

## Christian Holstad

### FOCUS

Imagine your state of mind if, up late one night in a halcyon Ecstasy haze, you channel-surfed between documentaries on Glam Rock, Stonewall and Studio 54

Throw in a bunch of superhero comics, some vintage horror and Expressionist films and a few inspirational children's stories, and you might get some idea of what it is like inside Christian Holstad's head. Born in Anaheim, California, in 1972, and currently living and working in Brooklyn, Holstad belongs to a generation of heirs to aborted revolutions, confused movements and mixed messages, a generation born amid sexual liberation and chemical exploration but that grew up with 'Just Say No' and AIDS. Too late for hippiedom, and for Disco and Punk come to that, Holstad and his cohorts are looking for counter-culture within a mainstreaming flood. Artistically Holstad is part of what one might term a post-cynical generation trying to come to terms with a legacy of assorted critiques and endgame positions, deeply touched with Postmodern doubt but wanting to transcend it. His work reflects a yearning to identify with something and to find excitement in anything. He seems always to be looking for the amazing and the fabulous. Discovering it at best in hints and glimmers, he is willing to augment, stretch, inflate and pad as required to satisfy his appetite. Moreover, much as he may love the objects and sentiments of his quest, he can't seem to help himself signalling incredulity towards the very things he celebrates. One imagines him both smiling and smirking as he discovers, recalls and consumes his cultural working material.

# ScheiblerMitte

Comfortable with a range of subject matter and processes, and beholden to none, Holstad generates a variety of two-dimensional, sculptural and installation work. His 'Eraserhead' (1996–ongoing) drawings are selective erasures and hand-drawn doctorings of newspaper photos, converted from front-page banality into one-off magic pictures. In Holstad's collages young men culled from skin magazines cavort and couple, sometimes in the buff, but often with their silhouetted physiques in-filled with interior décor photos, landscapes or patterns from hand-knitted afghans. Their bodies become vessels of domestic warmth, glamour and Romanticism. They exist amid designer interiors, grand locales like the White House, rainbow-filled skies and landscapes accessorized with chandeliers hanging from trees. The collages are akin to Martha Rosler's series 'Bringing the War Home' (1967–72), which depict Vietnam soldiers in household settings; and to Sam Durant inserting depictions of vandalism and squatters into photographs of Modernist houses. But they share more with the commingling of modesty, decadence, hopeful desire and bafflement one finds in the early collages of Richard Hamilton or the recent work of Gilbert and George – artists from previous generations who, like Holstad, draw on both common culture and subcultures, trying to assemble a code for expressing views and visions of a dazzling, if dizzying, world.

Collage translates for Holstad into sculpture, assemblage and installation: think of his work as a walk-in version of the cut-and-paste medium. He imbues spaces with an unpredictable carnival-esque frenzy familiar to such predecessors as Martin Kippenberger or Jonathan Borofsky, and recently graced the Whitney Biennial with the warmth and cosiness of a crocheted camp-fire entitled *Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are* (2004) – a dollop of DIY Sublime that rivalled the mysterious glamour of a nearby installation by David Altmejd and seemed to share its impulse for heightened experience. Holstad does have

his darker and more twisted side. *Fear Gives Courage Wings* (2003), an installation revealing the artist's humorous bent and his willingness to wallow knowingly in nostalgia when it offers glimpses of the wonder he seeks, commemorated disco with a funeral wreath and a boom-box augmented with roller-skate wheels and sequined testicles. Also savagely comic are the Glam-Punk stuffed hyena and its pink flamingo prey that became the mascots of Holstad's installation *Moving Toward the Light* (2004). A celebration of the search for transformation, the piece employed objects and images that span the gap between the banal and the fantastic: gilt mirrors, drag queens, riot gear, party masks and a video showing a children's television host explaining the prosthetic alterations undergone by actor-bodybuilder Lou Ferrigno for the 1970s *Incredible Hulk* TV show.

Equally voyeuristic, and perhaps a bit macabre and prurient, is Holstad's 2003 tribute to the 12-year life of David Vetter. A loose simulation of the sterile, germ-free room inhabited by the so-called 'boy in the bubble', who became an oddly iconic figure for Holstad's generation, the piece is a kind of metaphor for the artist's oeuvre. Entitled *Life is a Gift*, the installation is suggestive of knowing all too well the limits of one's world, and wanting to live to the fullest within (and, with hope, beyond) those boundaries. Collectively Holstad's work forces a readjustment of our relation to the idea of infection in myriad literal and metaphorical ways, from the fear of, to the wondrous desire for, the possibility of a contagion – be it a disease or a movement or an attitude – taking hold in the world.

## **Christopher Miles**