist's reconfigured vintage vending machine, *Kids Have Everything These Days* (2009), stocked with a wide range of hand-guns, highlights the ready availability of guns to adolescents of high-school age. It hangs on the wall of the gallery, like a bubble gum dispenser in any American high school canteen, ready to disgorge its lethal product at the drop of a coin. And in *Teenage Wasteland* (2009), a classic 1960s 'shoot 'em up' arcade game is potently reconstructed as the stage set tableaux of a high school shooting massacre, targets now the fresh-faced sophomores in their uniform monogram tops and a prim teacher standing in front of a blackboard ironically chattered with the Biblical declamation: 'Thou shalt not kill: Exodus 20:13'; the scenario is astutely earthed to the late 1960s by a miniature black and white portrait of the assassinated John

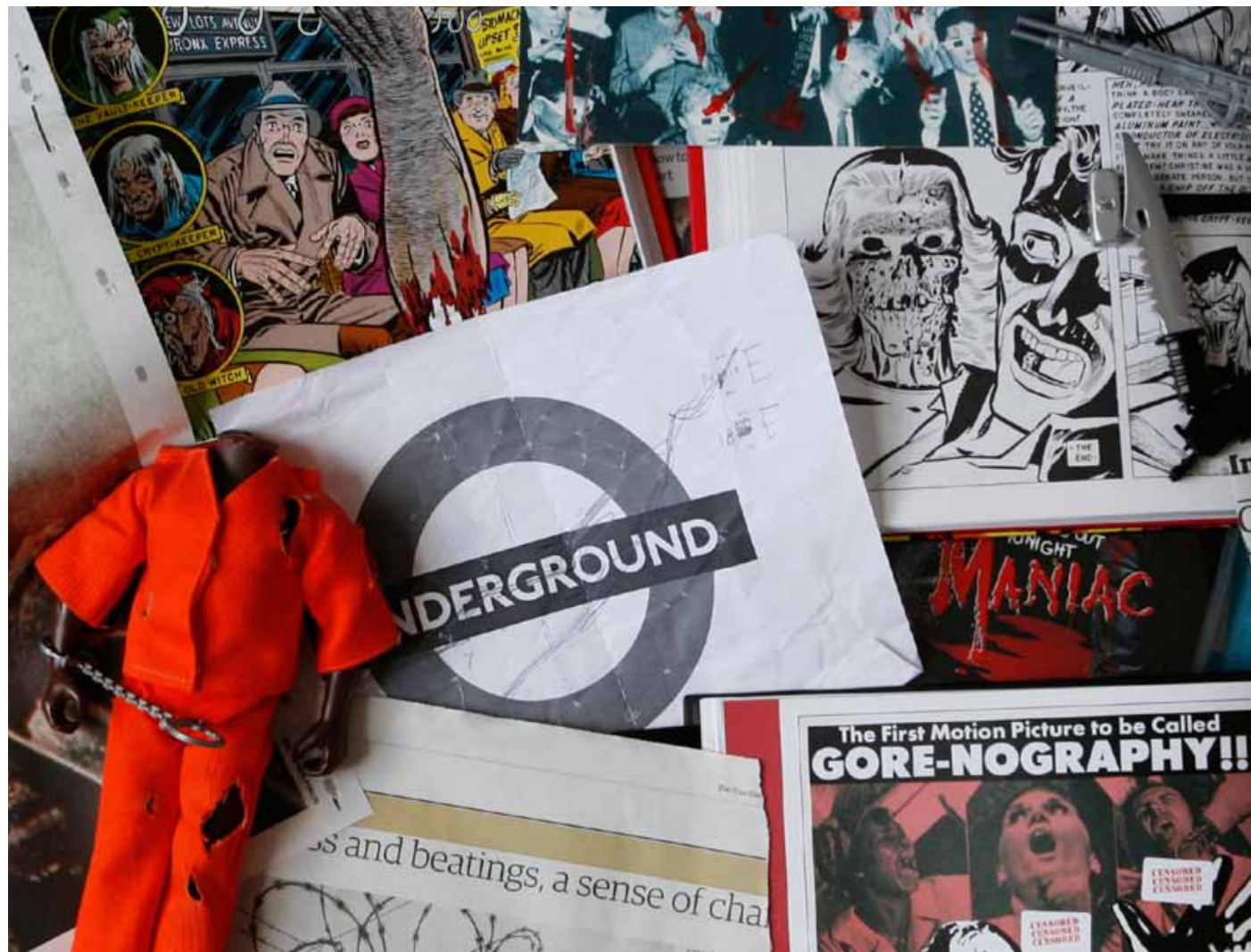
BEN TURNBULL

TRUTH, JUSTICE AND THE AMERICAN WAY

BY RICHARD DYER

F Kennedy, festooned with a red, white and blue riband above the blackboard, the carnage indexed by a map of the U.S. literally dripping with blood. Of course Turnbull's guns are toys, plastic replicas of the real thing, mere inutile simulacra; but instead of undermining the message their fakery serves to reinforce it. From an early age children are introduced to the centrality of the gun to a culture of personal power and domination over others through violence via the medium of replica toy guns, soldiers, tanks and military airplanes. This is highlighted in the artist's disturbing sculpture *Breeding Terrorism* (2008); a cot-full of infant terrorists, clad in Guantanamo camp jumpsuits, romp behind the bars of their barb-wired crib, the mobile hanging overhead a threatening quartet of American passenger airlines which, post 9/11, we cannot help but read as potentially deadly air to surface missiles. At the end of *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), the second in the *Star Wars* trilogy, the character Han Solo is encased in 'carbonite' to be presented as a trophy to Jabba the Hutt. In *Land of the Freeze* (2008), Turnbull has replaced Solo with an inanelly grinning effigy of the retiring American President, George W Bush.² What at first appears to be a nakedly anti-American statement can in fact be read as a more neutral comment on the facts of history; Bush, who's World power was almost without bounds, has now been 'put on ice', not quite dead, but not really alive either, his future resurrection or destruction decided by the flick of a switch on the inbuilt nuclear device.

Turnbull's powerful series of used school desks, *I Don't Like Mondays: Lessons 1-7* (2009),³ carved with the ghosts of firearms – a magnum, a pair of Smith and Wesson pistols, an AK-47 – refers directly to the disturbing phenomenon of high school gun massacres which have taken place in the U.S. over the last forty years.⁴ The easy availability of firearms in the U.S. cannot be dismissed as a contributing factor to these horrific acts of mass murder, and the ratification of the right to bear arms in the United States Constitution gives a clear political and social red light to the profligacy of gun culture.⁵ In these works it is as if the guns have been 'released' from the fabric of the wood, like Michelangelo's *David* from the block of marble, the implication being





that, as in society, just beneath the surface of the everyday banality of the school desk, etched with inane graffiti: 'bored', 'who done this?', 'I love?' – and the artist's own engraved monograph 'Bjt' (Ben John Turnbull) – lies a well-spring of anger, revenge, violence and unbridled egotism embodied in the form of a gun, that which gives the possessor the right to choose who lives and who dies. A hand grenade lies in the deeply carved beech wood, like a grub buried in the sand, (*Lesson 2*, 2009), its 'heavy metal' 'full metal jacket' finds its echo in the graffiti for the heavy metal group AC/DC; one can see that efforts have been made by the school authorities to bleach out the graffiti, but sullen brooding dissatisfaction and alienated frustration is not so easily scrubbed out; it uncurls like a larva suddenly awakened from the torpor of its hibernation, stretches out its tentacles, and reaches for the nearest gun. In this singular series there is a potent confluence between material and image, content and craft, history and its ever amnesiac repetition.

The artist's series of New York fireman collages, exhibited under the title *Supermen: An Exhibition of Heroes* (2011), would seem to run counter to his ongoing critique of late capitalist American culture.⁶ However, although the artist describes this series as 'just a blip', it would in fact appear to point up his ambivalent relationship to American culture. Love and hate are never distinct opposites; to love something is to get to know every aspect, every detail of it on a most intimate level, and once we know everything, we may begin to despise that which we once loved, those loving details now become irritants, and conversely, the hated one becomes a focus of obsession every bit as seductive as the loved one. In *Hero I* (2010) and *Hero III* (2011), the firemen's wooden axe handles are made up entirely of cut-outs of the brutish and organic character The Thing, from Marvel Comics' 'The Fantastic Four', his earthy minerality not only speaking to the organic nature of wood, but also bearing testament to the basic, unsophisticated nature of the tools available to the rescuers of 9/11.⁷ The steel axe heads are fashioned from Iron Man, and the coats mainly from Batman – the 'Caped Crusader'.⁸ The lighter parts of the faces are mostly made from the unmasked

faces of superheroes in their private moments of contemplation or anguish, echoing 'the human face of heroism' of the firemen, real humans in the real world, driven to acts of superhuman heroism and self-sacrifice. The choice of character for each element of the portraits is driven not only by its formal aspects – The Thing is the colour of wood, Iron Man is 'steely', etc – but also by their mythological and symbolic resonances. The basic printing colours of Marvel, DC and EC Comics: black, blue, red and the white of the cheap newsprint paper, make for a powerful graphic effect which pointedly echo the colours of the iconic American national flag, the 'Stars and Stripes'. In *Patriots* (2011) the American Flag signifies art historically in the same way as Jasper John's *Flag* (1954),⁹ John's waxy facture is echoed in Turnbull's bricolage of Spider-Man, Daredevil, Iron Man and The Flash fashioned into the red stripes of the flag.¹⁰ Spider-Man was Marvel's first teenage superhero, demonstrating many of the characteristics of high school massacre gunmen, grappling as he did with shyness, rejection, inadequacy and loneliness, character traits which can lead the individual to great achievements through fighting against them, or a growing resentment and lust for vengeance against the rest of society which comes to be blamed for all their ills. The blue background to the stars is configured from images of Captain America,¹¹ the ultimate patriotic super hero, and the fifty white stars are close-ups of Spider-Man's face – the all-seeing eyes of the state's covert secret services embodied in the super hero's blank-eyed vigilante stance. In the text work, *Heroes III* (2011), Spidey's eyes become the flickering flames of devastating destruction; Captain America's determined and focused face, multiplied a thousand fold, articulates the singular unflinching tribute 'AMAZING'; the carefully scattered 'A's of his helmet echoing the first letter of the word. 'AMAZING' hangs like a hopeful curtain of ice cold blue water above the red hot blaze of 'FIRE-MAN' (read Spider-Man), 'the' and 'AMAZING' are embedded in the churning sea of dialogic speech bubbles, a claustrophobic glossolalia of comic-book quotes, and by the most subtle articulation of tone and the knife-sharp precision of the artist's eye and scalpel, 'FIRE-MAN' floats above

the surface of the speech-bubble field; 343 dead, their weightless souls ascending from the rising cacophony of voices, voicing horror, disbelief, shock, sadness.

Disparate segments of dismembered Action Men coalesce in a turbulent maelstrom of crippled power, a frozen swarm of deconstructed manhood. In *Homecoming* (2007), Action Man, the sublime cipher for a new generation of post-II World War capitalist cannon-fodder, the U.S. military recruitment tool par excellence, is here rendered as a potent metonym for the human cost of war: bodies are broken, limbs are lost and men and women are mutilated, all in the name of the American flag. The Stars and Stripes are carefully rendered in red and blue paint over the white plastic of the fallen soldiers and fashioned into a casket which mimics the flag-draped coffins of the repatriated bodies of dead American servicemen and women from Vietnam, two Iraq wars, Afghanistan, and perhaps many more conflicts to come. It would be too easy to say that Turnbull's practice was an ongoing critique of American post-civil war military-industrial capitalist Imperial expansionism; it is far richer and more imaginative than that. The psycho-geography of America is at once seductive and repulsive, brought to us in glorious 3-D, surround-sound Technicolor, mainly through cinema, but also via novels, television, magazines and the internet in a ceaseless proliferation of 'Americana', an ever-growing tide of endlessly replicated product which the rest of the world is inundated with, swamping us with the pop-cultural artefacts of the would-be mono-culture that is the United States of America. In the face of the growing assault on U.S. economic dominance from the so-called BRIC countries, (Brazil, Russia, India and China), will the US eventually 'hang up its gloves' in the ever diversifying ring of economic and military power? *Gloves Off* (2007), functions as a memorial to the passing of the dominant power. Like the makeshift memorials to the victims of random shootings or terrorist atrocities a quartet of white candles bathes the cross and American flag emblazoned boxing gloves in a flickering, dying light.

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- Also cited in *Deuteronomy* 5:17: 'Thou shalt not kill'; *Matthew* 5:21: 'Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment.' and *Romans* 13:9: 'For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.'
- Now listed in the internal film's chronology as *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, 1980, Irvin Kershner, Director, Leigh Brackett and Lawrence Kasdan, writers; George Lucas wrote the film's story and served as executive producer. Disney theme parks even offer fans a chance to see what they would look like in Solo's place by creating a personalised toy.
- The title of this series references The Boomtown Rats eponymous number one single, which held the top slot for

- four weeks in the summer of 1979. The song was written by Bob Geldof in response to the shooting spree of sixteen-year-old Brenda Ann Spencer, who fired at children in the playground of Grover Cleveland Elementary School in San Diego, California on 29 January 1979, killing two adults and injuring eight children and a police officer. Spencer's explanation for her actions was 'I don't like Mondays. This livens up the day.'
- The University of Texas massacre, 1 August 1966, the University of Texas Austin, U.S., Charles Joseph Whitman murdered fourteen and wounded thirty-two; the Columbine High School massacre, 20 April 1999, Jefferson County, Colorado US, Eric David Harris and Dylan Bennet Klebold murdered twelve students and one teacher, twenty-one were injured; The Virginia Tech Massacre, 16 April 2007, the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia, U.S., Seung-Hui Cho shot thirty-two and injured seventeen; and, as I write, with tragic irony in the context of the above

- text, doctoral neuroscience student James Eagan Holmes has been charged with the murder of twelve and injuring over fifty in Aurora, Colorado, U.S., on 20 July 2012, in a mass shooting at a cinema for the premier of *The Dark Knight Rises: The Legend Ends*, last in Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy. The gunman called himself 'The Joker, a well known Batman villain.
- The Second Amendment to the United States Constitution is the part of the United States Bill of Rights that protects the right of the people to keep and bear arms. It was adopted on 15 December 1791. In 2008 and 2010 the Supreme Court issued two Second Amendment decisions. In *District of Columbia v Heller*, 554 U.S. 570 (2008), the Court ruled that the Second Amendment protects an individual's right to possess a firearm, unconnected to service in a militia and to use that arm for traditionally lawful purposes, such as self-defence within the home. As passed by the Congress:

- 'A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.'
- 'Supermen: An Exhibition of Heroes', 16 September – 22 October 2011, on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, at Eleven gallery, 11 Eccleston Street, London SW1W 9LX
- The Thing first appeared in *The Fantastic Four* no 1, cover-dated November 1961. *The Fantastic Four* was the first superhero team created by Editor and writer Stan Lee and artist-writer Jack Kirby.
- Iron Man first appeared in *Tales of Suspense* no 39, 1963, created by Lee, Larry Lieber, Don Heck and Kirby; Batman first appeared in *Detective Comics* no 27, May

- 1939, created by artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger (uncredited).
- Jasper Johns, *Flag*, (1954–1955), the Museum of Modern Art, New York, U.S. Johns' *Flag* was also made using strips of printed newspaper, along with encaustic (molten wax mixed with pigment).
- Spider-Man, created by Marvel's Editor and writer Stan Lee and writer-artist Steve Ditko; the character first appeared in *Amazing Fantasy* no 15, August 1962; Daredevil, co-created by Lee and artist Bill Everett (with Jack Kirby), first appeared in *Daredevil* no 1, April 1964; The Flash, this time from DC Comics, created by writer Gardner Fox and artist Harry Lampert, first appeared in *Flash Comics* no 1, January 1940.
- A Marvel Comics character, Captain America first appeared in *Captain America Comics* no 1, cover-dated March 1941, developed from a character in Marvel Comics' 1940s predecessor, Timely Comics, created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby.

Richard Dyer is an editor at *Third Text*, Art Editor of *Wasafiri*, and a Corresponding Editor on *Ambit*. He was News Editor and London Correspondent for *Contemporary* magazine for nearly ten years. He is a widely published art critic, reviewer, poet, fiction writer and also a practicing artist. His critical writing has appeared in *Contemporary*, *Frieze*, *Flash Art*, *Art Review*, *Art Press*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *Time Out* and many other publications and catalogues. His latest publications are *Magne Furuholmen: Alpha Beta* (Forlaget Press, Oslo, 2012), *Lost for Words: Manifesting the Ineffable in the Work of Katie Cuddon* (Camden Arts Centre, 2011), *Valérie Jolly: Infra-Thin*, (Alexia Goethe Gallery, 2010), and *The Descent of Man: Wolfe von Lenkiewicz* (All Visual Arts, 2009). He has conducted interviews with Gilbert and George, Nicholas Serota, Euan Uglow, Gregory Crewdson, Sara Lucas, Andres Serrano, Issac Julian and Yinka Shonibare, among many other leading contemporary artists.