

JOE NANASHE

Joe

This work was essentially 7 years in the making. The first very crude study was made in 2001. "Sunset Blvd" was edited down so that all that remained was the name "Joe." A film about a vain and mad silent film actress became a bare-bones abstract obsession with the male lead, who is also killed at the end. I returned to this idea around 2006, beginning by pouring through IMDB for films with characters named "Joe". Editing down 144 films to the name Joe and the exclamations, commands, or brief sentences that contained this name, each film becomes an exploration of how the character is constructed from the outside in.

These 3 works were early studies to see how narrative could be constructed with zero continuity besides the constant refrain of the name. Simple narrative devices are linked together to create a single abstract and threadbare contain of a single identity. Joe morphs and is malleable, becoming whatever the surrounding characters, narrative, or audience wants him to be: celebrity, sexual carnivore, or dead body.

These 3 studies became the outline of what would become "Joe (A Self-Portrait)", a 4-channel 40-minute narrative film installation; a schizophrenic, self-indulgent, hypnotic, appropriated self-portrait telling the life, death, and rebirth of "Joe."

The concept of "Joe" is so distinctly American: average, yet able to achieve a sort of heroic anonymous grace. We see this with the origins of GI Joe, a foot soldier called to duty that rises to the occasion. Joe Blow, Joe Schmo, or Joe Six-Pack are names given to everyday average men with no discernable identity or quality. In this work, characters intone the name "Joe" as short hand, as a prescriptive identity. What we see is not a person, but the environment that surrounds him, creates him. The world is the impetus for his being. The individual is erased. Joe becomes an empty vessel, a shape-shifting mass of banality - an obscure, elusive object of desire.

After 3 solid years of combing through scores of films, editing them down, then weaving a complicated narrative tapestry, "Joe (A Self-Portrait)" was screened twice at Monkey Town in Brooklyn on my birthday, August 29, 2008. Ironically enough, it was the same week of the Democratic National Convention in which Joe Biden accepted the nomination for Vice President. Headlines proclaimed "It's Joe!" Several weeks later, Sarah Palin gave a shout out to all the "Joe Six-Packs", followed soon after by John McCain's introducing America to "Joe the Plumber." This constant incantation of "JOE" was a method of establishing the dichotomy between white "Real America" and the exoticism of a black man with the Muslim-sounding name Barak Hussein Obama. In fact, before all that madness, I quipped at the premiere that it seemed fitting the DNC picked a white guy from Delaware named "Joe" to balance the ticket. Nearing the election, supporters held up signs that said, "I AM JOE THE PLUMBER," which then became "I AM JOE," and was finally reduced to it's essential nature, the campaign passed out stickers resembling gas station attendant or work uniform patches with simply the name written in mock-stitching, "JOE." On a "year in review" episode of NPR's All Things Considered, several linguists declared that the word of 2008 to be the word "JOE," citing many of the themes and ideas I had lectured on multiple times when introducing this work at exhibitions, screenings, and the premiere at Monkey Town. The Republican National Committee had unknowingly usurped my life's work.

And yet none of that matters now. It's been 7 years since that screening. The techniques employed are rather quaint now, a part of our pop culture lexicon. Smash-cutting dissonant narratives can be seen on television, granted in only 10-20 comedic bits and not as 4-channel immersive installations, but the structure is similar. We now talk of viral videos and memes, concepts I have been fascinated with since reading Burroughs and Dawkins, but were not part of pop culture at the time. Funny to think that when I began these works YouTube and Facebook were practically non-existent, in their extreme infancy and not the juggernauts they are today.

These 3 narrative studies "Joe Joe Joe!", "Joe's Dead," and "Joe... Oh JOE!," their precursors, the 144 "Studies for a Self-Portrait", and the culmination of all these works, "Joe (A Self-Portrait)" exist in an odd time and space of American politics and technological advance.