



1995 PLAYED AT A GALLERY COVERED IN MUD FOR RICHARD ORJIS' EXHIBITION, 'MY EMPIRE OF DIRT'

Meeting artist and photographer Richard Orjis, you'd be forgiven for being reminded of a certain mild-mannered reporter with a penchant for saving the world. The thick black-rimmed glasses and impeccable manners help and the clean-cut, strong-jawed, take-home-to-mommy thing seals the deal. But it's his fantastical, mythical alter ego which, to me, is the dead giveaway.

When Orjis is behind closed doors, a fly-on-the-wall catches a glimpse not of some caped crusader, but the dangerously alluring world of his art. It's just as homoerotic as the tightly packaged *Man Of Steel*, but far more subversive: a recent video work of his featured a naked man doing press-ups while slowly being buried in mud laced with gold.

First impressions of Orjis' artwork are mostly responses to his vivid imagery and serialised creation of a nature-worshipping boy-cult. He attributes this partly to his "cultural Catholicism." Growing up in the Catholic church meant he was constantly exposed to similar narrative constructs, all of which were to do with worship, community and icons. Every week he was exposed to "grotesque images" of crucifixion that were made out to be beautiful and sublime. Beauty and pain were aligned, as were binaries like good and evil, Heaven and Hell, sin and redemption. Orjis seems to treasure these memories, and the themes are certainly treated with veneration in his work.

As I point this out, Orjis shifts uneasily in his seat. He is comfortable with the highly referential nature of his artwork – recent titles of artworks were drawn from songs by Nine Inch Nails and Fleetwood Mac – but the self-referential side is a touchy subject. He will not be drawn about the firsts in his life, saying that there "haven't been any light-bulb moments for me", and doesn't remember ever deciding to be an artist and is one simply because "I don't like being told what to do." He's too present-centred to be able to dredge up much about his past, which is largely composed of self-discovery and strong attachments to family and friends.

The myriad of inter-textual references in his art, however, is a subject he will immediately warm to. Walt Disney is mentioned for his "imaginative and intoxicating" creations which are able to capture the delight of so many millions,

something which one "couldn't say about Duchamp." He hastens to add that he's very fond of Duchamp.

The Disney thing is interesting, especially given a recent series entitled *My Empire of Dirt* which featured a photographic portrait of a man whose face was entirely covered with brightly coloured, almost plastic-looking flowers. There's a sense of innocence and even some unhygienic post-modern sense of purity in much of his work, and it's off-putting.

It's also strange that even I can't get him to talk about his time in the fashion world. Having spent three years in New York working with the likes of David LaChapelle and photographing supermodels for the society pages of the *New York Times*, he seems to be in a unique position to talk in an airy voice to a wet-behind-the-ears writer. But he doesn't; instead he talks about the tenuous relationship between art and fashion, a topic far less glamorous but more interesting, and the topic of his undergraduate dissertation. He mentions Andy Warhol and reiterates his stance on art as communication, rather than some art which "tries to be too intellectual and isn't connected to emotion."

Having exhausted my stock of questions designed to give someone who doesn't know him a nice, neat first impression, and now slightly frustrated, I ask him if he's implying that he makes shock art. He replies, good-naturedly, that everything shocks someone, and that he just makes what he likes. I go for the cheap shot and ask him if he worries about originality. He says that originality is a somewhat "stifling concept" and that the "human experience is made up of commonplaces and constants." The worst thing is that he sort of sounds like Dean Cain when he says it. All I've got after our somewhat staged interview is a cramp in my hand and a whole lot of confusing, mismatched observations. All I can say is that I remember, a year and a half ago, first seeing a piece of his artwork, the iconic *Floros* piece. I didn't realise for a few minutes that what I thought was a pretty little pitcher plant was, in fact, a very phallic symbol placed directly over a man's crotch. Here's the point: Richard Orjis, both the man and the artist, is all about creating, destroying and subverting first impressions. It's all very confusing. Interview Harry McNaughton Images Natasha Cantwell

