

GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER

PRESS RELEASE

Lucas Blalock
Potemkin Village

January 14 – February 18, 2023
Opening on Friday, January 13, 6 – 8 pm
Waldmannstrasse, Waldmannstr. 6, CH-8001 Zurich

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is pleased to present *Potemkin Village*, the gallery's third exhibition with the New York-based American artist Lucas Blalock.

In 1787, when Empress Catherine II of Russia made a visit to the recently annexed Crimean peninsula, Grigory Potemkin, the region's governor and Catherine's former lover, had to scramble to make the territory, whose acquisition had cost the empire much in blood and treasure, look impressive. This was no mean feat, as the conquest had left the region in shambles. So, as legend has it—and it does seem that it is mostly legend—the enterprising Potemkin came up with an ingenious plan. As Catherine and her entourage wended their way across the region, he arranged for ersatz villages to be hastily constructed along the banks of the Dnipro River, which he stocked with seemingly prosperous villagers, who had been imported from the surrounding areas. After Catherine had surveyed her spoils and moved onwards, Potemkin supposedly ordered these villages to be deconstructed and moved further down the river, where she would hopefully be deceived by them yet again.

Potemkin's villages, whether apocryphal or not, have lived on in our historical imagination as examples of the desperate lengths that we—as a society, as individuals—will go to in order to save face. No one wants to be found wanting. What harm is a little smoke and mirrors now and then?

Lucas Blalock is not exactly pulling off this kind of con, but he is hiding something nonetheless. His new works, which he has collectively dubbed *Facades*, are actually not wholly new. To make them, Blalock has taken old, framed works that happened to be in his studio—pieces returned from museum shows, cut during the planning of previous exhibitions, or whose time simply came and went—that he has used as a support for new pictures, which he has printed on metal and affixed to the old works's glazing. But these new works have not completely effaced the old. Instead, the unwanted pictures are allowed to peek out from around the edges, or occasionally be glimpsed through cut-out holes. It's as if they somehow insisted on not being fully papered over, enacting a kind of return of the artistic repressed.

You could see this as an act of vandalism, like Baldessari cremating his early paintings, or Rauschenberg erasing his De Kooning. But Blalock's effacement is not exactly destructive—if you so desired, you could remove the glass with the new print and replace it, *rescuing* the old work. It is, rather, a kind of reanimation, an enlivening of a dead work with the addition of a fresh, vital parasite, which benefits from its visual interplay with its host. The result is a new, hybrid thing, an artistic Frankenstein's monster.

Blalock has long been devoted to the poet and play-write Bertolt Brecht's principle of artistic *estrangement*. Put somewhat simply, this involved Brecht creating ruptures in dramatic verisimilitude, though, for instance, actors directly addressing the audience or speaking stage directions out loud, allowing the audience a peek behind the normally seamless theatrical facade. Blalock's previous pictures have taken a similar approach to photography, by engaging with the glossy visual language of the medium's commercial side, and throwing a monkey wrench in its gears. In his hands, what could be a seductive product photograph becomes surreal, psychosexual, viscerally unappealing, and the nearly invisible digital tools used to smooth the rough edges of our reality and conjure a consumerist dream world are foregrounded in strange and deliberately hamfisted ways.

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With these new pictures, Blalock asks the viewer not just to contemplate the mechanisms of the photographic medium—though the way in which the layering of images mimics the virtual *layers* created in the Photoshop software is a neat trick—but also the stage managed, facade-like nature of the artistic *career* itself. Here, Blalock formally literalizes the more abstract truth that trailing behind every successful artistic work there is a string of aborted experiments, productive misfires, and flat out failures. An exhibition is also always partially an act of concealment. All artists are Potemkins, and their audiences all are Empresses, drifting blissfully downriver, entertained.

Chris Wiley

Lucas Blalock (born 1978 in Asheville, NC, US) participated in *New Visions*, the inaugural edition of The Henie Onstad Triennial for Photography and New Media, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Høvikodden, NO (2020); and *Whitney Biennial 2019*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US (2019). Current and recent solo exhibitions include Abroms-Engel Institute for the Visual Arts, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, AL, US (2021); Galerie Eva Presenhuber, New York, NY, US (2021); Museum Kurhaus Kleve, Kleve, DE (2019 – 2020); and Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA, US (2019). Blalock's work is included in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, US; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, US; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, US; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, US; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, US; and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, US.

For further information, please contact Andreas Grimm (a.grimm@presenhuber.com) or Laila Schnurrenberger (l.schnurrenberger@presenhuber.com).

For press images and information, please contact David Ulrichs PR (press@presenhuber.com, +49 176 5033 0135).