THE SUBLIME AND THE RIDICULOUS

PERFORMANCE ARTIST MARCUS COATES WALKS THE LINE

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IN THE RADIO STATION A SHAMAN WAITS patiently for the country tune to play out and for the local Norwegian DJ to begin the interview. Dressed for business in a sharp suit and full stage peel, wielding a stuffed hare in one hand, with the head of another furry varmint poking cheekily from the folds of his jacket, the shaman explains his role as someone who works with his community, seeking solutions to very difficult problems. This bizarre scene marks the opening of British artist Marcus Coates's filmed performance Radio Shaman (2006). It turns out that in his shamanic guise he has been visiting the town of Stavanger, Norway, ostensibly to address the residents' concerns about the growing problem of prostitution. At the council offices in a church and in a red-light district we see him in an absorbing dialogue with his animal spirits, beating his chest and speaking in what could be the language of his favoured advisers - the coat, moorhen and baby seal. And what's his solution to Stavanger's problem? A course of considered empathy; it's very dangerous to try and help or rescue a situation you don't understand.

This is Coates's latest and best-known manifestation as the artist-shaman: the artist theatrically cast as visionary outsider and social healer, developed most famously during the 1960s by Joseph Beuys. Beuys pursued the idea that his art could be beneficial to everyday life, magically transforming the decimated culture of postwar Germany with mythical, spiritual art symbols with the shaman-artist himself as a messianic leader. Nonetheless the position of the crusading artist is one that seems increasingly unsustainable in the present day, characterised as it is by a mass culture cut off from the concerns of both 'high' art and political engagement, and Coates clearly has a sharpened sense of the ridiculous.

Traditionally the shaman acts as a conduit between two worlds, the everyday and the supernatural, particularly engaging with animal spirits, often assisted in attaining a trance-like state by drums. And while often thought of as a healer, the shaman isn't necessarily so. Contrasting with Beuys's self-mythologising shaman, Coates opts for the most prosaic settings, earnestly engaging with the everyday, even mundane problems of a community. The artist came to attention in last year's British Art Show 6, where his film Journey to the Lower World (2004) documented a similar ritual performed for the elderly inhabitants of a condemned Liverpool council block, a setting that offered a riposte to the pomposity of hermetic artworld elitism. The culture clash - between the exotic, rarified artist-shaman and the tea-and-sympathy world of the pensioners - revealed that Coates's shaman (and by implication the artist) is hopelessly neutered as an agent of social change.

Shamanism has enjoyed a more recent renaissance, of course, thanks to a rampant postmodern tendency to willful cultural (mis)appropriation, via 1990s New Age and, in the UK, the rave generation. It coincided with Coates's performances point up the flawed logic in Western society's magpie attitude to outmoded cultural practices, in this case bending another society's beliefs to fit a consumer capitalist cult of the self, be that the shaman of New Age 'inner healing' or the leader of the trance in Ecstasy-fuelled dance-music hedonism, neither of which belies any real engagement with the shaman's original meaning. Kamikuchi Tokyo (2006) is one of his most extreme outings, in which, accompanied by a drum- and bass soundtrack, dressed as a hybrid of Marilyn Monroe and a shaman (a typical set of Coates's displacements triggered by notional associations: a shaman, drums, dance music, dance divas, the diva - Marilyn) in a Tokyo public square, he consulted with the spirits on the problem of illegal bicycle parking.

Coates addresses ideas taken out of context, the better to consider their meaning. As his film-and-works of variously are on show at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London throughout July - demonstrate, he has marked out his artistic territory over the past eight years with similarly absurdist projects. An early work, the bawdily eccentric Out of Season (2000), deposits a Chelsea football supporter in the middle of a lush forest, where, all alone, he belts out football chants, with his legs bent, finger jabbing the air. "We don't give a fuck, wherever we may be, cos we are the famous CFCT, etc. In answer to the macho rallying cry, there are only the sounds of the forest, rustling leaves and birdsong. Man in nature seems hopelessly out of place: this fan's actions are silly and ultimately meaningless.

Coates has been testing what habitat the artist can authentically lay claim to as well. As the adage goes, art can't change the world, but it can make you think about it differently, and while the artist's shamanic performances are ineffective in solving even the most ordinary real-world dilemma, as a cultural provocateur, Coates is far from chained to the railings. As eccentric as his mess of references in Kamikuchi Tokyo might be, rendered glaringly wrong when tackled to the body of a bespectacled artist, one might reflect that this is but a distillation of the way modern society commits ill-considered acts of cultural tourism-cum-piracy, and a fitting warning of the resulting schizophrenia.

Work by Marcus Coates is on view at Whitechapel Art Gallery from 27 June to 5 August, www.whitechapel.org