

“NAIROBI HIGH”  
Guy Benfield

10 May – 21 June, 2014  
Opening: 10 May, 4-7 PM

Press Release:

On one particular visit to the National Gallery of Victoria’s permanent collections I remember coming across a cube with two open sides, aluminium on the outside and a deep blue synthetic polymer resin on the inside; Untitled (1969-1971) by Donald Judd. In my mind minimalism, particularly in its use of plastic, was something of pure geometries and permanent statements. Here however the inner blue surface of this work looked all scratched up, like a bunch of kids (or dogs, or adventurous adults) had been crawling through it.

A few years after this work was made Madonna moved to New York. I won’t rehash her meteoric rise to fame or plot out key moments in her prolific career, but simply recount that when I was growing up if “that woman” was on TV I sadly wasn’t going to be watching. When I finally did get access to the Queen of Pop she soon became a musical landmark. For me her project was never expressed better than in the music video for Hung Up (2005), a song she imagined as a cross between music played at Danceteria (the New York City night club she frequented in her early days) and the disco ballads of ABBA. Popular response to Hung Up’s leotard-clad pelvic thrusts was far from positive, but to me the ineluctable tragedy of Madonna’s stubborn loyalty to the cult of youth had never been more bittersweet. The way her sexual aspiration reaches its limit is echoed in the narrative of the sampled ABBA song’s, “There’s not a soul out there, No one to hear my prayer, Gimme gimme gimme a man after midnight.”

Benfield’s work thrives in this zero hour of atrophied legacy, when bleary eyed, everything is finally available to us but nothing looks quite right. In Nairobi High’s hybrid of art-documentation, documentary, and advertising, palms shade and waves flow over Club Mixxx girls dressed for a night out and a wine label’s golden swans look seedy on golden sands. In the brown spotted banana turned vernacular lamp (also good on crackers), in the artist’s shaky hand pouring (spilling) a glass of Spanish chardonnay, and in the stock music and worn out fonts and effects, Benfield joins once-icons of substance and style on a walk of shame, bringing a lucid stagger to the way history is made and felt.

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