

Marine Contemporary

002

littlewhitehead  
Bad News



## Foreword Claressinka Anderson

In the summer of 2010, I was in London and saw Newspeak: British Art Now at the Saatchi Gallery. On the top floor I was confronted with my first work by the Glasgow based duo littlewhitehead. *It happened in the corner*, a cluster of life size thugs, hoods up, were all literally facing the corner of the room. The sculpture was ominous, ghoulish and without a doubt the most arresting addition to the space. I walked over and peered up and over the figures, trying to see if I could see what they could see. There was nothing. The absence, however, spoke volumes. And that is, of course, the point. The implied 'horror' always starts with the viewer. "Hoodies," young gang kids prone to knifing innocent people and each other, are universally feared in the UK. Not exactly a cheerful work, yet, there was something funny about this piece. It was absurd, disturbing and utterly compelling. I couldn't stop thinking about it after I left the gallery. As I did some more research into their work, I saw that littlewhitehead have a real knack for summoning up our collective fears in a cryptic, brutally honest and amusing way. As a result, viewing their work leaves one with the feeling of not knowing whether to laugh or cry. What is most seductive about their practice is that it sits somewhere in this enigmatic and captivating space.

This liminal space allows for an imagined narrative in the work that is heavily based on the viewer's personal history. Our personal histories are, of course, a combination of the collective psyche (filtered down through the communal image bank) and personal memories. littlewhitehead have often referred to their visual language as "tabloid vernacular," due to the immediacy it has and its affinity to narrative. The artists explain, "We prefer to shift the construction of the narrative onto the viewer, where the work stimulates their memory and forces them to construct a story. Viewers step into an enigmatic moment in which they have



*It Happened In the Corner*, 2007  
Plaster, wax, foam, hair, clothes  
71"x79"x59"

lost their bearings, and the only way to negotiate it is through a process of deduction, supposition and an attendance to the hierarchical, psychological disposition of the composition. In this sense the narrative in the work is always multi-layered, fractional, nebulous and heavily dependent on one's own private history."

littlewhitehead clearly understand the uncanny as a feeling of uncertainty, particularly regarding whether something is animate or inanimate. I cannot help but think of Hans Bellmer's dolls when looking at Sentient Orbs, the child's feet hanging, melancholy dead weights in amongst the red balloons, which are something akin to bulbous body parts. Once again, their use of the life size lures us into simultaneous states of anxiety, repulsion and amusement. This, along with their particular and subversive way of tackling serious cultural concerns, places littlewhitehead somewhere in the realm of a contemporary version of surrealism. Linked to the idea of the uncanny in Surrealism is the "Uncanny Valley", a hypothesis is in the field of robotics coined by Masahiro Mori in 1970. The "valley" is recorded as the dip in human empathy when reacting to robots that appear to be fully human. When robots are "barely human", we express a feeling of empathy towards them, but when they are totally lifelike, we experience total revulsion.

The appropriation of media images and everyday cultural references also gives their work a feeling of the uncanny. Residual feelings left over from the detritus of mass media images - the discarded and repressed memories of these things - are brought to the forefront in their work. In Sentient Orbs, there is clear reference to the 1956 French Film, "The Red Balloon." The short film tells the tale of a child being followed by a red balloon with a mind and will of its own. At the end of the film, the child is swept to safety by a group of sentient balloons. In an age where we are continually

bombarded with violent or disturbing images on screen, and almost numb to their effects, there is still something about the visceral nature of seeing those images in three dimensions right before our very eyes, that brings them into our physical world in much more forceful way. It is easy to remain removed from events when they are filtered through a television or film screen, but the immediacy of the sculptures makes the brutality more tangible. There is constant play between the real and the unreal.

The interesting thing about the uncanny, is that is simultaneously strange and disturbing and banal and every day. littlewhitehead explain, "In regard to our use of figuration and its connection with the uncanny, this is an idea always evoked from the use of realistic life size figures. Our figurative work is no different as we often life cast to make it. Casting creates an interesting paradox. It embodies both presence and absence, real and fictitious. What viewers are presented with looks both familiar and foreign. Consequently, many viewers do feel uneasy in the presence of our sculptures". However, these reactions are never the artists' primary reason for making the work (if it were, it would very quickly become boring), however it does allow viewers to have a very immediate connection with the pieces.

This idea of presence and absence is one that comes up continually in contemporary sculpture. One only has to look at the work of another British Sculptor, Anish Kapoor, whose abstract and minimalist work is completely opposite in form and concept from littlewhitehead's to see that this is a universal theme. It is intrinsic to the very nature of sculpture, no matter what the subject matter or execution. In her 1976 essay in October Magazine, Sculpture in the Expanded Field, Rosalind Krauss said "...if sculpture itself had become a kind of ontological absence, the combination of exclusions, the sum of the



Sentient Orbs, 2009  
Mixed media installation,  
dimensions variable

neither/nor, that does not mean that the terms themselves from which it was built-- the not-landscape and the not-architecture-- did not have a certain interest." Although Krauss was talking about what is now essentially known as environmental sculpture, something very different from littlewhitehead's take on sculptural practice, it is still a noteworthy reference when thinking about how their work fits into the history of contemporary sculpture. littlewhitehead embrace the "presence of absence" in their work and always leave that questionable place unanswered. When looking at littlewhitehead's work, one notices similar concerns and an equally perverse sense of humor in the work of other contemporary artists, such as: Elmgreen and Dragset, Maurizio Cattelan, Tony Matelli and David Cerny, along with fellow Glaswegian joker David Shrigley. In contrast to many of these artists, however, littlewhitehead, make all their own work. Keeping their sense of humor alive on their artist website, under the news section for 2011, they have written only the sentence: "replacing the charcoal in our lungs with highly toxic solvent fumes". Indeed, their work develops substantially through their use (or misuse) of the materials needed to make their sculptures. For the Bad News show, the artists say that this misuse is something they've been working on. When I asked them about their views on Cattelan's work as a possible influence, their reply was "Cattelan is much more decisive than us, as he has an idea and then gets the appropriate person to make it. I think we likely share some stylistic similarities and a comparable kind of irreverence with Cattelan, however I think our work maybe relies a bit more on narrative than his. So, yeah we like him, but are always a little hesitant to say he's an influence."

A joke between the two artists about the films of David Cronenberg, introduced the idea of deep fat frying as a method of sculptural production.

*The Horror* was preceded by *The Thing*, a deep fried bible, which initiated littlewhitehead's use of deep fat frying as a way of making art. Irreverent and imprecise, their process lead to the creation of *The Thing* - a battered and deep-fried 200 year-old Bible. Provoking condemnation from church leaders who declared it a mockery of Christianity. The artists ignored the comments, swiftly justifying the work by claiming that both Bible and batter were quintessentially Glaswegian. "We always dislike Glaswegian artists that continue to explore the stereotypes of the city in the usual boring manner, looking at themes such as sectarian divide, poor health and poverty. So battering and deep fat frying felt like quite an appropriate way of working. Both religion (particularly the Christian divide) and poor diet are the stereotypical issues associated with Glasgow. We've never wanted to make work that feels overly Glaswegian, so we thought it'd be quite a multi-layered joke - between the relationship between religion and deep frying, and our own irreverence towards Glasgow and art production that usually focuses on these issues." When they were asked to produce a royal portrait for *The Guardian* newspaper, they both immediately thought that as head of the church of England, the Queen provided an obvious continuation on from the previous work. littlewhitehead explain, "As she's so recognizable, so often photographed and caricatured, we felt that it would be a challenge to create a work that looks at her uniquely. Through battering and deep fat frying, we feel there's an interesting, confrontational relationship between the subject, the medium and ourselves that evokes ideas about class, national identity, greed and the grotesque."

*The Horror*, 2010  
Deep fried batter, plastic mannequin head, metal crown, resin  
22.5" x 12" x 14.5"



*Universal Sidereal* was an installation made for an exhibition at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland. This was littlewhitehead's first solo show in a public museum and was made completely from the act of burning. The artists built the space outside their studio and took to it with flame throwers, before dismantling it and reinstalling it in the gallery. The artists explain, "We were inspired by images of abandoned buildings, particularly scientific research stations in the Arctic. We

wanted to create a space that although looks like a burnt out room, is a bit more cinematic than completely realistic. Making this work and getting involved in burning also influenced us to begin burning various materials to make art." Only viewable through a window, the viewer is asked to peer into another reality. Whose life was brought to ruins here? Again, the idea of an unreal space that is eerily real makes for a surreal and mysterious proposition.



*Universal Sidereal*, 2010  
Burnt wood, burnt objects 197" x 87" x 90.5"  
(photo Colin Davidson)

The idea of making burned work was taken a step further in their recent sculptures made entirely from ash. *The Struggle*, a sculpture of the bible made from the ash of 100 copies of Mein Kampf, although still cheeky and impious, it is perhaps a more poetic meditation on commonly adopted ideologies and more importantly, their destructive capabilities, than other littlewhitehead works. Amongst the more brutally confrontational pieces, there are quieter and darker works that poignantly show what could perhaps be the more hidden heart of the artists' concerns. To some extent, it doesn't really matter that it's the bible and Mein Kampf. It could just as easily be the other way around (i.e. burning the bible and making a Mein Kampf) or they could have used other books of similar ideological weight. The process of burning is most important here, particularly in relation to both books' historical connection with the act.



*The Struggle*, 2011  
Ashes of 100 copies of Mein Kampf,  
resin, 7" x 4" x 10"

### Bad News

Bad News is littlewhitehead's first solo show with Marine Contemporary and their debut show in the U.S. Bad News brings together a selection of new work by littlewhitehead. Indeed, a glut of bad news preceded the making of the work and in turn formed the foundations for the show. Although the news was very personal, it allowed them to notice the misfortune of others more readily. Fueled by their own misery, they began consuming the adversities of others and bearing them as their own. Drunk on misfortune and in delirious insomnia, the artists embarked on a journey that took them to the darkest recesses of the human mind. Viewers are invited to enter the dark, twisted, violent universe of littlewhitehead and witness bad news. Come listen to their woes...

### littlewhitehead is

Craig Little (b. 1980, Glasgow, Scotland) and Blake Whitehead (b.1985, Lanark, Scotland).

Recent solo shows include

- The London Art Fair, London with Summaria Lunn, 2011,
- The Gilt Hole Complex, Arcan Mellor, London, 2010,
- Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland, 2010
- So Many Fellows Find Themselves, K Gallery Milan, 2009.

Recent group shows include

- Modern British Sculpture, Gimpel Fils, London, 2011,
- Newspeak: British Art Now at the Saatchi Gallery, London, 2010,
- Newspeak: British Art Now, The Hermitage, St Petersburg, 2009.

They are the recipients of the Scottish Arts Council Creative Development Grant in 2009 and 2008. littlewhitehead are being included in the upcoming book 100 New Artists by U.K. critic Francesca Gavin. 100 New Artists highlights new themes, media, imagery and ideas emerging in contemporary art practice. They also have an upcoming show at Seven Art Ltd, New Delhi in November, 2011. They currently live and work in Glasgow, Scotland.

[The right word at the right time](#), 2011  
Medium-cloth, resin, wire, coat hanger,  
silicon, polyetherane foam, glass eyes,  
wig, olive oil, shirt, suit, shoes, tie, window,  
46.5" x 70" x 11"





[We're all going to lose](#), 2011  
Resin, wire, cloth, silicon rubber, polyurethane  
foam, hat, pajamas, socks, sandals,  
47" x 35.5" x 12"



Stolen Flesh, 2011  
Tree, burlap sack, red gloss paint,  
resin, heads, dimensions variable



After the fall, 2011

Ashes from a burnt-out building in Detroit, resin,  
record player, speakers, cast of Stevie Wonder's  
'the secret life of plants', 13" x 13" x 9"



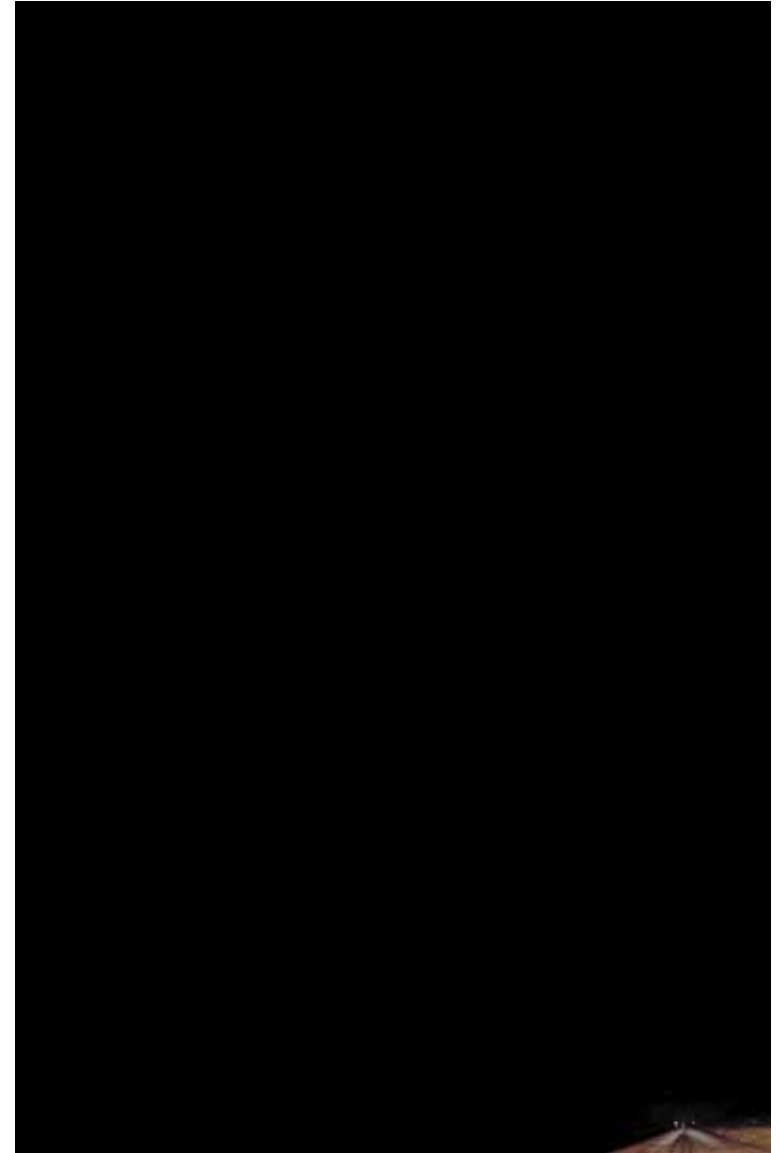
Bad News, 2011  
Ashes from a burnt-out building  
in Detroit, resin, 19.5" x 16.5" x 5"







Untitled (print 1 detail), 2011  
Inkjet on paper



Untitled (print 1), 2011  
Inkjet on paper, 33" x 21"



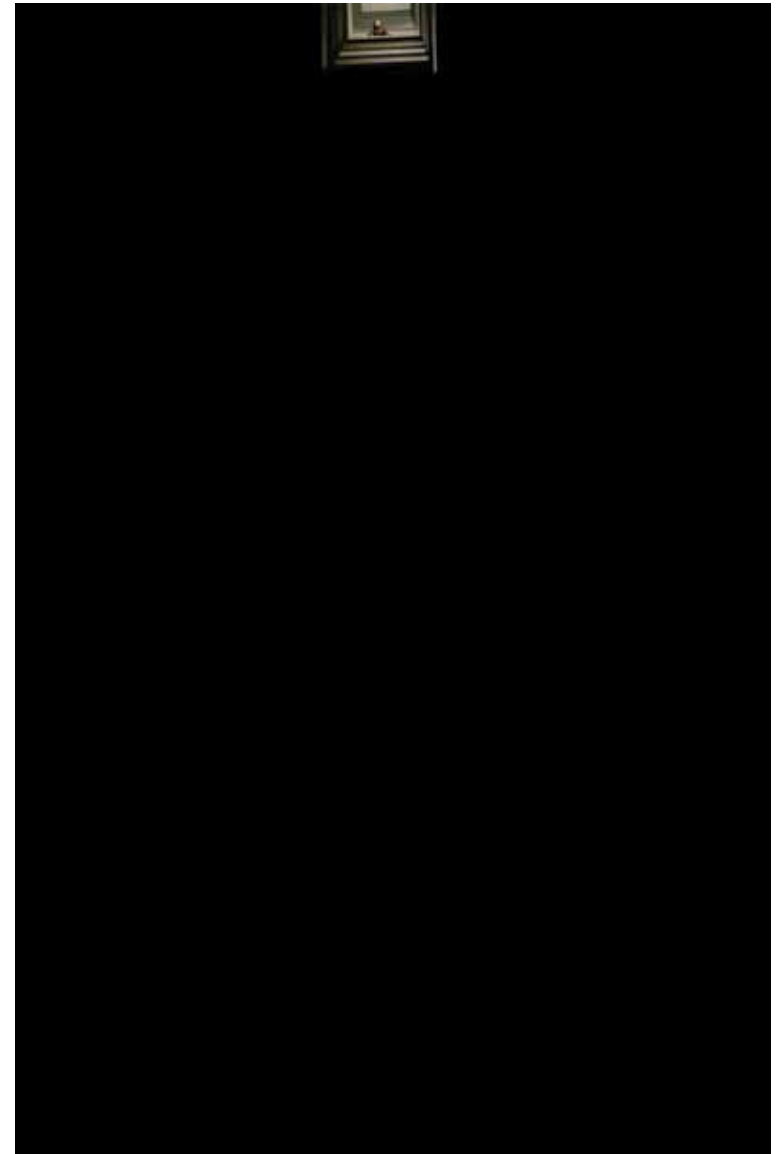
Untitled (print 2), 2011  
Inkjet on paper, 33" x 21"



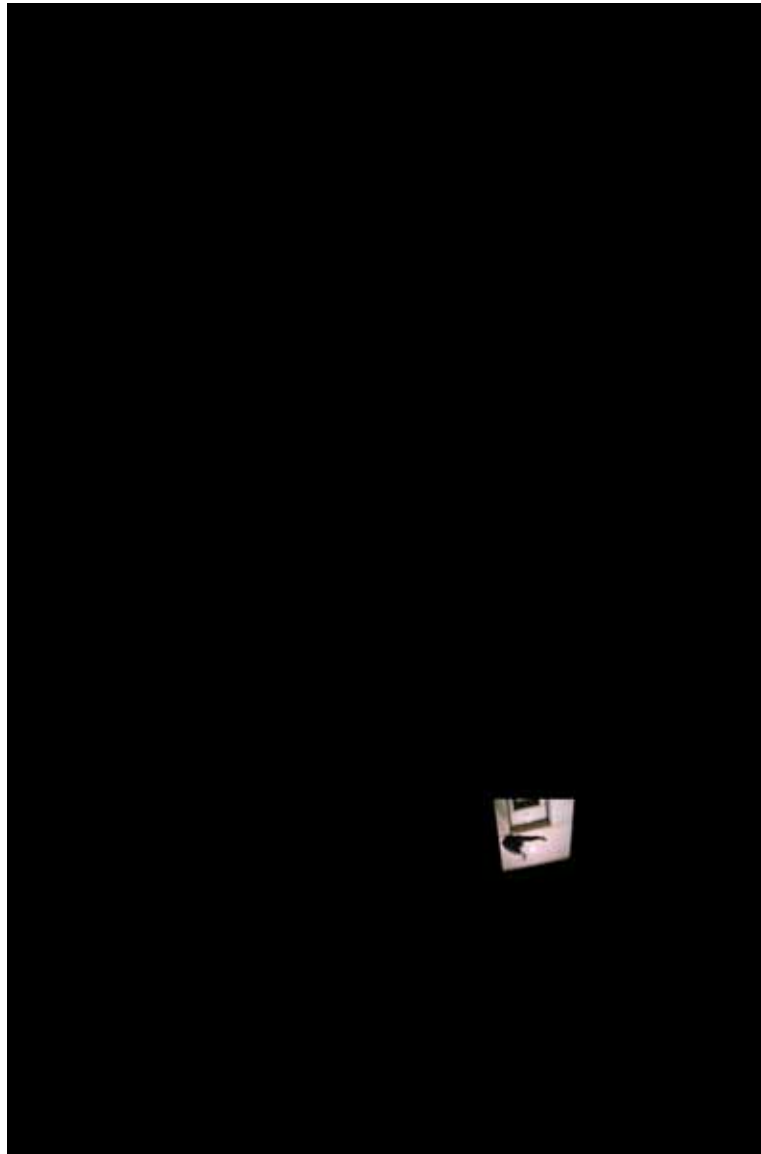
Untitled (print 2 detail), 2011  
Inkjet on paper



Untitled (print 3 detail), 2011  
Inkjet on paper



Untitled (print 3), 2011  
Inkjet on paper, 33" x 21"



Untitled (print 4), 2011  
Inkjet on paper, 33" x 21"



Untitled (print 4 detail), 2011  
Inkjet on paper





Untitled, 2011  
Pencil, ink, paper 8.5" x 5"



Untitled, 2011  
Pencil, ink, paper 8.5" x 5"



Untitled, 2011  
Pencil, ink, paper 8.5" x 5"



Untitled, 2011  
Pencil, ink, paper 8.5" x 5"



Bad News  
Installation



Bad News  
Installation



Marine Contemporary 002  
littlewhitehead: Bad News

Second edition published May 17, 2011  
Los Angeles, CA

All images © littlewhitehead

All rights reserved. No part of this publication  
may be duplicated or transmitted in any form  
without written consent from Marine Contemporary.  
Unauthorised broadcasting, copying or duplicating  
of this publication or the works within it will constitute  
an infringement of copyright.

Photography: Robert Wedemeyer  
Design: October  
[octoberdesign.co.uk](http://octoberdesign.co.uk)

littlewhitehead.  
Represented by Marine Contemporary.

[marinecontemporary.com](http://marinecontemporary.com)