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Dancing to the Music of the Till— John Goto's Ukadia

Capital Arcade forms the first of three series of works which John Goto has collectively entitled and branded *Ukadia* .[1] Together they provide a distinctive satirical reflection on the cultural and political landscape of Britain under New Labour.

The digitally constructed pictures of *Capital Arcade* are formally modelled on the artifice and colourful excesses associated with advertising and what Goto has himself referred to as 'the neon glitz' of Americanised mall culture.[2] The first thing which strikes the viewer of *Capital Arcade* is the awkward manner in which the figures relate to each other and their environment, a clumsy, mechanical and overly theatrical manner typifies their depiction. The act of montage is not disguised, in fact the awkwardness looks deliberate and significant. The figures seem to just 'hold' gesture, as if frozen, detached from the flow of natural action. Despite the obvious compositional importance invested into the gesture of the figures, there is something dumb about the outcome or, perhaps more accurately, it might be said that the figures take on the qualities of dummies or mannequins.

Goto's *Capital Arcade* could be read as a calculated attempt to collide the sign systems of contemporary capitalist commodity aesthetics with citations from the history of western art, so as to stage yet another symbolic punch-up between the alleged adversaries of 'high' versus 'low' culture. The first tableau in the series, for example, is based on Joshua Reynolds's painting, *Garrick Between Tragedy and Comedy* . Goto's version is set in a mall car park. While the suited figure of the artist might be shown leaning towards and addressing the sober-dressed woman of tragedy, his brash tie and the peroxide blonde pulling hard on his other arm, spells out that his allegiances are not so secure. In each following tableau, often set on the steps of storefronts and beneath the colourful signage of such shops as Tesco's, McDonald's, B & Q, and Mothercare, choreographed figures in contemporary dress mime the gestures borrowed from great museum paintings.

The gesture of the central Mexican youth in Unit 3 echoes that of Christ in El Greco's *Christ Driving The Traders From the Temple* , only instead he seems to be beckoning the traders into McDonald's. The theatrical artifice and excess in such pictures accords with the fakery of commodity culture. In the McDonald's tableau the poses and gestures also suggest social interaction and dialogue between subjects.

Such social cohesion opposes the vacuity, alienation and boredom which often typifies the depiction of figures amidst spectacle: Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere* , for example. Goto does, however, make an acknowledgement to this other tradition with his figures set within and outside *Mobil Mart*. Here the glass facade of the petrol station shop serves to separate a couple, each with a child, and each absorbed in other things: he has his head buried in a magazine entitled *Money* , she looks expectantly out of frame. The picture is based on Caravaggio's *Rest on the Flight Into Egypt* ; the Biblical story now played out in terms of a rather atomised family stocking up for travel at an airport car park's service station.[3]

But what function does such citation serve? It would be prudent to resist the notion that the deployment of such art historically loaded references heroically set out to counteract the hyper-active, fleeting glance of the consumer by establishing a more discerning, culturally informed gaze, associated with the connoisseur art historian.

The problem with such a proposition is the tendency to conflate the recognition of Goto's use of re-enacted compositional set pieces, lifted from the repertoire of art history, with the operation of more refined faculties of discrimination and by implication, the interpretive power this has to impart greater moral, ethical or cultural value to the reading of the scene.

Additionally, in the quest to establish a moral and political dimension to the cultural scenario, the distinction between the operation of supposedly separate spheres of 'high' and 'low' culture could be seen to be subject to an overly simplistic presentation and result in a false dialectical relationship being offered. To experience the complex nature of how commodity aesthetics have appropriated many of the codes of high art, one simply has to spend a short period of time exposed to the sales-pitch delivered by advertising. The distinctions are not so clear. That Goto recognises this is evident in *Welcome to Capital Arcade*, where he depicts himself at the centre of a fracas in the car park, torn between two competing allegorical figures.

The image depends upon the compression of both art historical reference and the signage of contemporary consumer culture in a single, unified space, the space of a fictional mall entitled 'Capital Arcade'. The citation of historical painting enables the consumption of 'high' culture as an 'up market' commodity to take place alongside the consumption of more mundane commodities. In *Capital Arcade*, Goto presents scenes of choreographed alienation, with actor/ mannequins mechanically feigning 'significant' historical gestures, dressed in the latest fashions. Whether it is 'high' culture or 'high' street fashion, in essence, both elements share the same identity, both are marked by the operation of commoditification.

What is so distinctive about Goto's representation of the process of commodification in *Capital Arcade*, is the fact that he depicts it as a space governed by stasis. In this context, the stunted, awkward, and mechanical representation of consumers seem to deliberately contradict our understanding of consumer culture as a process governed by constant change and flux where 'all that is solid melts into air'. In *Welcome to Capital Arcade* Goto acknowledges the relentless process of consumption through his inclusion of a bill-board hoarding which is about to receive a new advertising image. The fact that Goto uses examples of his own work here suggests that he is fully aware of his own status within the process of commodity production. The fact that there seems to be no logic to the process is suggested by the fact that the worker appears to be replacing Goto's Unit 7 with Unit 4, contradicting the sequence of the series.

Despite this, Goto's arenas of consumption are typified by bland, lifeless retail spaces inhabited by automatons, mechanically performing social interaction. This tension between movement and stasis seems to be of particular interest to Goto as he includes an image of Concorde 'frozen' in the grey sky above the car park in *Welcome to Capital Arcade*. At the time this work was made, Concorde still represented the height of consumer luxury and supersonic speed – part of the mythology of glamorous shopping trips in New York, borne of a lifestyle which proposed that time and not money was the only thing in short supply.

The representation of time, whether historical time or the medium for social

interaction, is one of the most interesting aspects of the *Capital Arcade* series. In Unit 4, the dancing young female shoppers, modelled on Poussin's *Dance to the Music of Time*, seem to signal the hedonistic self absorption encouraged by consumerism. Their dancing movements mimic those of similar figures on the adverts adorning the Next shopfront behind them. The autumnal leaves, the older guy with the ghetto blaster on his shoulder and a rolled up copy of Time magazine in his hand, reporting Diana's death, serve as a reminder of the transience of such joys. But to what tune do these shoppers dance? A few years ago, the avarice of Alec Gilroy, one of the characters in the British soap-opera *Coronation Street*, led him to exhort one of the barmaids working in the *Rover's Return* pub to 'Dance to the music of the till!'. Maybe the figures in Unit 4, along with the rest of the wage slaves whose labour has been commodified, are dancing more to Gilroy's 'music of the till' than Poussin's 'music of time'?

The mechanical nature of the social interaction depicted often suggests associations with entertainment spectacles, theatrical or musical performances in which actors go through their routines. Everything in *Capital Arcade* looks choreographed, nothing looks spontaneous or unruly. A sense of total administration governs the scene; an idealised, harmonious environment in which babies never cry, parents don't go mad, shoplifters are never bad and the poor are never sad. A world where exchange value rules, a world unsullied by use value with its waste, dirt and dissatisfaction. This is a pure sterile space where everything runs to plan and the only 'litter' to be found are the picturesque autumnal leaves decorating Unit 4.

The mannequin-like depiction of the consumers seems to suggest that Goto wishes to signal that within commodity culture we are all reduced to the status of being mere appendage of the capitalist machine. Bodies whose function it is to display commodities, create identities and ceaselessly consume.

Capital Arcade's glitzy and kitsch spectacle of shopping mall consumerism, contrasts with Goto's following series, *High Summer*, which draws upon the genre and conventions of landscape painting to provide beautiful settings for contemporary land uses. The idylls associated with the pictures' allusions—the eighteenth-century landscape gardens of Stourhead, Stowe, Rousham and the seventeenth-century French paintings of Poussin and Claude—are rudely interrupted by the differing groupings of figures which populate Goto's landscapes: Ascot toffs, hunters, sporty types, joyriders, drunks, the military, eco warriors, muggers. Such dystopic portrayal, uses the popular middle-brow genre of landscape painting to expose a disastrous failing in our stewardship of the land. A number of pictures show the rising flood waters of global warming. In one of the bleakest, a farmer has hanged himself from a tree. In *Capital Arcade* the gestures of the figures carried with them the weight of high culture to be set against the commodity cultural settings. Here the settings carry the cultural and aesthetic import and the figures disrupt it: pollute and spoil the views, bring out the gulf between the ideals associated with the settings and the dysfunctional realities of the present.

After in turn, mimicking the forms of advertising and painting, Goto's final series, *Gilt City* takes its cue from photography, more specifically documentary photography.

Documentary's tradition of looking at the other, is replayed here through the full figure portraits of outsider and colourful street types. Replete with allusions to the

photography of Atget, Sander and vogueish contemporary photographers like Mikhailov and diCorcia, the series also draws upon Marcellus Laroon's seventeenth-century prints, *The Cryes of the City of London*, which showed the poverty of hawkers. Unlike the consumers in *Capital Arcade* and many of the figures in the landscapes of *High Summer*, *Gilt City's* characters imply the possibility of resistance and subversion. Yet at the same time these outsiders are also insiders, at least in the sense that they are all produced by the same social system. Where they are within that system is pretty clear, Goto presents them as peripheral figures hanging around in door ways either begging, filling time or having a smoke break. The low trade of shady dealings and goings on among Goto's street figures provides a parodic echo of the no less dodgy trading associated with the pompous city buildings behind them, buildings which come to stand for the architecture of the banking worlds of the overdeveloped West.

The veneer of a commodity and label-obsessed culture continues through interrupting details: the can of Beck's in Bacchant, the McDonald's carton used by a street beggar, the incongruity of various fashion labels. The art historian's connoisseurial attention to detail in these pictures is given a comic twist in relation to such commodity signs: he or she now needs to know their Converse trainers from their Nike's. Many of Goto's pictures play on an unexpected disparity of codes— a joining of sign systems that seem inappropriate. The stylishness of his subjects rubs up against our assumptions of alterity. Much as they may appear to stand apart in Goto's tableaux, such figures are completely assimilated by capitalism's culture of commodities.

In *Bucketman*, one of the most theatrical and comic, the male, wearing a T shirt which proclaims 'Be the Reds!' does a headstand with his head in a semi-transparent bucket. Goto plays with associations here. The performer's body position is emblematic of the artist's satirical perspective on the world. The inversion of the figure corresponds with the inversions of values which recur in *Gilt City*. The performance of this street entertainer also points to a condition of willful blindness, of putting your head in the sand. One might then ask: to whom is this critical commentary addressed? It certainly is not this street performer. Instead, Goto seems to direct his satire at the liberal 'left' humanist viewer. The punning title of the series draws attention to the guilty unease with which the middle-class tend to view such outsider types, misfits, and marginals. It also might be seen to suggest the atrophy of social conscience (guilt) by money (gilt) and free market ideology. So, in contrast to much documentary, this is not about trying to speak for the socially disempowered, but instead uses signs of difference— albeit skewed and reconfigured— to say something about the value systems which keeps these types in their place, on the streets, begging, dealing, hawking, performing etc.

Much as the series *Gilt City* might suggest the idea of resistance associated with its parade of street types, all potentially symbolic of revolutionary and counter cultural forces, the overriding message is about their ultimate ineffectuality. Documentary is not only disordered here, but its ideals are radically shaken. Capitalism, in Goto's pictures, becomes a pervasive monolithic force, readily assimilating and commodifying any signs of subversion or deviance. At the same time, the work itself is nevertheless clearly positioned as resistant, using irony, satire and farce as oppositional forms, but from within not from without. In *Hawker*, is that not the artist

peddling his wares around *Gilt City*, haunted by the spectre of Uncle Sam stalking behind him in the reflective glass frontage ?

Documentary traditionally functioned to engage with injustices and inequities in order to provoke active responses. The current vogue for documentary in contemporary art has entailed a documentary *in extremis*, often consciously unethical and sensational, and often aggressive and shocking in its subject matter: reducing human misery into an object of consumption. As a result it has lost much of its political meaning and import. Goto, rooted in a tradition of satire and irony, revisits documentary's history but keeps his distance from it. The final series of *Ukadia* borrows and distorts the codes of documentary in order to portray contemporary capitalist concerns and tap into liberal 'left' humanist guilt, desires and fears.

David Campbell and Mark Durden.

[1] See John Goto's book *Ukadia*, published by Djanogly Art Gallery, Nottingham, 2003.

[2] From a discussion between the artist and Mark Durden, October 2003.

[3] The closing tableau in *Capital Arcade* offers a key to the citations each image makes; the prints of the paintings upon which the series are modelled are displayed in a shop window. This last picture is also important in highlighting a final act of salvation of objects embedded with the cultural values which we infer are about to be lost to the consumerism of mindless 'mall culture'. A male figure, the artist, and a child, both laden with books, are shown in front of a book and print shop, which, according to its new sign, is about to be turned into a 'Customer Survey and Response Centre.'

The authors exhibit collectively as *Common Culture*. The group was founded in Liverpool in 1996 by David Cambell and Paul Rooney, and now consist of artists, David Cambell, Mark Durden and Ian Brown. This article was originally published in *Parachute* magazine, No 115, 2004