

Jon Kessler
The Blue Room, 2012
(installation view). Courtesy the
artist and Salon 94, New York



Alec Soth
2008_02z10173, 2008,
archival pigment print mounted
to 4 ply museum board,
102 x 81 cm, edition of 7 + 3 AP.
© the artist. Courtesy Sean Kelly
Gallery, New York

JON KESSLER

Jon Kessler: *The Blue Period*
Salon 94 Bowery, New York
2 February – 10 March

That *The Blue Period* (2007/2011) was first shown at the old Arndt & Partner (now just Arndt) in Berlin in 2007, and then at Art Basel in 2008, and has now arrived at Salon 94 Bowery in New York in 2012 is noteworthy for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it was apparently ‘zee Germans’ in 2007 who were still buying up all of those toxic subprime-mortgage-backed securities that Goldman Sachs and others were packaging and selling, and so it was ‘zee Germans’ who were giving that much more altitude to the global financial balloon whose basket was carrying, as we found out, not the most diversified portfolio of neoliberal wealth creation the world had ever seen, but a huge pile of shit.

Blue period indeed.

In Kessler’s world, that shit is blue, and it is sprayed on the walls of the gallery. It is also colour-keyed (as in green-screen compositing) to a series of mobile closed-circuit video feeds of the gallery itself, in which stand the flatscreens that show those feeds, a number of two-dimensional cutouts of some of Kessler’s assistants and former students (including significant artists in their own right, particularly Leigh Ledare and Liz Magic Laser), a spinning lattice of two-dimensional smiling faces cut out from sales catalogues, some two-dimensional portrait work and – to complete the *mise en abyme* – a three-dimensional scale model of the same gallery, portraits included. There is also a bank of monitors that show clips from popular television and movies – *Braveheart* (1995), *Pierrot le Fou* (1965) – where actors can be seen with blue paint on their faces and bodies.

Kessler is motivated by media, surveillance and spectacle. Sometimes, as with *The Palace at 4am* (2005) and *Kessler’s Circus* (2009), that motivation can encapsulate a current mood (anxiety and exasperation over the US fiascos in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example). With *The Blue Period*, however, the sensibility is more romper room than house of horrors, and between 2007 and now, that sensibility hasn’t changed, which means the work appears not timely but prematurely dated. History, it seems, is on the move.

Which may be a good thing for Kessler, because it means that one can treat *The Blue Period* as a specimen, and what one begins to see is that, as much as by media, surveillance and spectacle, social engagements all, Kessler is also motivated by that distinctly formal engagement we know as collage.

The portraits that line the walls of the gallery announce as much: they are straight-up, well-worked-over photo collages (executed during a residency at New York’s Dieu Donn  artist workspace). And these works are only the more material demonstrations of what one sees on the flatscreen monitors, where the colour-keying makes of all *The Blue Period*’s blue paint a ground onto which is composited, which is to say collaged, a different video feed (and one in which we as spectators are sometimes captured).

One thing next to another, now with a third dimension and real-time thrown in – there was a politics to this in the 1920s, and Kessler’s work, even when it’s at its least dark and most playful, suggests that there should be again.

JONATHAN T.D. NEIL

ALEC SOTH

Alec Soth: *Broken Manual*
Sean Kelly Gallery, New York
3 February – 11 March

Alec Soth is not the first white male artist in recent years to explore his inner Ted Kaczynski – ahem, Sterling Ruby – and he might not be the most adept. In *Broken Manual*, a solo exhibition of photographs and an installation, Soth captures some of the imagined beauty and unadulterated freedom that lures those who choose to retreat from society in America, but he falls flat in his attempt to connect with his subjects.

Based on the conceit that Soth is following the escape plan laid out by the eponymous *Broken Manual*, a survivalist text written by his alter ego, the hermit Lester B. Morrison, the exhibition serves as photographic accompaniment to Morrison’s book. In the contrived installation of *Broken Manual* books and research material, copies of the guide itself, which is being sold in a limited edition, are hidden in the carved-out interiors of coffee table books stacked at perfectly sloped angles on the floor of a side gallery.

In the large main gallery hangs the bulk of the photographs, which read like a collection of gorgeous stills from an episode of *America’s Most Wanted*. In them, Soth depicts real men and the off-the-grid places they inhabit: a cave, a school bus abandoned in the midst of open tundra, a thinly wooded hideaway next to a factory. The images are in turn creepy and dreamlike. In *2007_10210006* (2007), a filthy Sheetrock wall with gaping holes is branded with the words ‘I love my dad Tony I wish he loved me’, while in *Utah* (2008), an idyllic hut carved into the side of a plateau looks out over operatic skies.

Despite their association with Morrison’s guide, which praises lonely men, Soth’s subjects mostly come off as freaks and weirdos. In *2007_10210094* (2007), a man with a furrowed brow and a long, mangy beard stares with unfocused eyes at a point right below the lens. In *2008_08210107* (2008), a sunburned loner stands naked in a shallow pond staring fiercely at the camera. On his arm he bears the albatross of a crudely rendered swastika.

The exhibition is accompanied by a full-length documentary, *Somewhere to Disappear* (2011), directed by Laure Flammarion and Arnaud Uyttenhove, who follow Soth as he travels across America in search of subjects. The photographs alone fail to resonate emotionally, but in moving images they come to life. The naked Nazi is nothing more than a misguided kid in need of affection. The man who scrawled about loving his daddy turns out to be the product of two parents addicted to crystal meth. ‘I’ve been living in hell,’ he tells Soth, thereby dismembering the romance of life on the lam. In the exhibition, escape is a fantasy seen at a distance. In practice, it is a state of exile for the deluded.

BRIENNE WALSH