

## IN PILLS WE TRUST

Stephen j Shanabrook

21 January – 13 March 2010

An American artist based out of New York and Moscow, Stephen j Shanabrook presents new works for his first UK solo show at Orel Art, examining the disturbing space between painful and sweet, death and beauty. The primary theme is the exploration of addiction, the way its soft, seductive whisper turns into the heaviness of an everyday fight. In a poetic way, Shanabrook looks at the side effects of urgent social phenomena - addiction to prescription drugs, to religion and even to one's own heavy memories. Working with a discomfiting yet visually stunning combination of materials, Shanabrook forces the viewer into the dialog with their own unconsciousness.

Stephen j Shanabrook was born in 1965 in Cleveland, Ohio and studied throughout the United States, Italy and the Netherlands before relocating to Russia. His early experiences in life would become intrinsic to the creation of his future artworks. The son of an obstetrician and the town coroner, Shanabrook worked at a chocolate factory as a child, two parts of his past which would meld together to become recurring elements of his work.

On entering the exhibition space, the viewer is confronted with three framed panels of collages of weeping willows. From a distance Shanabrook's series, *The Danger is all Mine*, look beautiful, reminiscent of Asian screens printed with blossoming flowers. However upon closer inspection, the delicate leaves transform into a discomfiting arrangement of razor blades and surgical scalpels, and the brilliant orange and white petals into the by-products of melted prescription pill bottles. The viewer literally experiences visual pleasure turning into material danger. This new series is a continuation of Shanabrook's earlier work *L.O.V.E. (List Of Vicarious Edges)*, the artist's first piece using razor blades and scalpels, featured today in Damien Hirst's 'murderme' collection.

The opposite wall features *Lithium Flower*, a similar series of melted prescription bottle, plastic and razor blade flowers, yet these are created with Lithium pill bottles. Medically used as a mood stabilising drug for bipolar disorder, Lithium is also the title of a Nirvana song about a man who turned to religion after the death of his girlfriend, "as a last resort to keep himself alive. To keep him from suicide." As the drug is used to counteract both mania and depression, this perfectly demonstrates the polarity of Shanabrook's works, leaving the viewer floating between comfort and disquiet.

The concept of addiction is reiterated with Shanabrook's piece *Pharmaceutical Landscape*. Hundreds of prescription bottles are melted into chocolate Easter bunny moulds and arranged on glass shelves reminiscent of those in medicine cabinets. The seemingly innocent shape of an Easter bunny makes a powerful statement about the way drugs physically corrupt the mind and body, soothing at first yet eventually leading to addiction and destruction.

One of the most common side effects of prescription drugs is nausea. Shanabrook's *Side Effects Series* features pieces conveying the struggle of an addictive personality with the consequence of nausea as a reaction to contemporary society's rules. *Wild Horses Couldn't Drag Me Away* is made of contorted plastic toy horses, melted and twisted almost beyond recognition, a free-standing sculpture visually demonstrating a physical interpretation of pain and nausea.

The final works of the exhibition push Shanabrook's theme into more controversial matter. *If Jesus Had Been an Abortion How Happy Would We Be* is the title of a 14cm high human foetus, illegally aborted in the 1960's, cast in bronze then plated with 24karat gold and presented on a pedestal under a glass dome. Facing the golden foetus are two moulded Easter bunnies, cast from actual ground-up pills. *In Pills We Trust: Downer Bunny* and *In Pills We Trust: Upper Bunny* are made from "downers" (sedatives like Xanax, Valium, & opiates) and "uppers" (stimulants like Adderal & Ritalin). The pills were bought illegally online without a prescription, which raises the question about the easiness of feeding addiction. The pairing of these works address the parallel between addiction to drugs and religion. Like religion, prescription drugs can be a form of salvation. However when this salvation is abused, drugs and religion then become one and the same.

#### Notes to the editor

Stephen j Shanabrook's pieces have been shown worldwide in prestigious collections and exhibitions, from the Museum of Modern Art and the Swiss Institute in New York to the Moscow Biennale and Hirst's private 'murderme' collection.

#### **IN PILLS WE TRUST**

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