

James William Murray & Alexander Glass: ideal-i at NIAGARA FALLS PROJECTS

Unit 9, 15 Lincoln Cottages, Brighton, BN2 9UJ

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Art galleries are constituted in various formats and serve different purposes for cultural and economic reasons. The, sometimes fleeting, artists' run space can both compliment and challenge the major institutions and the commercial gallery system as a showcase for contemporary art. As reputations develop and a degree of permanence and visitor expectation is established, a day-trip to the London galleries could well take in visits to 'alternative venues' such as Bermondsey and Cell Project Spaces in addition to the established galleries. In Brighton we still miss the Creative Arts Centre (originally called Grey Area - founded by Daniel Pryde-Jarman and Alice White) just off the Queens Road. Typically, as non-profit organisations, such venues might be few and far between. But given the significant number of artists living in Brighton and Hove it's a little surprising that more of these initiatives have not yet developed in the city.

But just 15 minutes walk from *Phoenix* - fast becoming Brighton's premier contemporary space alongside *Fabrica* - **Niagara Falls Projects** presents **James William Murray & Alexander Glass: ideal-i**. The fifth exhibition in less than two years, regular visitors will have witnessed an evolving space that now has a new roof (hence the name of the venue). Founded by James W. Murray and Martin Seeds, their policy is to present exhibitions focussed on solo and two person projects with early career artists.

The term 'project' is one that many an (ex) art student will rejoice or recoil over. Arguably, fine art projects are more open-ended than their design lead counterparts as the end product might still suspend judgements over notions of full realisation. Another way to understand any implied contradiction is that a body of work might be finished, but its success is constituted in opening up yet more potential for further development. In the studio, project or headspace (all are interchangeable), questions are asked by a combination of thoughts, materials and processes. Solutions are starting points for further investigation; end results are constituted in form and material and, later, in the response (often private) of the viewer and artist alike.

For example: Murray's '**Failed Circle**' (2015-18) sculpture of steel and gold leaf was once contrived from referencing the circle of Leonardo's, '*L'Uomo Vitruviano*' (Vitruvian Man) drawing. Now the piece is sub-divided into four parts (and displayed here in two pairs). The two sculptures are placed outside of the building with other works from the show. 'Failed Circle' still has the potential to reassemble or to fragment yet further - and whether this happens or not, the viewer can ponder over the possibilities. Furthermore, notions of failure could be applied to the subject of the sculpture, or more pertinently, to challenging an ideal notion of the geometric proportions of the human figure (notably, in this instance, the male). This questioning of the *ideal* permeates, and conceptualises, the whole show. As the exhibition statement explains:

“Departing from Lacan’s psychoanalytical concept of the ‘mirror stage’, ideal-i brings together two artist’s unique approaches to questions of desire, fragmentation, and projections of the idealised self-image.”

This notion of the ‘self’ as questionable and misjudged has been inherent in what we call ‘fine art’ for so long that we might take it for granted. The self-portrait (Rembrandt, van Gogh and Picasso have achieved iconic status in this regard) is a perennial subject that every viewer can relate to at any and every stage of life. Gazing at oneself in the mirror (or via the ‘selfie’) is a universal experience that has its origins and repercussions for a sense of ‘self’ and personal identity. So, with the French philosopher Lacan in mind, and his concept of the *Mirror Stage*, the objectification of the self as an identity constructed from others (e.g. parents and, ultimately, society), Alexander Glass’s, ‘**Reaching**’ (2018), a hand print in a blue pool of epoxy resin, certainly shifted the focus from the material to the psychological. This work, minimal in nature, is a trigger. The original *mirror* is the pool of water that reflects an individual’s image - especially the face if the gaze approaches the surface of the water and the rest of the body and other people and surrounding objects leave the frame of reference. One might place a hand in the water to touch the image and realise it lacks solidity and is immediately fragmented and apparently dispersed.

The exhibition catalogue also presents a quotation from Ovid’s, *Metamorphoses*:
“He fell in love with a bodiless dream, a shadow mistaken for substance. He gazed at himself in amazement, limbs and expression as still as a statue of Parian marble.”

As if to contradict this quotation, Murray’s ‘**Untitled (Agamemnon & Argynnus) i**’ and ‘**Untitled (Bobby & River)**’ (both 2018), framed and wall mounted graphite surfaces (applied to Carrara marble and beech wood, respectively) imply surfaces that should/might reflect. But all essentially absorb light, only reflecting a monochrome sheen of light that summarises rather than particularises surrounding surfaces or the gaze of a person/observer. The viewer is left to reflect upon a simple, minimalist geometry that, I suspect, represents love and friendship.

Murray’s, ‘**Untitled**’ (2018), presenting a paraffin wax handprint on canvas that has the proportions of a head and the vertical format rectangle of a bathroom mirror, also suggests the pre-historic, ritualistic, handprint on a cave wall (which, interestingly may have been made by women). Again, the image is bodiless although recording the surface of things. The weave of the cotton duck has its own origins in craft and the handmade (albeit via the technology of the loom).

All of the works maintain a presence that cannot be ignored. For example, although diminutive in size, Glass’s ‘**Death of Achilles**’ (2018), an acrylic and wood construction smaller than A4, seems to offer a private conversation to the viewer. The size of the piece makes it suitable to be hand held and the small wall-mounted plinth on which it is presented seems to offer up the image as if it were on a mantelpiece in the home. Carefully etched images of a towel hanging from an implied wall and a fallen (naked) Achilles combine and invite interpretation. The figure of Achilles is drawn (etched) carefully, although the immediate and unchangeable nature of the medium and the process forbids change and amendment that drawing on paper would more freely allow to create a more sensuous image of the body.

A collaborative piece from Glass and Murray, **'Broken Bits of Boy'** (2018), presents three fragments of paraffin wax torso laid out on a pillow with copper leaf. The sculpture is laid on the floor, rather than a conventional plinth, which might reference the bedroom floor and not the art gallery environment. Along with, **'Stood'** (2017) a silver-leaf embellished bathmat, the everyday and the domestic stage is a strong/forceful feature of the exhibition.

But a broader social and generic public space (though confined to the male changing room with its homo-erotic implications) is implied by **'Hang by the Pool (speedo #2)'** (2018), a bronze sculpture of *Speedo* swimming trunks. Another implication is one of nakedness, and the limpidity of the work could imply a more sexual connotation and humorous contradiction.

A physical notion of the self as portrait/facemask is explored in Glass' **'Cleanse & Repeat'** (2018) and **'Peel & Relax'** (2018). Before making the connection with cleansing, peel-off, cucumber facemasks, I was pondering, by association, Greek theatre tragedy and comedy acting masks. The combined potentiality of the theatre of the everyday with classical, perhaps collective, memories and origins points to the inherent possibilities of reactions that could be activated or provoked by this and the other works in ideal-i. The exhibition is marked by a persistent visual poetics that combines images, found objects, material juxtaposition and ideas. The project is placed with a particular sexual orientation in mind but connects on a humanistic level nonetheless.

It's worth mentioning that a limited edition of five 'Peel & Relax' works by Glass are offered for sale for just £100 to support future exhibitions at this venue. Ideally, Niagara Falls Projects will be with us for many more years and will help to encourage other small collectives and individuals to share contemporary practice in venues that are not bound or defined by strictly commercial values. This is a project in itself, of course.

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Links:

Niagara Falls Projects

<https://niagarafallsprojects.tumblr.com>

https://www.instagram.com/niagara_falls_projects

<https://www.facebook.com/niagarafallsprojects/>

James William Murray

<https://www.jameswilliammurray.com>

Alexander Glass

<http://www.alexanderglasssculpture.com>

Bermondsey Project Space

<http://project-space.london>

Cell Project Space

<http://cellprojects.org/home>

Phoenix Brighton

<https://www.phoenixbrighton.org>

Fabrica

<https://www.fabrica.org.uk>

Jacques Lacan

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lacan/>