

STATION

David Griggs

Magic is Mentally Ill

19th July— 16th August 2014

—
Jack Willet: You have been based in Manila on-and-off for some six years and by looking at this series of new photographic works in conjunction with previous works (both photographic and painted) you have very much immersed yourself within specific parts of their culture. I know that you have previously spent a lot of time with gangs in local prisons—specifically documenting their tattoos for an artist book, but many of these images seem more personal. Photographs taken from inside rather than those taken from an onlooker, are we here more-or-less being introduced to your day-to-day excursions through Manila?

David Griggs: Yeah I set up the Manila studio about six years ago. LOSTprojects (the studio) became a space where I was able to focus on the type of works I wanted to make with no distractions. I decided it was the perfect time to have no limits and a space that could become very communal and welcoming for other artists to work in or just crash in if they needed. The whole Prison Gang thing was a trip. Manila City Jail is an all male prison. I was allowed access once a week for a few months. The inmates were super amazing, however it was a difficult system to infiltrate. I was constantly being watched by the guards, this made it tough for me to do what I wanted. On rainy days it became a lot easier, the guards did not want to get wet so I could enter any dorm area and spend time with the guys and photograph. In the past I had worked in series of photographs that had a clear subject or topic. In this new series *Magic Is Mentally Ill* I wanted to document my daily world. It was a way to try and boycott the aspect that photojournalism had played out in my practice before.

—
JW: No matter what medium you employ, the role of the portrait is present in most—very often dead center; these portraits hold an empathy, feeling as though your images access the truth of the subject rather than a stylised or scripted notion of the truth. What compels you to explore these subjects, these specific people of a specific kind of counter-culture?

DG: I have always been interested in the marginalised. More specifically I'm interested in how people create a way out or a way to stay stable within their situation. I came from this sort of background also. I grew up in an area that was full of drug and alcohol abuse. What saved me was skateboarding; it gave me an outlet and a community that was outside and different than the environment surrounding me. Skateboarding is an extremely creative thing to do and be part of. Living here in Manila and being engaged in the skateboarding community on a daily basis I suddenly realised that I had never documented it. I had never photographed my friends or the culture. It was so liberating to photograph from the inside. The camera became invisible. It's all about trust and once you have that that's truth.

—
JW: You have an eye for colour, in many of the images it seems that the composition—or angle—has been decided on by the colours within the frame. Again vibrant colours are often apparent in much of your work, I gather that these bright tones are typical of your current location, what else makes their presence characteristic of your practice?

DG: It was also amazing to notice that myself. When I visited my printer to check the photographs it was the first time I had seen them scaled up and printed at the sizes I wanted. I just thought, "shit these are like paintings". My sense of colour comes intuitively. I gave myself two small rules for this project. One was to hardly show the environment, no street shots where Manila became identifiable and no shots where the skateboarding terrain became identifiable. I wanted to focus on

the people and their individual personalities. This is quite a hard thing to do in Manila. The city is so overwhelming and dominates everything. I would not say it's the location of Manila that dictates the colours in the shots, simply because in most part Manila is grey and grey. A very dirty looking city. However, Manila she does have her moments of extreme colour. One way I found to work the shots was to shoot tight and keep moving low with the camera, getting the bright sunset or just a strange colour of a wall in the background.

—

JW: I hear that you have been working on a feature length film for a while now, do you see these images in any way as research or inspiration? The images that comprise of *Magic is Mentally Ill* continue along the same themes and sensibilities as your works over the last decade, will this film be the point of completion of this thought or just another element in the continuum?

DG: What's amazing for me right now is that I have come back to photography and film after years of painting. My uncle was a photographer, so I was always in the darkroom learning the ropes you know. I would have been around 9 years old when I shot, developed and printed my first roll of black and white film. When I was 16 I wanted so badly to be a photojournalist I did two weeks of training at a local newspaper in Sydney and it was super boring, photographing politicians and local football stars of the time. It put me off photography for years. Then in first year off art school I started making very low-tech super eight films with my mate on the weekends. But there is no way in hell I will show you these films, hehe. What it did though was show me early on that making any type of film is a head fuck, time consuming, costly and allot of work. I was just to high energy and high to deal with the medium back then. My point is I never knew what to make a film about until four years ago when I read a story in the Philippine Star. I knew the whole thing was made up, complete bullshit. But that's what was incredible about the story. It had a beginning, middle and an end. Whether it was true or false made no difference to me. I used this story like bookends and over two years invented my own narrative my own scrip for the story. The film *COWBOY COUNTRY* was shot in 2013. We are now in the final stages of sound editing then its done, the cut is so beautiful. Julie-Anne De Ruvo, a Melbourne based editor flew to Manila and weaved her wizard editing magic. I will let you wait for the trailer to go viral before I tell you what the film is about. *COWBOY COUNTRY* is its own trip, not connected directly to any past works or future works. Its just *COWBOY COUNTRY* man, my first full-length film. However in saying that, the *Magic Is Mentally Ill* photographs have moved me into a whole new direction. In September this year I will start research for the second full-length film. Some of the people in the *Magic Is Mentally Ill* photographs will be acting for this project eventually. This new project will be scripted, documentary and mockumentary.

—

JW: This series is juxtaposed between somewhat horrific themes and also that lighter of heart, but it is all documentary in nature, what exactly do you see yourself documenting?

DG: I'm looking for the absurd and the beautiful at the same time. I mean like if I'm going to a skate spot to meet up with some friends getting there is always a challenge. Manila traffic is the worst in the world and the trains and busses are crammed. I always take the train because it's the fastest mode of transport. Like the photograph of the mans legs. One of his legs has gang green and is rotting away. I will encounter that on my way to the train station then 40min later I will be in another location surrounded by a beautiful sunset and gorgeous women. That's absurd to me. And it's completely amusing and horrific. The extremities of life that's what I'm documenting.