



Q&A with Joel Gibb

by Allan Doyle

January 24 – 29, 2007

Allan Doyle: I'm sure you don't remember me, but you and I met a few years ago when I was driving Bill Arning around Toronto – Bill's a good friend. We all had smoothie somewhere if I remember correctly. Anyway, hello again.

***Joel Gibb:* Hey there, nice to hear from you, yes of course I remember meeting you at Juice For Life. I am getting excited for my show at Sunday. Thanks for agreeing to write something about it.**

Allan Doyle: I am curious about a couple of specific things but I thought I'd start off with a fairly general question. I was thinking about the move from the stage, album cover, and website, to the gallery space. I was curious what that transition meant for you. The Hidden Cameras' performances are really multi-sensorial, ecstatic experiences. That relation to the audience is very different than the more reserved, contemplative space of a NYC gallery. What do you think/feel about that change in relation to your work? For example, in the past, your banners and other pieces have been part of a larger, multi-media performance. Have you gone about making the work for the gallery-show any differently? Do you see each one as a discrete work or are they intended to work together and provide some kind of larger or cumulative effect?

***Joel Gibb:* For the past couple of years I have been working on pieces that I knew would be used for something other than the Hidden Cameras' projects. Having my art shown in a gallery is the next step it can go. I started making visual art roughly at the same time that I started writing songs. An image always arose from a song, and I wrote songs subsequently keeping that in mind as an informal rule. My process allowed for words to become shapes and shapes to become melodies.**

I am not so rigid now about that anymore, and a lot of the art that I make now doesn't relate to that at all. I guess the general meaning of the work together would be a tenderizing of the darkest things in the world, like death or disease or doom, and in some cases celebrating it. I didn't think of a special concept for *Rise Up Thou Earth* beyond that. It really will be about picking from stuff I have been working on for the past year. A lot of collages I have made assembling new bodies from parts I have accumulated over the years from medical textbooks and encyclopedias, two graveyard banners, and a bunch of drawings of various subjects.

The only Hidden Cameras crossover I imagine there being in the show will be a penis-sword-dagger that appears above three blank graves on one banner and a bunch of individual Hidden Cameras skull pieces.

I always make pieces as individual things – the cumulative effect is yet to be seen by even me until I hang everything and see it in the gallery, I hope it works somehow.

Allan Doyle: Your choice of materials seems really important. By using felt, paper, stitching, glue, and such, it brings to mind collective Sunday School projects or art camp activities. The sensual appeal of the materials, however, is balanced by some of the darker content: skulls and daggers, for example. This reminded me of your songs which draw on folk, pop, and hymn traditions to convey notions about politics, pleasure, mortality, love, etc. In both cases the material's association with a collective, feel-good experience allows the viewer/listener to access things that might otherwise be dismissed. I was wondering if you could talk about your materials and why they appeal to you?

***Joel Gibb:* Is that a question? I liked everything that you said. I can't say much about the materials except that felt is great in that you must reduce the picture to its most iconic, recognizable, and simplest form. I like the process it demands in that sense.**

Allan Doyle: The way you describe this body of work as an assemblage of body parts, one, which would tender-ize (great word!) doom, death, disease – this made me think of how allegorical these works are. Their skulls, chopped trees, daggers, etc., bring to mind Walter Benjamin's discussion of German Baroque mourning dramas. He shows how allegory was a strategy for dealing with a gloomy, plague-stricken world that had been emptied of meaning. By 'saying-other' – allegory allows one to say 'death' but actually mean 'life' in a different register: so, earthly decay becomes heavenly incorruptibility and so on.

This is a very Christian way of looking at things. I bring it up because you've mentioned Foucault and Eco when being interviewed in the past, and I believe you studied semiotics. I was wondering if the notion of turning emblems of death, doom and disease into something tender had something to do with the allegorical mode they are presented in or if you had any ideas along these lines.

Joel Gibb: I don't know that Benjamin reference, what book is that in? I like that connection.

Allan Doyle: I was referring his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which doesn't sound like much fun and the introduction is maddeningly dense but parts of that text are truly incredible, in my non-expert opinion. I really love that book.

When I thought of the allegorical angle, I couldn't help but think about Warhol and then about General Idea (GI's use of symbolic codes in their badges for example). I was wondering if you felt influenced by them at all. I was curious if there might be a connection between their exploiting the marketplace in order to disseminate art that challenged the basis of that very economy. Attacking from within, art becomes a kind of virus in their work. I also remember first seeing your *Gay Goth Punks* zine at Art Metropole. Could you say anything about your relationship to GI?

Joel Gibb: I am definitely influenced by Warhol and GI...and also Dadaism. I think collage is the perfect medium to do what you are saying because it is a literal response to culture. It is regurgitating and spitting back out our media as something more real but also more sinister and surreal.

Allan Doyle: I'm excited by your mentioning Dada because I wondered if you knew Hugo Ball's work – he was a founding member of Zurich Dada and quite a remarkable individual. His work consisted mainly of sound poems and the Dada performances at the Cabaret Voltaire. His diary is in print: *Flight Out of Time* – it's amazing. Ball combined Christian ethics with radical politics. He got a little reactionary at the end. But it made me wonder if you were concerned about the way Christianity in the U.S. is often associated with a right-wing agenda. Your work references Christian spiritual tradition but does so in pursuit of a progressive, perhaps 'radical', social/political agenda. Do you feel that the way this work will be received in the U.S. at the present moment would be different than if you showed it in Canada (for example) in terms of its overt spirituality?

Joel Gibb: I know about Hugo Ball a bit but never read his biography...sounds interesting...didn't know about his Catholicism. My experience of Christianity is varied. I have been to very conservative camps as a kid but have also been to many gay friendly churches, the Hidden Cameras have played in most of them over the years. I guess my work would be a little more loaded in the context that you speak of, but I am not showing in Texas. I am showing in New York, which is kind of its own country with its own set of values. I am always concerned going to America because it is the most hostile border I have ever crossed and I have to do it regularly.

Allan Doyle: Christian spirituality is a big taboo in fine art. The art market has embraced bodily effluents since Warhol and Manzoni but as soon as you start talking about God, let alone connecting the two, people get nervous. Critics love talking about the piss paintings but rarely take Warhol's Catholicism seriously. Does this reluctance concern or interest you at all?

Joel Gibb: That is a tough question. I try not to think about what the "art world" would think when I make art. My art is not Christian art, it references it, but I don't think it is proposing something that would be taboo in the art world.

Allan Doyle: Since you'll be showing alongside G.B. Jones, can you speak a little about her work in relation to your own?

Joel Gibb: I guess there is that iconic similarity between our work. I like how she chooses her subject matter very carefully, and there is a reason for picking a particular church or grave or what have you. It is all in an anti-authoritative spirit.

Allan Doyle is an artist and PhD candidate at Princeton University, New Jersey where he is completing his dissertation on French Salon painting.

Joel Gibb's first New York solo show *Rise Up Thou Earth* opens at SUNDAY, New York on February 8, 2007. He is also the leader of the "gay church folk" group the Hidden Cameras.