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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Ryan Trecartin

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In Mary Jordan's documentary on the movie director Jack Smith, *Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis*, 2006, the filmmaker and musician Tony Conrad has a wonderful memory of seeing *Flaming Creatures* (1963) for the first time: "The screen lit up with this lambent, wonderful, surging, frolicking, exquisitely happy moment." I recalled that line while watching *I-Be Area*, the 1-hour-48-minute video work that was the heart of Ryan Trecartin's recent show. I'm not sure *I-Be Area* is exquisitely happy; its content is too elusive to be sure. But Trecartin follows on from Smith in a number of ways, from his DIY, Salvation Army-shopping aesthetic (gratifying at a time when high-production-value art has become a constricting convention) to his work's vivid sense of community. Whether as characters or as the performers who play them, the cast of Trecartin's movie evokes a world—a largely young public sharing understandings and sympathies, tastes and drives—in tune with the present moment. For a glimpse of the ethos of the upcoming generation, *I-Be Area* is as good a place as any to go.

That said, like Smith's own downtown-Manhattan gay scene of the '60s and '70s, Trecartin's people are a minority in Republican America. Fluidly polysexual, they take as a given the culture that Smith's films, and those of successors like John Waters, helped bring into being, or at least to move from a repressed and underground status to visibility, thereby changing that culture dramatically. And they update those earlier films in that Trecartin and his friends have grown up in the age of the Internet and of Final Cut Pro. As his critics are in the habit of remarking, they are formed as much by YouTube as by movies—and if the aesthetics of YouTube ultimately trace back to movies, to television, and to advertising, they also replace the gloss those media cherish with homegrown, cheap resourcefulness in terms of props, scripts, and mise-en-scène. This is art that anyone can make—though far from everyone on YouTube, unfortunately, has figured out the rapid and sinuous editing that Trecartin manages, let alone his Hawaiian-shirt palette, his pace and energy, or his visual and verbal inventiveness.

The omnipresence of the Internet today, and of computers in the home, has led to questions, indeed anxiety, about the shaping of identity: The middle-aged and older group to which I belong knows that younger people are growing up with different inputs than we did ourselves. To the extent that *I-Be Area* has a plot, it addresses just these identity issues: The central character, I-Be II, is a clone, and themes of artificial life, adoption and parentage, original and copy (among people, not artworks), radiate throughout. In Trecartin's world, you can literally become a different person by deciding to—just as you can by using an alias on the Internet. The name "I-Be" itself puts identity on the front burner. But the story line is hard to follow; rapid intercutting between speakers tends to break continuity and flow—although the characters are talking to each other, we mostly see them talking to the camera or to someone offscreen—and unified sequences, conversations, and locations rapidly give way to new ones in a way that is strangely both liquid and disconnected. Perhaps this redefinition of plot in itself points to a redefinition of identity, although one hesitates to draw conclusions that grand—but it certainly contributes to the surging, frolicking mood of the work as a whole.

—David Frankel



Ryan Trecartin,
I-Be Area, 2007. still
from a color video,
1 hour, 48 minutes.