

selection in the Alchemy focus. What connects these films is the way they explore the points at which various modes of identity intersect – or, as focus curator Jonathan Ali describes in his introduction, ‘hyphenate’. In *Chinese Characters*, 1986, Fung places to-camera interviews with various Asian Canadian men talking about their experiences of watching gay pornography in front of a video backdrop featuring scenes from these same films. In most instances, despite failing to see themselves fully represented in this US-produced pornography, it still offers them some satisfaction. As these scenes play out, Fung connects the men’s stories about their exploratory pursuits of pleasure to a folkloric Chinese tale about the search for the source of the Yellow River. While Fung does appear in *Chinese Characters*, he is more central in the autobiographical *Sea in the Blood*, 2000. In this work, Fung describes his relationship with disease, having lost a sister to thalassemia around the same time that his partner was diagnosed with AIDS. Blending home-video footage shot by his sister with his own travel photography, Fung weaves together an accumulatively affecting, politically potent essay about death and disease that is more nuanced than most films on the subject. As with *Chinese Characters*, this is not simply a film tackling a single subject or attempting to make any finite assertions about it, but one which expertly mixes several issues together, leaving each compellingly open. Discussions of colonialism in the Caribbean are melded with Fung’s own thoughts around migration and distance, and, in examining illness, he covers the ramifications of both the specific rare disease that took away his sister and of the then-emerging pandemic that afflicted his partner, folding the complex subjectivities of both into a more universal narrative. In Fung’s presciently intersectional films, issues that first seem disparate become fluidly interlinked.

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John Smith: Citadel and Covid Messages

On 12 May, Boris Johnson announced that a public enquiry into the government’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic will finally go ahead, citing that it is ‘absolutely vital’ to ‘learn the lessons’. This will take place in Spring 2022, two years after the UK went into the first national lockdown. There is something deeply macabre that the 127,640 people who died (according to official records on 13 May 2021) are becoming an opportunity for the Tory government to grasp; if this investigation is anything like the Sewell Report (Editorial *AM446*), with the government marking its own homework, the results will be shrouded in positive affirmations that Boris Johnson and his buddies battled the disease valiantly for Queen and country. Are they really going to hold

themselves accountable for the death toll? I, for one, won’t hold my breath.

John Smith (Interview *AM355*) released two films in 2020, *Covid Messages* and *Citadel*, directly tackling the official response to the Covid-19 outbreak. Smith pokes fun at the government’s mishandling of the pandemic while also documenting a significant period in UK history, of lockdowns and tedious press conferences and the Tories’ prioritisation of the health of the economy over the health of the nation, which led to disaster for both.

Shot in one position from Smith’s London home, *Citadel* opens with chimney-top views on a notably British murky day. A construction crane lurks behind the fog, a crow caws. And then Boris Johnson booms, downplaying the severity of the novel coronavirus. His main concern? Economic damage. The camera cuts to heavy rain and a grating sound. The crow returns and a drilling sound echoes across the vacated cityscape. ‘Buy and sell’, Boris blurts as the city of London jerks into view from behind the thick smog. ‘Business’, he babbles on repeat like a glitching robot as the skyscrapers lurch closer into view. ‘But at this stage, we should be going about our business as usual,’ he declares before gloating about shaking the hands of patients. A chilling statement from 5 March 2020 follows: ‘allow the disease to move through the population’. The city falls silent and a single siren blares. The reality sinks in: the familiar phrases that were bandied about – and mocked across Twitter – during the daily briefings are even grimmer with hindsight.

The film cuts to night-time and the city’s skyline glitters. The tallest high rise sparks up in sync with the PM’s bumbling phrases; its lights rise and fall with the soundwaves of his voice. Smith disrupts the slick city view of London’s financial centre and transforms the neoliberal skyline, an iconic marker of global financial capital, into business-as-usual Boris. This is the image of a sleek, innovative city, popularised on postcards and the opening credits of *The Apprentice* to naturalise the financialised landscape. Here, Smith shatters the illusion that the government’s power sits in Downing Street as it is moved into 22 Bishopsgate, reminiscent of the artist’s



John Smith, *Covid Messages*, 2020, video

origins in structuralist filmmaking. It is clear that the citadel of London is the fortified financial centre, protected by this skyscraper that has become Boris.

The Boris building announces the national lockdown restrictions. The remaining section of the film spans the windows of neighbouring Georgian townhouses, lit up like TV boxes that Smith zooms into, *Rear Window*-style. The mundanity of life locked-in is performed for us as the inhabitants potter, exercise and work. The film doesn’t offer a universal experience of life in lockdown, nor does it claim to. These experiences can’t be compared with that of those without outside space, cramped in small housing, being a key worker or having to escape domestic violence. Someone shuts a blind, blocking out the light. The whole screen turns black.

Then a house lights up with an accompanying morse code sound, beeping in high pitch. Boris interjects: ‘you should go to work’. Another flashes up, communicating with the first. ‘Get to work,’ he chunters. Others join in and a symphony of morse code emerges, the intensity building to a sudden halt. The film loops to the setting from the beginning: the sky is foggy, the buildings are not visible, the drill is drilling. A closing statement: ‘By August 2020 the United Kingdom had achieved the highest Covid-19 related death toll in Europe and entered its deepest economic recession since records began.’ A sombre feeling washes over me as I digest the facts. Such a cost; but another, more deadly wave, was yet to come.

Covid Messages is a video in six episodes that revisits the weird rituals of the PM’s daily press briefings, reworked by Smith to show the government trying to destroy the virus with spells (Chris Whitty is the Chief Magical Officer), but the spirits of the dead rise up and take revenge. The absurdities of the press conference room can only be explained through the supernatural. As in *Citadel*, Boris’s buffoonery persists as he tumbles over words – ‘contract tasting/contact testing’ – and tells us to wash our hands to the song ‘Happy Birthday’ twice. In Smith’s opening episode, he washes his hands and sings the celebratory number to the melody of Frédéric Chopin’s *Funeral March*. The pathetic comedy of the PM’s request is further exacerbated when the camera swings upwards to reveal that it is attached to the top of Smith’s head as he sings into the mirror, darkness cloaking him as he becomes a floating face.

I have to admit, I’m cynical about ‘pandemic art’. Maybe because I am bitter; my capacity to be productive during this period was limited. I felt frustrated with the art world and welcomed a break from it. Smith’s *Citadel* and *Covid Messages*, however, are crucial records of the time and searing takes on the government’s response. Smith challenges our leaders’ competencies and, despite never wanting to sit through another one of those dreaded press conferences, it made me look back with horror and humour, an apt coupling for the Boris Johnson administration.

Citadel and *Covid Messages* are being screened at the Hamburg International Short Film Festival 1-7 June.

Alexandra Hull is a writer and curator based in London.

Report

Mental Health and Art

I have been thinking about mental health a lot over the past year. Mental disorder is known to be one of the most widespread, chronic and disabling health conditions in the global north. Back in 2017, the World Health Organisation found that depression was the main cause of ill health and disability worldwide. In the UK, the withdrawal of welfare provisions has only increased the burdens of mental distress, not to mention an estimated 130,000 excess deaths due to austerity policies (according to the Institute for Public Policy Research). After successive cuts to public health budgets over the past decade, the NHS charged the government with ‘structural discrimination’ against mental health provision.

In ‘The Privatisation of Stress’, 2011, Mark Fisher laid out the relationship between neoliberalism, austerity and mental health, describing how current psychiatry depoliticises unhappiness by shifting the blame onto an individual’s neurochemistry. Referencing Dan Hind, Fisher noted that the logic behind Margaret Thatcher’s statement that ‘there’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women’, is also shared by the current psychiatric model which defines mental illness as the outcome of an individual’s brain chemistry rather than social and environmental conditions. The 2017 Lancet Psychiatry Commission on the Future of Psychiatry proposed that psychiatry should follow an ‘integrative biopsychosocial-cultural formulation’. Arguing that ‘social determinants of mental illness and the role of social discrimination in the causation of mental illness deserve study’ and that ‘both advocacy against poverty and unemployment and equitable funding into [...] social research is needed’. The report recognised that current psychiatry is an overly medicalised profession, one which prioritises neurobiological research that falls short on diagnosis and treatment, largely overlooking the multiple causes which lead to mental disorders such as depression. Studies have shown that social adversity, such as poverty, change the neurobiological ability to cope



Jeamin Cha, *Sound Garden*, 2019, video

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