



*Ruins*, 2007, *Life*, *Time* and *National Geographic* magazines, wood and glue, 287 x 508 cm. Courtesy Zach Feuer Gallery, New York

## JOHANNES VANDERBEEK: BED BUSH RUINS

ZACH FEUER GALLERY (LFL), NEW YORK  
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Johannes VanDerBEEK's work hunts down a new paradigm of collage, but it does so with all the subtlety of a howitzer, so that very little of that historic practice is left behind, let alone recognisable, once the artist's done with it. In two works, both titled *Ruins* (2007) – with one qualified by the parenthetical (*Culture Pants*) – VanDerBEEK eschews the stable ground, the blank page or canvas, onto which the collagist appends clippings and cultural detritus, and opts instead for the creation of a new 'ground' altogether, one entirely composed of, or perhaps accreted from, iconic magazines such as *Time*, *Life*, and *National Geographic*, all of whose pages are glued together to make individual stratified blocks of image and text.

Rather than add to this new artificial geology, however, VanDerBEEK erodes it, equally artificially, with a Dremel, that ubiquitous high-speed rotary tool that is a favourite of craft hobbyists. The ensuing surfaces of the *Ruins* may be described in any number of ways, the most honest of which might simply be 'overworked'. The gouging, cutting and grinding down of this new 'ground' is so complete as to nearly lose it to the category of relief. The larger of the two *Ruins*, which occupies an entire wall of Feuer's gallery, does nothing to resist this impulse. There the eviscerated magazines serve as mere blocks in the construction of a quasi-archaeological folly. The smaller *Ruin* supports a fully sculpted figure, one which recalls the recumbent fellow from VanDerBEEK's earlier *Time Tomb* (2006), but now in three dimensions. Here it would seem we are travelling in the domain of sculpture proper, but on a path still bordered by the shallows of collage.

VanDerBEEK would have us believe that there are big ideas circulating through these pieces, ideas which, as his process demonstrates, must necessarily exceed the bounds of flat graphics, photos and text. Allegories of time, perhaps? *Bush* (2007) would appear to second that allegorical impulse. Less a sculpture of an actual bush than of a collection of tree branches and leaves all emanating from a common source at the floor, *Bush* takes a page from such recent efforts at sculptural verisimilitude as Roxy Paine's *Weed Choked Garden* (2005), as well as his half-decade's worth of well-wrought mushroom fields. But each leaf of VanDerBEEK's piece, we are told, reveals a painted picture of outer space, thereby offering the viewer a look at an alternative – albeit arboreally structured – universe and its space-time roots. The triangular and perspectival construction of VanDerBEEK's somewhat inscrutable portrait sculpture *Bed* (2007) points to a similar taste for implicit recessions too: alternating pillows, out of whose stuffing the artist has shaped various faces, growing smaller as they approach the piece's far apex-cum-vanishing point.

When faced with the potentials locked away in those ground-down 'grounds' of the *Ruins*, however, all of this pointing at history, or cosmology, or the imaginary, is easily left behind. Though at the moment the work may rely too heavily on a mere process, as a medium – that of 'excavation' – it is worth pursuing further. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*