

NORMAL BIAS PAINTINGS

Those of us old enough to have stacked cassette tapes on bedroom bookshelves will be familiar with the 'Normal Bias' labelling on the standard ferric oxide versions we used to make mixtapes. Nowadays, the words normal bias are more likely to elicit thoughts of partisan media or perhaps evoke the similar sounding 'normalcy bias' – a belief that causes people to underestimate both the likelihood and the effects of a disaster by assuming that things will *a/ways* function the way they have normally functioned.

The currency in analogue technologies is strong right now and the music we used to play on them will always provide us with comfort. Artists such as Jeremy Deller and Mark Leckey may be accused of 'ravewashing' the past but who can blame them for at least partially turning towards the past when the present is so disorientating?

Like all humankind throughout history, Baby Boomers and Generation Xers grasp for the things that feel familiar as they advance in years. They embrace progress up until the point that they don't understand progress. This is the point at which nostalgia can transmute into political ideology.

Nationalistic and triumphalist, hard-line Brexiteers are wedded to an idea of a 'great' Britain, a nostalgic world-view that promotes a remembrance culture and world war victory narrative. Historically, the media, church and politicians of all stripes have been complicit in propagating this jingoistic delusion. Journalist John Harris writes:

...self-evidently, to yearn for the spirit of pre-50s Britain runs the risk of celebrating a country that was monoculturally white and ridden with bigotry, and an imperial ideal racist in both theory and practice. Decades of cultural history have also undermined just about every aspect of the Brexiteers' view of things. ¹

If we subscribe to the author LP Hartley's notion that 'the past is a foreign country' it's certainly ironic that a campaign predicated on no small amount of xenophobia is hell bent on returning us there.

Populist politicians who trade in nostalgia seek to reduce complex political arguments into binary choices. They invoke a simpler time when we were all so much more in control of our destinies and our borders, when we were all proud patriots.

In reality of course there never have been simpler times. Technological advances facilitated by global capitalism simply mean we're far more aware of everything now. We shouldn't be shocked when we listen to a previously suppressed audio recording of president Ronald Reagan describing African diplomats as 'monkeys' who were 'uncomfortable wearing shoes' ² because it was ever thus. Politicians have always been that offensive in private. Nowadays though there are no filters between the president of the USA and us. In Trump's America, the Oval Office is a glass-walled slaughterhouse.

Wikileaks, tell-all exposés and Trump's own big mouth reveal to us all the grim inner machinations of the most powerful nation on earth.

Each painting in the *Normal Bias* series is a small cry for help. They are an exploration of the noise and confusion that arises when nostalgia bumps up against reality. I'm as befuddled by contemporary politics and society as anyone else my age. I'm often unconvinced that things done in the name of progress are just that. I don't know if edible drones delivering humanitarian aid are the way forward because I don't know what the environmental impact of producing them might be and I haven't spent time thinking about all the ways such an invention could be abused. It's complicated.

If you buy into the idea that satire implicitly contains a seed of optimism – Stanley Kubrick described a satirist as 'someone who has a very sceptical view of human nature, but who still has the optimism to make some sort of joke out of it. However brutal that joke might be' – then there is always hope. If we are able to recognise ourselves, our absurdities, through the lens of satire then we can use this insight to liberate ourselves from such absurdities.

Tim Fishlock 2019

¹ John Harris, The fantasy of Britain at war could be nearing its last hurrah
The Guardian 14/10/19

² Isaac Chotiner, How a historian uncovered Ronald Reagan's racist remarks to Richard Nixon
The New Yorker 02/08/19