



Michael Dudeck WITCHDOCTOR, *Amygdala*, Photo by: Karen Asher. Courtesy of: The Artist and Pari Nadimi Gallery.

## WALLA WALLA BING BANG: MICHAEL DUDECK'S AMYGDALA

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BY STEVEN LEYDEN COCHRANE

It's difficult to know how to best find meaning or coherence in the work of an artist who, in all apparent seriousness, refers to himself as "Michael Dudeck WITCHDOCTOR." In the case of *Amygdala*, Dudeck's exhibition and "ritual" performance at Winnipeg's Aceartinc., the second work in what is ominously described as "a 10-year project," any attempt to do so raises only further doubt.

Like his moniker, Dudeck's practice and persona trade in a kind of blue-eyed pseudo-shamanism that suggests old colonialist attitudes and a fetish for "primitive" culture, and this seems at first to demand accounting for. After consideration, though, the figure that emerges in *Amygdala*, a sloppy, self-serious affair lacking sufficient purpose to elevate it beyond its myriad clichés, does not really resemble the racist huckster that one expects to encounter in the role of New-Age plastic shaman that Dudeck performs. Rather, he gives the impression only of being both convinced of his own subversive genius and astonishingly tone-deaf — the kind

of oblivious Euro-North-American who not only calls himself “witchdoctor” but presents the name all in capital letters.

Dudeck’s *Religion* (the aforementioned 10-year project) centers around an invented mythology that, we’re informed, “radically reimagines the nature of human origins” along lines of queer sexuality. In a lengthy introduction to the opening-night “ritual,” we learn that the world’s human population has, in Dudeck’s scheme, divided into male and female “tribes” destined for an apocalyptic military showdown. Glossing over questions of why prehistoric homosexual gender war might be a productive or even an interesting scenario to consider, this exhibition promises a voyeuristic look into the spiritual life of Dudeck’s clan of warrior-women (the *Amygdala*, actually one of two small regions in the brain tasked with processing emotion and memory, is also the “sacred text of the female religion,” a reading from which constitutes the performance’s second half).

If the work’s framing suggests a primary focus on Dudeck’s sizeable cast of female performers, that promise goes unfulfilled. Nude save for body paint, combat boots, and gasmasks, they slowly and stompily wheel a supine (and similarly naked) gentleman on the gallery’s movable scaffolding from the center of the exhibition space to the rear. He is presented to their “goddess,” a questionably typecast fertility figure who sits atop a pedestal and whose primary duties seem to be scowling at the crowd and manning the smoke machines. The other women raise knives and bits of antler above their heads, prostrate themselves, and then retreat, victim in tow, back to where they found him, assuming bored poses on the floor in front of a makeshift stage. The goddess, for her part, remains marooned and motionless on her plinth, and the audience mostly ignores her. At this point, the artist himself emerges to mount the stage, and one begins to suspect that the practitioners of the “female religion” were cast mainly as set pieces for Dudeck’s own turn in the limelight. Also naked, though equipped with three pairs

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of prosthetic breasts, he comfortably dominates the scene and the audience’s attention, literally towering above the immobile cast of seated women. In his bestial drag, Dudeck sings unintelligibly into his gasmask (this is the “reading,” allegedly given in a language of his own construction), fondles his fake breasts and actual genitals, undulates a bit, and then collapses predictably into a fetal position. Throughout this second act, the only other active player (and only participant permitted street clothing) is Dudeck’s collaborator, composer and sound artist Andy Rudolph, who pieces together an engrossing but ultimately conventional soundscape from live samples and feedback loops. The ritual over, the bar is reopened; the audience resumes its chatter, and the performers spend the rest of the night reprising their roles as statuary.

If women, *Amygdala*’s ostensible focus, play second fiddle to Dudeck’s posturing in the performance, they are less present still in the objects that make up the exhibition. The bulk of these are hasty-looking collage drawings, many featuring photos of Dudeck himself or else magazine cutouts of male models, most emblazoned with heavy-handed, nonsensical pronouncements on violence and religion and shot through with spelling errors (“WEAPONRY IS THE ARTIFICIAL PHALLUS WE CONSTRUCT [.] IT IS REGALIA OF A UTERIS [sic.] SHAMANISM,” is one representative passage.) The remaining imagery — guns, knives, bullseyes, and nipples — are such familiar shorthand for “edginess” as to recede

from thought completely. Also on view are a pair of plastic skulls, positioned as to invite comparison: one is perhaps a wolf, the other an elongated human cranium. Frightful though head-binding may seem, the conflation here of cultures that practice it with animals, much like Dudeck’s woman/bitch prostheses, demonstrates questionable judgment and contributes little.

Audiences will either find *Amygdala* culturally insensitive or they will not — Dudeck’s past work has cribbed explicitly from indigenous cultures, and this is mostly, mercifully not the case here — just as they will or will not suspect an underlying misogyny. What remains is the fact that, in times of upheaval, white people have retreated into erotic fantasies of non-industrialized cultures for longer than anyone can remember: 19th-century Post-Impressionists, World-War-I-era Dadaists, the hippies and neo-avant-gardists of the 1960s — all extensively mapped territory that Dudeck behaves as though he’s just discovered. He finds himself late to the trend’s most recent incarnation, growing since 9/11 throughout the West, which has, for better or worse, been championed by artists possessing far greater self-awareness and humor. Even exhausted tropes may be repackaged compellingly: *Amygdala*, leveraging all of its pretensions, its nudity and built-in controversies, manages to be at best uncomfortable viewing, at worst merely boring.

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