



STEVEN CLAYDON IN HIS STUDIO,
LONDON, OCTOBER 2006

Steven Claydon

TEXT **MARTIN COOMER** PORTRAIT **LEON CHEW**

As one-third of the electro band Add N to (X), Steven Claydon forged a link between Edgard Varèse, Kraftwerk, and Grandmaster Flash, coining the term "avant-hard" along the way. In his multifaceted practice as an artist, he does something similar. Summoning the ghosts of cultural history, vanguard and otherwise, while invoking the fetishized icons of

today's consumerist society, he creates hybrid object-images that force us to consider the dark art of marketing and suggest that we learn the difference between spiritual and material wealth.

Titled *Fear of a Planet*, Claydon's 2005 solo show at Hotel gallery in London featured what appeared to be relics of a lost civiliza-

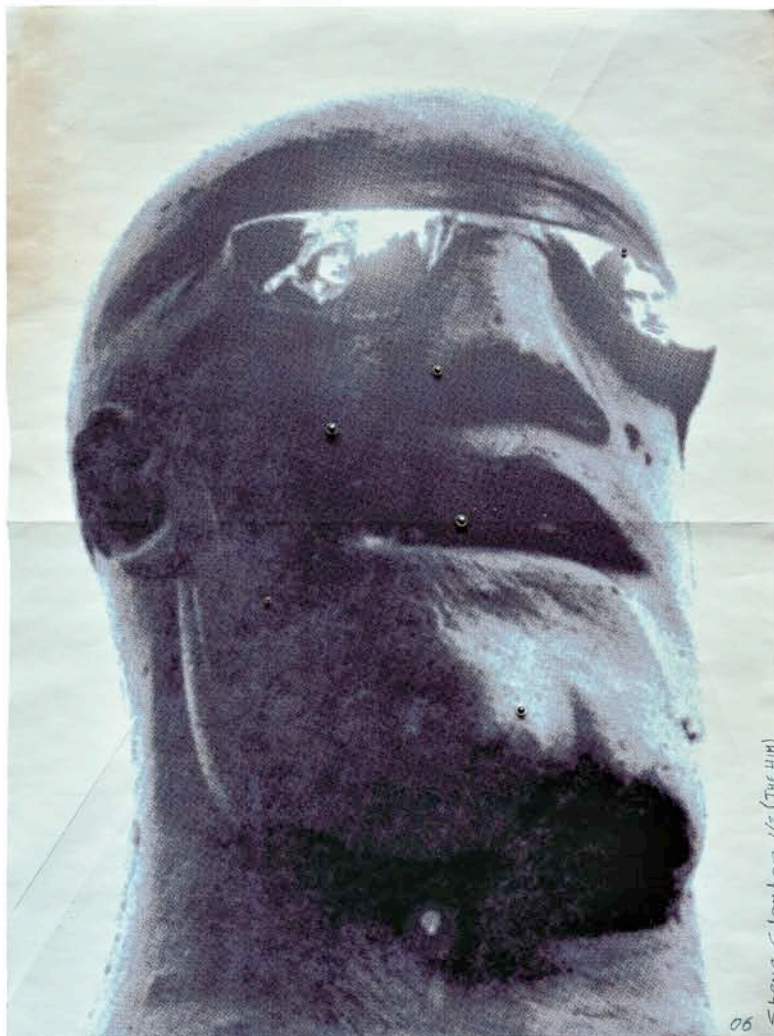
tion—outré sculptural creations like *Benign Tumour (Doonesbury Head)* (2005), which merges Renato Bertelli's famous 1933 *Head of Mussolini* and Garry Trudeau's popular cartoon, as well as Suprematist-inspired posters and a cell-phone company's logo rendered in a variety of media. These 2- and 3-D works were humorously augmented by a sci fi-

"The main head in the image is by Elizabeth Frink (1930–1993), who once occupied an important place in British sculpture as part of the school 'Geometry of Fear.' Frink soon became unfashionable and something of an embarrassment to an art establishment keen to cultivate its Cool Britannia credentials. Frink's work inhabits the subconscious of British culture like an atavistic memory: neither bad nor good, just present, a benign sentinel.

"In the left eye of the image is John Hargrave, founder of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift. Originally an offshoot of the Boy Scout movement, the Kibbo Kift evolved into a political party comprised of artists, writers, and thinkers who combined modern humanistic philosophy with Anglo-Saxon folklore, Native American woodcraft, and radical economics. It later formed a paramilitary wing that clashed violently with Oswald Mosley's fascists, performed political stunts like shooting a green arrow at 10 Downing Street, and organized a widespread graffiti campaign calling for the government to 'Release the national dividend!' An artist and acclaimed novelist, Hargrave sought to fuse Futurist imagery and iconography with disciplined utopian ideals of financial and physical self-sufficiency, a disjuncture that proved indigestible for the average British mindset.

"Percy Wyndham Lewis is reflected in the right eye of the sculpture. An equally prolific polymath, he cofounded the journal *Blast* with fellow writer and confederate in infamy Ezra Pound. They formed the Vorticist movement in Britain and, unlike the utopian movements extant at that time throughout Europe, it followed a route of lofty contradiction and pointed vitriol, cultivating the role of the artist as cultural superman in a society with a plebiscite unfit to take charge of themselves and an aristocracy rotten to the core. Pound was magnetically drawn toward fascist Italy; Lewis was known to support German National Socialism, although he later regretted it. Both were swept under the postwar carpet. Modernism was to become associated solely with the utilitarian left, with Lewis and his misguided cronies sidelined as an aberration, historically synonymous with the reactionary right.

"With the conceit of hindsight, it is easy to pathologize the past, but at one time these groups, despite their fumbling, dastardly political ambitions, shared some kind of fraternal radical ideal. It may be more dangerous for history to ignore the contribution of these minor players and 'exceptions to the rule' than to grudgingly accept them."



Steve Claydon 1/2 (THE HIM)



THE HIM, 2006
PHOTOCOPY AND
EARRINGS ON PAPER,
15 1/2 X 11 1/2 IN
COURTESY THE ARTIST

CERTAIN EVENTS PERMIT
THEMSELVES THE LUXURY
OF OCCURRING (CHARLIE
CHAN), 2005
OIL AND MAKEUP ON
CANVAS, 39 3/4 X 29 7/8 IN
COURTESY THE ARTIST

inflected video, *From Earth* (2005), detailing the planet's demise. More recently Claydon has displayed an interest in the trivia of British history, for example, the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, a more spiritual alternative to Baden-Powell's Scout movement begun in the 1920s, as well as lesser-known artists such as sculptor Charles Sargeant Jagger. In treating

these subjects, Claydon conveys both denigration and veneration. In the 2006 poster *Low Pixel (Beneath Contempt)*, he impishly inverts an image of a sculpture by Jagger of an angst-ridden figure, but safeguards it inside a thick, clear acrylic frame, suggesting that history's might-have-beens are to be cherished alongside its clear winners.