



Civic disturbance

Improbable scenarios, misinformation? **Mic Moroney** charts a course through the wry aesthetic of Stephen Brandes who features in 'Phoenix Rising' at the Hugh Lane Gallery

There is a gnomic wit at work in Wolverhampton-born Stephen Brandes' art: an ever-unfurling graphic and satirical universe ranging across collage, big drawings, small paintings, oft-hilarious posters advertising improbable phenomena; and misinformation billboards, such as his permanent 'heritage' notice before the Hellfire Club in Askeaton. The best of them are comic and cod-philosophical masterpieces, crawling with lugubrious humour. Though immeasurably bleak, they radiate a cheerful and infectious sense of the utter absurdity of human existence.

Brandes is perhaps best known for his big, fabulist topographical drawings which, like eccentric maps, are drawn

with unbridled graphomania and all the allure of storybook illustrations – despite the tawdry materials of patterned floor vinyl and permanent markers. Inspired by medieval cartography or Arnold Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*, they feature cypress-fringed islands or phantasmagorical, spiky mountain ranges, their sylvan slopes peppered with Brandes' strange dog's breakfast of cartoon-symbolist junk: planks, telegraph poles, mattresses, ladders springing up out of holes, enigmatic geometric encrustations, dumped tellies, slagheaps, industrial smokestacks; grids of nowhere suburbia, outflow pipes spewing gunge – an exhausted world of weird mazes and gardens of earthly undelights. One never sees a human

1 STEPHEN BRANDES
b.1966 APRIL 22ND 2013
permanent marker & acrylic on vinyl
192x373cm
Photo Roland Paschhoff

2 SELF-PORTRAIT (AS A FICTIONAL CHARACTER)
2012 acrylic on linen
40.4x34.5cm
Photo courtesy of the National Self-Portrait Collection of Ireland



3 CIVIC COMMITTEE 2014 digital collage

4 MARCH 25TH: FROM THE LAST TRAVELOGUE OF ALBERT SITZFLEISCH 2014 digital collage 383x245cm

figure, merely their thought-bubbles gasping up from chimneys. With Zeppelins or aeroplanes nose-bombed into nearby doughy hillsides, the very world seems soggy, as polluted hamlets capsize into a Slough of Despond.

It's actually a recognizable portrait of his native 'Black Country' of the English West Midlands; and increasingly,

BRANDES' EASTERN EUROPEAN TRAVELS STEM PARTLY FROM A HAZY, PART-SUPPRESSED FAMILY TALE OF HIS GRANDMOTHER'S EXODUS FROM ROMANIA'S UKRAINIAN BORDER AS A TEENAGER

our own conurbations. Recently, some drawings have become more hard-edged, arising from his journeys into central Europe. His huge *April 22nd Richtung Chemnitz*, which graced the RHA lobby last year, reveals a puzzling concern with imperial and totalitarian architecture (Fig 1). It depicts an architect's model plaza, with icons of baroque modernism parked alongside scale replicas of Brutalist and Soviet-era

high-rises: an elaborate framing device for what seems like the last resting place of obsolete statuary. A central equestrian figure (borrowed from the Boer War monument to the Royal Scots Greys in Edinburgh) is overloomed by the mountaintop Kyffhäuser Monument to Frederick I, or Barbarossa, the 12th-century Holy Roman Emperor; whilst

in teutonic-deco Munchhausen font, the piece proclaims *Barbarossa schläft nicht* (Barbarossa never sleeps), signalling some uneasily slumbering Germano-Russian past.

Brandes' eastern European travels stem partly from a hazy, part-suppressed family tale of his grandmother's exodus from Romania's Ukrainian border as a teenager (with a ceramic prosthetic leg), after resisting a possession order on

her father's timber yard during a 1913 pogrom. The family fled, she via Vienna, Prague and Berlin to Hamburg. On the boat to Hull, she tended her seasick future husband, with whom she later had four children. One day, Grandad went out for cigarettes, and never returned. Early rumours suggested he left for Dublin.

In 1999, Brandes retraced his grandmother's journey, up through north-eastern Romania, near the Moldovan border, although he never reached her home village. From Cluj, the ancient capital of Transylvannia (bristling with restive local ethnicities: German-speaking Saxons and Hungarian separatists), he travelled to Budapest just as NATO was bombing Belgrade, and Serbian refugees streamed into the city. He has since made other solitary journeys; feeding such nervous, fragmentary reportage into an outright fiction, *The Last Travelogue of Albert Sitzfleisch*. The surname means, literally, 'sitting meat' or buttocks (the pejorative Nietzsche applied to Marcel Proust), but it also connotes a sense of stodgy Prussian perseverance. Brandes' Sitzfleisch is a stateless *flâneur* ghosting European resorts or obscure shrines like the site of Walter Benjamin's suicide in 1940. Such vignettes appear as splintered flashbacks in Sitzfleisch's mind as he mysteriously plunges from the top of the Deutsche Bank in Hannover towards certain death. *The Travelogue*, in 'slide show' form, now graces eight digital monitors in the Illuminations Gallery in NUI Maynooth.

The images emerge from Brandes' recent digital collages, twelve of which he scaled up to billboard size last May for the grounds of Norwich Cathedral: postcards from Sitzfleisch's meanderings from Fitzrovia, through the Sorbian region of east-central Germany to the Ligurian Riviera, where a flotilla of destroyers nestle in the bay. From the 'diary entries' which adorn the images, Sitzfleisch emerges as a bewildered, irascible, faintly unsavoury gent on a nightmarish 'Grand Tour': holed up in survivalist mode in the Hampshire hills, while 'neighbours tramp the gardens in night-vision goggles'; attending conferences in palaces like 'Tyrol's most exclusive health spa', whose 'corridors boast looted artworks'; shuttled in coaches between Zagreb and Krakow; surfacing blearily in hotel breakfast rooms ('The room is full, backs bent over soup plates.');

and enduring hideous entertainment ('Tommy Cooper tribute acts' or 'air-guitar karaoke'). He is plagued by anxieties about 'unrest in the Alps and riots in Bruges', dodgy internet coverage and whether he remembered his mosquito repellent (Figs 4&5).

For all Brandes' deflating humour, the imagery is sinister, melodramatic: buildings in gothic conflagration (*May 9th: Hotel Shushashin*); or in *January 2nd Nowa Zestroyenie*, his Royal Scots cavalryman reappearing, like a favourite toy soldier, atop his rock pedestal, apocalyptically dwarfing a damp-looking coastal caravan camp.

The aesthetic is mostly retro-futuristic. shades of early 20th-century German/Russian Dada which hint darkly at European history, yet distractingly, Brandes' trademark dates





IN A BOMBASTIC SATIRE OF EMPIRE, BRANDES’ HUGE GLOWERING WALL-PIECE REPRISSES HIS HORSE-MOUNTED TROOPER, HIS BIRDLIMED BUSBY ABSURDLY MAGNIFIED LIKE A BUNCH OF BANANAS

and red lettering – which recall Soviet anniversaries – are purely arbitrary: ‘I’m conscious of the weight of history behind these elements, but I almost ignore it, using them as props to create stage settings. It’s interesting to see them work off each other, creating something superheavy which is essentially fiction. It’s about the tension of forcing different elements together. Familiar places develop an *Unheimlichkeit* [unhomeliness, uncanniness]. I’m interested in how totalitarian architecture, Internationalism, and the concrete manifestations of such failed monolithic ideologies go through an almost anthropomorphic process of suffering and impotence, either due to neglect or’ – he chuckles in his gravelly way – ‘the insensitive development of the world around them.’

For all Brandes’ Ozymandian take on such edifices, the commanding scale of his recent pieces carry their own almost dictatorial power. He similarly deflects resonances behind his *Self-Portrait (as a fictional character)* at the National Self-Portrait Collection (Fig 2). Troubled by an emerging likeness to his father, he took inspiration from a NKVD mugshot of the great Jewish Russian writer Isaac Babel, shortly before the latter’s execution in 1940. Brandes appears in profile, topped by his surname in Cyrillic and his PPS number, in an unsettling reminder of repressive state control.

Brandes also appears in the Hugh Lane Gallery’s current curatorial flourish, ‘Phoenix Rising’, marking the centenary of Dublin’s utopic 1914 Civic Exhibition, inspired largely by Patrick Geddes, the Edinburghian biologist, geographer, sociologist and pioneering town-planner; and featuring an exhibit by Hugh Lane called Futurism in Dublin. Chaired by Lady Aberdeen, and run by the Civics Institute under the banner of the phoenix, this sprawling, long-forgotten event was an appeal to civic virtue and urban regeneration, and hosted international planners such as English garden cities proponent Raymond Unwin. The resurrected phoenix – variously symbol of Christ and, since Fenian times, of Irish (and Catalan, Greek, even German) nationalism – provided a rallying symbol for numerous enlightened causes, and the show was attended by over 110,000 in a Dublin awakening to labour rights, women’s suffrage and the scandal of abject poverty – just as Europe descended into total war.

In a bombastic satire of empire, Brandes’ huge glowering wall-piece reprises his horse-mounted trooper (Fig 8), his birdlimed Busby absurdly magnified like a bunch of bananas. He poses atop a mausoleum; its hot neon sign announcing ‘Through Work and Vigor/Virtue, I will Rise Again from the Fire’, before a hybrid city skyline of Dublin, Edinburgh, Norwich and Reading. Brandes also created the poster, which the gallery have mounted around Dublin (Fig 3), transplanting Reading’s monstrous Maiwand Lion Monument (com-



At IMMA, one woman shrieked when she bit through chili-chocolate candy into a butter-fried chicken-heart; whilst other horrors have included ox-hearts teeming with squid tentacles and liquorice ‘macaque heads’ in sambuca jelly.

Their ‘sushi-style’ buffet, premiered at Kinsale last September, featured a cutaway sewage pipe along which floated food (Upturned Icecream on Sand, Rogue Baked Bean in String Vest); and this will be reprised at Dublin’s Broadstone Studios on 17 January 2015. Meanwhile, Brandes went north to collaborate with Aberdeenshire artisan oat miller, Richie Duncan on *The Montgarrie Mobile Porridge Bar*; its working waterwheel turning a cement mixer in which Brandes conjured wildly novel oatmeal dishes – to

the peeling icecream-van jangle-tones of *The Internationale*.

Born in 1966, Brandes studied at Bath before moving in 1993 to Dublin where he worked at IMMA and the RHA, took an MA at the National College of Art and Design, and his work now rests in many key Irish public collections. He, among others, represented Ireland at the 2005 Venice Biennale, and he now lives in Cork with his wife and three kids. Hopefully they eat well, and enjoy the madness of his method. ■

Stephen Brandes ‘The Last Travelogue of Albert Sitzfleisch: a slideshow’ the Illuminations Gallery, NUI Maynooth until 24 November; ‘Phoenix Rising’ Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane Gallery until 1 February 2015.

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