Oliver Payne

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I'm fasting; for the next six hours, in preparation for a scan to help discover what the latest problem with my lower intestine might be. I'm trying my best not to think about food and sat on my living room floor among a pile of white-sleeved DVDs, popping one after another into the PlayStation 3. The PlayStation was recently purchased, and has replaced the incumbent DVD player beneath the television, all because I spent an hour in a video game arcade in Los Angeles, and I'm now having some sort of pre-midlife crisis. A multi-region DVD player no less, which, although rarely used, I feel guilty and wasteful for relegating to the overstuffed hallway closet, and also hungry.

The discs I am watching are each labeled with the names of the artists that made them, their titles, durations and the dates they were produced. They are all clearly marked 'Viewing Copy' except one, an exhibition copy, which I feel certain was given to me by mistake, although I have failed to say anything to the people at Gavin Brown's Enterprise. These films offer a retrospective look at a decade of work from Oliver Payne and Nick Relph; two British artists whose unlikely arrival on the global art scene, shortly after the YBA smoke was clearing, was heralded at the time as some sort of second or third coming. Whilst sat on the steps of

his sun-warmed porch—only a few hours before the aforementioned trip to the video game arcade and a few weeks before my fasting—Oliver himself says:

> "I think it was probably just a slow news year maybe. There must have been a bit of a lull, and people wanted to know what the next big thing was. They seemed to like the idea that we were two angry skateboarding bad boys making art; which in reality was actually the complete opposite of what we were."

Which while self-deprecating is perhaps true in part. The second invasion of Iraq was still three years away when they released their first film *Driftwood*, but the millennium was fast approaching, and with it the dreaded Y2K, while Tracy Emin had just won the Turner Prize for her entirely unnecessarily controversial *My Bed*. But then again, perhaps it says more about the artist than it does the response to the pair's early video works.

Oliver is polite, softly spoken and alarmingly funny. He's the type of person you'd quite happily bring home to your mum—he'd probably ask about her garden or offer to help with the dishes—but he's also, simultaneously, the first person you'd want to invite to a party, or at least know was on his way. He'd probably bring the drugs, and he'd almost certainly bring something worth putting on the stereo.

The films he and Relph began making before 'graduating' from art school—Oliver was kicked off his course at Kingston University, while Nick quit either in protest or sympathy shortly thereafter—explored many of the decade's general fascinations with self, time and place, but did so in a way that was not only unique but that was also, crucially, authentic. These were stories spoken in a language that their subject matter and audience could understand; songs that resonated, sung by a voice that rose from the throat of a generation, and if the pair did not speak for it, they perhaps spoke to it.

The Essential Selection, which consists of three closely linked but independently themed films, is perhaps the definitive version of this tune. The aforementioned *Driftwood* is an exploration of the Southbank Centre, the City of London, and the way in which public and government perception differs from the reality of the use of urban space by skateboarders and other youth subcultures. Images of buildings, monuments, banks, ledges and transitions are played on screen, while a narration from "an anonymous graffiti writer-type," voiced by Ben Keyworth, plays over the top. Patrick Keiller's *London* was a major inspiration and both films examine the way the city is used, the way its inhabitants are shaped by it; both are immediate and striking, the former wearing its influences proudly on its sleeve:

> "We were two reasonably polite dudes, who liked Erik Satie and were well into Le Corbusier. We always had a very clear idea about the work we were setting out to make, but of course we'd invariably get lost along the way. Initially we were heavily influenced by the works of Patrick Keiller and Iain Sinclair, punk rock, pyschogeography and flâneurism."

But these influences went further, deeper and were the grounding force between the pair, the glue that held their creative work together.

> "I had that '90s London suburban skate youth that people are desperately attempting to mythologize currently. It was all payphones, shit cameras, mixtapes on Walkmans, maps on paper, pen pals, Sunday trading laws and no CCTV. You could never get weed, it was always hash, and you'd always be traveling by bus to the middle of nowhere to skate some rusty metal mini ramp in a field or some curbs in a car park behind Argos. There were loads of derelict buildings in London back then, and they were great places to explore, hide and 'experiment' in.
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> It was in one of the abandoned, smashed up office buildings where I first met Nick. He skated, I skated; we were there doing graffiti, he was in a crappy punk band, I was in a crappy punk band—we just had way too much in common.
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> When I was around 13 or 14 I so identified myself as a skateboarder, a graffiti writer. I thought both were incredibly pure and direct; so immediate.
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> My primary interests were skateboarding, video games; I liked smoking weed and I liked doing graffiti. Those things really stayed with me, but certainly in my twenties, when I was really showing a lot, they definitely took a bit of a backseat while I involved myself in art, with a capital A. But in my thirties I really came back to the idea that basically I was right all along: it doesn't really get any better than skateboarding, there isn't really anything cooler than a 360 flip in my eyes, and I think getting into a yard and painting a train and getting out of there, is still just fucking incredible. I didn't waste time by getting into other things, by any means, but it did help me get back to a place where I just love those things maybe more now than when I first got into them."

After the first film, they made another, and another. *House and Garage* was an exploration of the London suburbs where they both grew up, a scene and lifestyle which they were intimately familiar with and a natural progression from the inner city settings of *Driftwood*, while the final part of the trilogy, *Jungle*, was the pair outside their comfort zone, exploring another atypical side of British culture, the countryside. And although the trilogy ended there, the natural progression of the work continued, with each film feeding the next as the public's perception of the artists began to change:

> "I think by the end of what became *The Essential Selection* people maybe started to become quite tickled by the idea of this gentle anger that we were perceived as having, this polite refusal of the way things were."

The influences grew, and the artwork the pair produced expanded; delving into broader topics, invoking more conceptual elements. "Our later influences were Celine, Huysmans, Whistler, emoticons, Kenneth Williams, Joe Orton, Carnaby Street, William Morris and Jar Jar Binks, among loads of other stuff." And the work morphed from film into installation and sculpture: "I guess either we ran out of ideas for films, or we got loads more ideas for objects."

And so the pair worked constantly, at an unplanned rate of close to two films a year. Working day jobs and producing art in their 'free' time, booking time off work to travel to shows where their work was to be included in foreign galleries. *Sonic the Warhol, Swoon Soon, Ashi's Stash, Comma Pregnant Pause*. The thread that tied each together was the artists themselves, the defining moments of their youth and a shared outlook and upbringing—the things that stay with you, the affects of which you struggle the rest of your life to ignore.

Angelino Heights is famed for its Victorian-era housing; Bob's Market sits on the corner of an open intersection, while an island of palm trees across the way separates several more. A few hundred yards away is a blue house; a two-story building, divided down the middle into two homes; Oliver's on the left, a porch out front, a small office studio upstairs across from the bathroom, a cat—bandaged up and cone-collared—laid out on the landing floor, fighting off ants.

Almost straightaway a pot of coffee is made and a large spliff rolled, both consumed in tandem on the porch out front while we chat. The quiet life suits Oliver, and he's a welcoming, animated, quick-witted host. The house is a work in progress—the floors stripped and varnished, appliances slowly purchased:

> "The house didn't come with a stove, there was no washer and dryer. I managed to get this fridge the other day, so now I can finally refrigerate stuff, but it had been empty for seven years before we moved in, so we still have a lot to do. We still have too much furniture, and some of that is out in the yard, getting rained on—not that I mind the rain. Last night I sat out on the porch, where I spend a lot of my time, and it was so welcome. We get two weeks of rain in February, when nobody remembers how to drive, but that's it for the most part."

But how did a boy from the suburbs of West London end up in West Adams, on the edges of South Central, and after the landlord pulled the plug, here, in Angelino Heights?

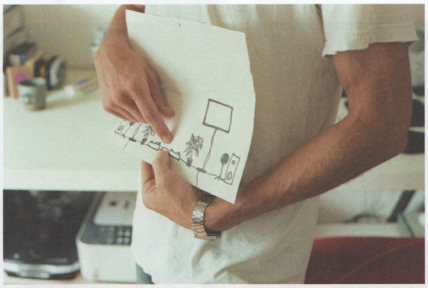
"Matthew Higgs, who was a really important early champion of our work, had introduced us to Gavin Brown, who gave us our first show in New York. Gavin's from Croydon, studied art in Newcastle and moved to New York in, I think, the '80s. Eventually a situation presented itself where we could either stay in London and carry on as we were, dedicating our evenings and weekends to making artwork, and kind of struggling quite hard to get by. Or we could move to New York and be closer to our gallery and closer to an art world we were on the edges of participating in, and it would sort of somehow allow us the opportunity to make art as a full-time thing. Staying in London didn't really seem like it would afford us that opportunity. We lived in New York for three years, before moving out here to LA. Nick moved first, and so we worked bicoastal for about a year. I was coming out to visit him pretty frequently, but still, it slowed down the working process tremendously and it just seemed the only way it could really work was if I moved out here too."

Upstairs in the small office studio: a desk, a computer, some shelves and a chair. Oliver's most recent works—a series of collages based on the bullet hell video games that have become his latest obsession—hang in various states of completion on the wall, or else are stashed away in large portfolio cases.

"The games are pretty hardcore. There are very few people playing them, and very few people making them. I got super into this one company called Cave, and started making these screen-printed, punk rock, Crass-inspired back patches. That developed into a series of collage pieces where I took pictures of Greek sculptures and applied bullet hell patterns to them.

On my last trip to Japan I had the opportunity to meet an absolute hero of mine, Keiichi Tanaami, who shows at Nanzuka, the same gallery that represents me in Tokyo. This guy is the ultimate G; he's the Japanese psychedelic warlord and he pretty much *invented* that shit. He's in his late seventies now and I got to go to his studio and take a pile of about 40 original drawings—complete with Tip-Ex marks and corrections—to use as the basis of these new collages I'm making. It's been a very slow process and part of the reason why is because I respect the original pieces so much, and I really don't want to ruin them with my stupid stickers! He doesn't care of course; he was like: 'Rip them up, destroy them; do whatever you want,' but I try to think really hard about exactly what I'm going to do, because once each sticker is placed that's it. I really have to commit to what I'm doing. It's really physical, really laborious; each sticker goes down with a razor blade, and that's not how I usually work. I'm not an arts and crafts sort of dude, but that's the only way to do it. It's also dependent on my understanding of bullet hell games; you can't really fake it too much, you have to really know about bullet pattern, the way the game works, and how to translate that onto the page.

So right now everyone is mad at me—Japan is mad at me, Gavin Brown is mad at me— every day they're asking: 'Where are the collages? Send us the fucking collages' and every minute of every day when I'm not making collages, which is most minutes in most days, I'm thinking: 'I should be working on the collages!' I mean imagine saying to everybody: 'I can't finish the bullet hell pieces until I play some more bullet hell games,' but that's the truth of the matter. They won't look good unless I play six hours every day!"



In talking to Oliver about his work as a solo artist one thing becomes clear: while the change from working as part of a team, to working by himself hasn't necessarily been easy, it's not without its reward. Oliver is visibly excited about the work he is making, eager to discover the links between one thing and the next, without ever really stopping to consider them—no plan of attack, no battle guide; he appears to be constantly jumping from one influence and one discipline to another.

"Things change, and it's just getting used to a different way of working more than anything. I'd always been very fond of the way Nick and I had worked together, because it was very much its own thing. We'd both always known that there was someone else who would get the joke. We just knew that there was at least one other person that completely got it, and with that you're instilled with a lot more confidence. It's a different procedure now, a different experience. I've been working on a much broader scale, from paintings and two-dimensional art, to the new film work—the *Shadow of the Colossus* and John Cage piece, which I recently showed here in LA for the first time. It had been shown once before, at my first exhibition as a solo artist at Herald St in London a couple of years ago. It was made in the gallery there, and then shown as a video projection, pretty much exactly to scale, on the same wall where we'd arranged and shot everything."

Untitled (*Shadow of the Colossus / In a Landscape*) is both an installation and a film piece. In the centre of the projection is a mixer, the cross fader set dead centre, and from there the work mirrors outwardly: two house plants, two speakers, two PlayStations, two television screens showing the attempts of two unseen players to defeat the first of sixteen colossi from the Japanese video game *Shadow of the Colossus.* They start at the same point, and arrive, at times, in the exact same place at the exact same moment, but in between take variations of the same path. There are two oscillating fans, two sticks of incense burning, and two turntables—each playing the same version of John Cage's instrumental piano piece 'In a Landscape,' the film's soundtrack.

"It's very much about synchronicity, and the way that things that are seemingly identical in every way—whether they're organic, mechanical or human—actually each have their own subtle differences. Ideally you just want to film that once, in one take, to show an absolute record of the process at work. It's pretty plainly obvious that a lot of my recent work has very much concerned itself with video games as a medium, as a form of expression, but this is one of the first pieces where I've been able to really show video games in a more meditative way. While this piece isn't really about that, using a video game was the perfect tool to show this idea of synchronicity; the idea that you can start two people in the same place in a video game with player agency and see how they go different ways, approach things differently. That's the element you expect to go out of sync, because the games are being played by two independently-minded people, but what explains how the incense burns at different rates, and how two identical fans plugged into the same source, slowly begin to oscillate at slightly different times?"

And this synchronicity is found in life, almost always in life. Oliver digs out a drawing—pen on paper, childlike in its simplicity. He explains, unintentionally, how the home we're stood in relates to the artwork in question, relates to the idea of a world in and out of sync, and to the absence of a traditional art practice:

> "A few years ago, 356 S. Mission Road opened here in LA, and they very kindly offered me a studio space one summer. The idea of going to a specific place to make objects or art was completely foreign to me. I've never had a studio and I work in a really weird way, through just absorbing loads and loads of shit for ages, letting it sit for a while, and slowly seeing what comes out of that. So I set up my video game consoles, a TV and a bunch of shit, and I'd go there, smoke weed, do whippets, listen to music and think about shit. Nonstop thinking about shit. And I'd play *Shadow of the Colossus* and think about that, and I'd turn the sound down and play John Cage, and I'd think about that. And I'd think about the beauty between those two things, realizing that actually I'd got it all wrong; it's not two things, that doesn't explain it, it's one. It's a Rorschach, a butterfly painting; it's mirrored.
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> Eventually they had enough of me coming in there, and basically doing what was perceived as nothing, and boxed up all my stuff. And the only thing I made that entire time I was there, the first time I'd ever had a studio, was this one crappy little drawing, which I had stuck on the wall. That drawing is essentially exactly what the *Shadow of the Colossus* piece became, and in one of those beautiful turn of events that life sometimes provides, after I showed it at Herald St the piece returned to its spiritual home, and was shown in the basement at Mission Road."

Oliver sits in the front of the silver Toyota we rented at the airport, and points the way; offers directions, recalibrates having taken us down the wrong street, because he doesn't drive and is used to walking or taking the bus everywhere.

We're headed to Family Arcade, one of the few remaining video game arcades in Los Angeles and a favourite haunt of Oliver's. But first he corrects himself again, reminds us that he wanted to show us somewhere else instead, and we make a stop at some abandoned tennis courts, where Oliver scampers up the platform and under the wire fence that has been pulled back to allow for a relatively straightforward entry. This is one of his favourite places to come and unwind; a perfect imperfect skate spot, governed by the kids that frequent it. As we arrive a young couple shadow one another around the perimeter, one holds the black bag the other picks up the garbage that's been left behind. The idea being: *if we keep it clean, maybe they'll let us stay.* Oliver gives a quick tour, points out his favourite non-obstacles: the world's tiniest pole jam, a traffic cone turned on its side; he talks enthusiastically about the kids that skate here. Again, the authenticity shines through his eager praise: he understands these kids from half a world away because he was once these kids, or at least a version of them. He'd probably argue that to a degree he still is. They want to know what we're shooting for, they want to pose for the camera; one of them tells us how he's in school, taking music courses, looking for an internship at a record label. He wants to be a producer, he yells behind us as we leave; tells us to look out for him.

At the arcade we pool together our quarters and dollars, Oliver changes them for tokens and makes his rounds; we watch as he plays, we watch as he tunes out the world around him and absorbs himself in the screen in front. There's a moment when the line between what you do to kill time, to pass the day; to entertain yourself, blurs with who you are, and what you want to be; what you've come to say.

The last roll of film comes to an end, a whirling of mechanisms, and a friendly contest begins. At the end of the battle Oliver is defeated, and you can sense the good-natured disappointment. For the past few hours we've been in the presence of a true hardcore gaming fan, a well-respected, widely creative artist who in recent years has come to find video games the closest medium to reflecting his thoughts and feelings, and the photographer that's come to capture that has beaten him, quite thoroughly, at a Japanese import version of *Tatsunoko vs. Capcom: Ultimate All-Stars.*

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A few days later we're back at the arcade to shoot the last of the photographs we need, hoping it'll be quieter, provide us with a clearer, brighter view. The game rivalry is brought up again, only this time Oliver is at home working, preparing for a trip to Sweden:

> "I'm obsessed with this record *Chill Out* by The KLF, and have been doing a series of works based around it. One is basically a performance piece, which I first undertook at the Venice Biennale, and which was an unmitigated disaster. But I'm trying it again, at a music festival. It's a really simple proposal: I play *Chill Out* by The KLF in its entirety, and everyone turns up, and just chills the fuck out. That's it. But it's posed kind of like the Detroit Underground Resistance—hardcore militant chilling. You arrive on time, no late admittance, you get thrown out for talking, no Instagramming or Tweeting, no photos; you're here to chill out. It's basically protest ambience."

The job at the arcade is complete, so I slot my one token into the machine and take the photographer to the cleaners. It's my first time playing a video game in something like 15 years, and when I return home to New York I buy a secondhand PlayStation 3, that I use to watch DVDs housed in white sleeves, killing time in preparation and avoiding the leftovers in the fridge.