

P.S.1 NEWSPAPER

CURTIS MITCHELL

SLUTTISH WITH CONTENT
BY FRANKLIN SIRMANS

Franklin Sirmans: I think it is safe to say that your work has always been inspired by icons and products of popular culture to some degree. And, the process has often been violent—like torching celebrity portraits beyond recognition after they have already been smeared with makeup, dirt, and varnish. This new work at P.S.1, *Clockwork*, seems to offer even more direct clues to its source, material, if you will. It's been about ten years since you first showed the celebrity portraits in the exhibition *Face*, with David Humphrey. How did you come to this new work? Where's your head?

Curtis Mitchell: I am not sure I would describe my process as violent—that would be like saying stonemasons hate rocks. But to the question: I'm still plugging away at the same chord. Now I'm watching movie clips. I get to engage with these scenes rather intimately. It's a bit of a lovely life. And outside the studio—for perverse reasons, but still—there's an atmosphere that's finally beginning to look at class. Growing up in a lower middle class culture has always been central to my work, and people are finally becoming more aware of it as a separate entity with a somewhat questionable relation to power. No one in their right mind still thinks the white middle class is monochrome and without its own underclass.

FS: How did you come to *A Clockwork Orange*? Not as a source of subject matter but when did you first see the film?

CM: When I first saw *A Clockwork Orange*, I was floored. I kept thinking of the film over the years. Then, in the mid-80s, I decided to finish with it. I sat down one night to watch it back to back for as long as possible just to pound it in. Four screenings later I fell asleep. It didn't work. The fact that *A Clockwork Orange* had such a powerful impact on me was the reason to use it, to work through the urge to react to it, to attempt to make contact with it.



Clockwork (P.S.1/MOMA) 48" x 121" x 120" Video projection, Altered C-Print, body bag, velvet 2004

I grew up fascinated with tabloid newspaper articles on gangs and the underclass and how they deal under the radar. The violence was cathartic (not to mention the sex) as an inarticulate counterpoint to the propriety outside the theater. It's also a good way to see a lot of bad movies. But the movies were mainly about gangs, the Mafia, or war. They weren't about the people I knew. If you're white and male in the movies, you don't react to class in any significant way. I grew up in a different world; that world liked *The Deer Hunter* more than *Apocalypse Now*, *Mean Streets*, had more resonance than *The Godfather*, and *The Warriors* was pure classic. Also, *Laws of Gravity*.

FS: In the scene you are working with from *A Clockwork Orange*, a gang of aimless rogues beat an innocent victim. The central character punctuates dance steps with brutal kicks, and extreme violence appears as play. Are you looking for some resolution between that violence's allure and repulsion?

CM: It's a powerful scene to just about everyone. It represents some rather unsavory impulses. But to engage the pleasure, pain, excitement and horror of the scene is to understand it.

The issue of violence in the piece only seems important with respect to its purity in the scene. It is the allure and repulsion—of the dream, of the screen, of the scream—which are compelling. If it can be drawn out into the world, if it can be located, then a small step toward feeling

alive can be achieved. My interest lies in the edification of experience, and I have little trust in the experience of representation.

Given this perspective, you can see why fashioning non-critical, non-ironic, sincere objects from the media might seem violent, and why the violence seen is only process.

FS: You've worked with sculpture, video, and most prominently with constructed photography. How does the choice of media fit into your initial conception of a work of art?

CM: I grew up in a culture that lived by reaction. It's the only honest form of realism I know. I've always worked with things I know well or that have a power for me. I don't care what they are made of. This is the only way I can work, because otherwise I would have little reason to react. I began by using objects alone while reenacting a scene—for example, spilling coffee or breaking beer bottles or chewing gum, spitting it on the concrete and adding history by stepping on them. Then I found photos, which are sluttish with content. They make reacting more urgent; they're very good at manipulating and teasing contact. As the work evolved, so did my desire to create the space that surrounded the event. This began with walking on C-prints of light in step with small pictures of places. And the pictures naturally led to videos.