

Oscar Perry *Essential Oils*

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Oscar Perry's new works offer a commentary on the political and cultural legacy of late modernism. According to the artist, "Instead of starting with figurative or landscape [subjects] and slowly building to the point of abstraction, I started with paranoid conspiracies and hundreds of hours of audio material. The paintings became misguided attempts at trying to document something that couldn't be explained." The "paranoid conspiracies" which Perry refers to centre around the activities of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an anti-communist advocacy group begun in 1950 which was instrumental in promoting American abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock throughout the West. In 1967, the CCF was revealed to have been a CIA front operation, designed to position American abstract painting as a counterpoint to the rigid realist principles of state-sponsored Soviet art, and thus create the impression that capitalist society was the natural home of the cultural avant-garde. This idea of art as a façade concealing a cynical, politically motivated ulterior purpose resonates with the uneasy surfaces of Perry's work, and with the complexity and difficulty of producing paintings in the information-saturated contemporary landscape.

However, the links between politics and painting are not the sole driver behind this group of works. Perry compares the activities of the CCF to the conspiracy theory which holds that the Laurel Canyon music scene, which gave rise to the Eagles, Jim Morrison and Frank Zappa, was in fact another example of the CIA manufacturing culture, and that the hippy counterculture was created by the CIA in order to sideline and de-legitimise the anti-war movement. Perry links this theory to the Dionysian Mysteries of ancient Greece, in which participants in the religious rituals of the god Dionysius dissolved their personal inhibitions through the use of intoxicants and frenzied dancing. While this secondary nexus of conspiracy and mythology is yet further removed from the mainstream of history, it seems of a part with Perry's anxieties about the authenticity of culture in general: In our present situation, how can we tell the difference between art, propaganda and marketing? This uncertainty is not limited to the viewer of art; Perry sees the role of the painter as that of a "Manchurian candidate," driven by their cultural programming rather than any intrinsic creative impulse.

Perry's work draws together disparate threads of conspiracy, history and culture in his search for meaning, a hyperactive research process facilitated by the instant accessibility and infinite variety of the internet. "I basically looked at a bunch of things and tried to connect them. I wanted to create a studio environment where I could attempt to make modern spiritualist paintings, like a theatre set for an amateur performance." As part of this neo-séance process, Perry cites three historical figures in particular as "spiritual guides/unreliable narrators" who influenced the creation of the work: Admiral George Stephen Morrison, the father of Jim Morrison; Vito Paulekas, a founding member of the Southern California "freak" scene; and Sirhan Sirhan, the man convicted of the assassination of Bobby Kennedy. Each of these characters exemplifies a strand of Perry's research: George Morrison as the shadowy authority figure standing behind the "authentic" manifestations of the avant-garde, Paulekas as the Dionysian prophet whose frenzied bacchanal dissolves the walls between self and culture, and, standing in for the artist himself, Sirhan Sirhan the erstwhile Manchurian candidate, whose journals were discovered to contain strange scribbles and examples of automatic writing.

The works in Essential Oils are likewise drawn from these three strands, as identified by Perry himself: "Honky Tonkin Gulf aerial paintings and porthole paintings, Laurel Canyon Dionysian dance paintings, and Sirhan Sirhan note book paintings."

As Perry puts it: "Morrison as alter-ego. Vito as persona mask, Sirhan as guiding hand. Perry as Manchurian candidate."