

# ARTFORUM

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## This Charming Man

BRUCE HAINLEY ON WILLIAM E. JONES

**WILLIAM E. JONES'S MÉTIER** is homosexuality; his vernaculars, gay pornography and experimental documentary film; his landscapes, Southern California (where he lives and works) and suburban Ohio (where he was raised); his mode, dandyism. In eleven remarkable films and videos and countless photographs produced over the last fifteen years, building upon the cinematic inventions of both Californian and foreign artists—from Morgan Fisher, Fred Halsted, Joe Gage, and Thom Andersen to Werner Schroeter, Luis Buñuel, Jean-Daniel Cadinot, and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet—Jones has rethought hackneyed categories of, as well as boundaries between, art and pornography, fandom and critique, Hollywood and other kinds of filmmaking. Focusing his lens on the intersection of Labor and Eros, Jones offers a study of the economy and legislation of the aesthetic as it is discombobulated by the erotic. Unlike so many artists and others of the moment who deploy porn images for moribund notions of "titillation" or "shock," using imagery to reify or reiterate rather than to question dominant sexual and relational practices, Jones thwarts such unthinking, often by a moving renewal of what escaped or was lost, deemed beneath consideration.

Austerely but sinuously structured—not unlike his voice, used to hypnotic effect in all his films with narration—Jones's work borrows part of its compositional finesse, often slyly, from what some would be sad to call *recherché* sources, not all of them cinematic. He learned his methodology as much from A. J. A. Symons's queer biographical pursuit, *The Quest for Corvo* (1934), as from experimental documentary film. Abjuring documentary's ubiquitous talking-head interviews, Jones shoots landscapes and buildings more frequently than people; when people do appear it is generally via appropriated still or moving imagery. But whereas the usual technique of appropriation today makes use of sources that are almost immediately accessible and recognizable, Jones inverts (with all the sexual consequence of that term) this process, incorporating the unlikely and syncopating, recontextualizing, and slowing down to the point of estranging the popular; this strategy creates a space for thinking about identity as well as about community. He acknowledges pornography and experimental film's differences (despite their simultaneity), but he relishes the potential of their becoming each other, pancinematically—

pornography turns into a kind of experimental cinema and experimental cinema into pleasure, recalling a moment when terms like *foreign film* and *artistic purposes* meant nudity and sex (as Anonymous, aka Mike Kelley, so eloquently put it in the title of one of his best books, *Why I Got into Art*). While many contemporary artists channel the visual so that it mimics mainstream entertainment, Jones mines film from a time, pre-AIDS, when experimentation and liberation were mirrored by cultural production—a heyday of American cinephilia coterminous with sexual freedom.

AIDS shadows nearly all of Jones's work, symbolically underlying his second film, *Finished*, 1997, which is almost entirely made up of appropriated images, mixed with his own radiant footage of Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley, and Montreal (resonant architecture, distant freeway views, ocean and cloud studies). The filmmaker narrates how he became "infatuated with someone I could never know": Quebecois porn star Alan Lambert, who at age twenty-five—just after he came to glimmer in Jones's consciousness via a phone-sex ad—killed himself in the middle of Montreal's Square Saint-Louis, leaving behind appearances in twenty-some gay adult movies, a radical and obscure epistolary manifesto, and Jones fingering the puzzle pieces of his own desire. In the course of putting together the facts of Lambert's porn star-cum-Marxist messiah existence, Jones discovers an unlikely film allegory in Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe* (1941), which he happens to catch on television after his final day of sleuthing in Lambert's hometown winds up coldly inconclusive. Playing an off-camera Barbara Stanwyck to Lambert's Gary Cooper, Jones strategically deploys Capra's film to consider the joint and schism between person and persona; suicide as an inconclusive protest of social ills; and the possibility of political action in the face of corporate manipulation. Cooper's beauty echoes Lambert's, as *Finished* observes the toll of the virility of youth and its representations on a gay imaginary haunted by morbidity.



William E. Jones, *Finished*, 1997, stills from a color film in 16 mm, 75 minutes. Alan Lambert.

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With *Finished* Jones bares a trenchant philosophical essay on beauty's give-and-take with the economic and the legislative: Desire is embedded, coaxed, and performed at exactly the sites government would place its limits and injunctions. These loci become evident not only as the beauty of the pictures of Lambert's body and of Los Angeles bewilder the narration's stern inquiry into the commodification of the body in pornography but also in a climax early in the film, when Jones shows a photocopy of Lambert's California identification card, revealing the porn star's real name. This official ID, issued by the government, itself becomes a site of subversion against authority—Lambert's name hints at the card's true usage, as proof that he was over the age of eighteen and thus legally



From top: William E. Jones, *Is It Really So Strange?*, 2004, still from a color video, 80 minutes. William E. Jones, *William E. Jones, V.O.*, 2006, still from a color video, 59 minutes.

allowed to participate in porn films; the young man's beauty is, quite literally, his very identity: Alain Lebeau.

This is the kind of strangely naked revelation of Jones's *Corvo*-like quests. Although constructed almost entirely from parts of the porn movies in which Lambert performed, *Finished*, tellingly, does not feature any actual pornographic segments, instead seducing into use porn's often superfluous interstitial narratives and setups, including resonant title frames, and relegating hard-core "action" to description in sonorous voice-over. Jones's decision to absent the straightforward depiction of gay sex acts complicates what pornography is "for" or "about." He reeroticizes sexual imagery, as omnipresent as it is corporatized, by analyzing a mortal narrative paradoxically hidden within a pornography that bares all.

Jones's next full-length film, *Is It Really So Strange?*, 2004, also focuses on an object of infatuation: Morrissey, and the singer's fans in Southern California. As Jones states in the narration, the idea for the work arose when he noticed an ad "for a club in Los Angeles called London Is Dead, which exclusively played

Morrissey and Smiths music, and I thought to myself, I've got to see this." To his surprise, the club's "atmosphere was quite joyous and belied the popular perception of Morrissey as a poet of doom and gloom. Another surprise was that most of the crowd was Latino." Jones began a black-and-white photographic project, taking pictures of the young, Latino fans in all their glory, the complexity of their punk-Mexicali style intensified by a seemingly incongruous British working-class flair (National Health-like spectacles, sturdy black Doc Martens). He had recently

completed a series in vivid Kodachrome color titled *The Garden State*, 2001, a study of cities in Southern California with recent Latino majorities. Photographs from both series find acute purpose in the movie.

To gain access to fans and to try to understand more somatically the phenomenon of how one of Manchester's favorite sons came to flourish with a fan group comprised not only of people not even born while the Smiths were still a band but also with Spanish surnames, Jones became a participant in the culture—contributing to Morrissey fan websites (and even winning an essay contest); attending Smiths and Morrissey conventions and other events; catching numerous concerts of a Los Angeles tribute band, Sweet and Tender Hooligans, notorious as much for an unerring sound as for their fans' intensity, often duplicating the raucous camaraderie swooning around their British progenitors; and, crucially, sporting his own pompadour, one of the favorite coifs of SoCal fans. The do became his tonsorial open sesame. As Jones relates in voice-over: "It was great fun, though some of my friends referred to it as my midlife crisis expressed in a hairstyle."

Jones deftly navigates the muter impassos of desire swirling around and within the Morrissey community, sexualities brushing up against sanctioned categories (gay, straight) and, at times, evading them, not the least because of Morrissey's own savvy, charmeuse elusiveness and the complications of Latino machismo. By entering the lives of the fans, Jones reveals a tenderness subterranean in his earlier work. Here the meticulous acolyte of the European avant-garde lets drop a few crucial hairpins: that he was reared by wayward uncles (Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, George Kuchar) who continually used the pursuit of "making a movie" to get people to remove their clothes and let their inherent sexiness amaze; their experiments, simultaneous to that of the French New Wave, extended (returned?) art's notion of the popular and "real" to include varieties of

point-blank, wallflower, and even deliciously "sexploitative" conjugation in *Flaming Creatures* (1963), *Couch* (1964), *My Hustler* (1965), *Bike Boy* (1967), and *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966).

Engaging the vernacular of the behind-the-scenes music docudrama, *Is It Really So Strange?* is the first and only film in which Jones filmed and photographed living people, and it is the only work in which he himself appears. At least one critic has called *Finished* the antithesis of *So Strange*, and yet they operate prismatically to each other: A light beam of solitary, soliloquizing infatuation with someone Jones will never know splits into the rays of communal, multivocal fandom. Although Jones gets to talk to the man himself, when he "assists" artist Jeff Burton on a photo shoot of Morrissey for a Japanese music magazine, the meeting is shown only through a sequence of Burton's still photos, with Jones narrating the tale.

Both *Finished* and *So Strange* consider the difficulty of documenting knowledge of anyone and the dependence on the inanimate and mute narratives of thingness—collections (albums, pictures, autographs), background mise-en-scène—as well as the anecdotal. Yet something eludes vision and documentation, which doesn't mean the way its absence appears shouldn't be looked at again and again. Jones traces this conundrum—how the seen suggests the unseeable, how pictures convey different meanings, contrary even to the narratives to which they are synced. Although Lambert's facial expressions while being fucked galvanize a final sequence, neither he nor anyone else is actually seen fucking or sucking in *Finished*; neither Morrissey's voice nor the Smiths' music is ever actually heard in *So Strange*, until the last still photograph almost fades to black and "This Charming Man" jangles in. That photograph depicts a postperformance stage, mics, guitars, and Fender amp; it's titled *Aftermath*, 2003, naming precisely what Jones pursues—bodies, their consequence, and the systems and ideologies in which they participate, consciously or not.

Never forgetting desire's dependence on what is wanting, Jones, like some Kama Sutra master, keeps things in constant expectation, edging ever closer. It's not that including the "money shot"—whether it be Lambert going at it or Morrissey's voice—would overwhelm his examination; rather, by redistributing the currency of ideas, energy, and critique within his sources, Jones reveals a new center of attention: fandom, the totemic record sleeve or autograph, the tissue of looks cruised, things out of mainstream distribution.

As if to intensify or even thematize the experience of these discontinuities between

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picture and sound, montage and meaning, past and present, critique and love, one of his most recent works, *V.O.* (a title that refers both to voice-over and to *version originale*, the term for a film shown theatrically in its original language with subtitles), 2006, consists of splices of film set mostly to unrelated sound clips. Jones combines subtitled sound segments from foreign films—including Manoel de Oliveira's *Amor de Perdição* (1978), Luis Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950) and *Susana* (1951), and Werner Schroeter's *Der Tod der Maria Malibran* (1971)—with "nonsexual" scenes from gay porn films produced no later than 1985, including William Higgins's *Delivery Boys* (1985), Ignatio Rutkowski's *Nights in Black Leather* (1973), Tom De Simone's *Confessions of a Male Groupie* (1971), Ian McGraw's *Subway* (1980), key works by Joe Gage and Fred Halsted, especially *L.A. Plays Itself* (1972), and Christopher Rage's *Sleaze* (1982). How and what produces sex as well as the affects of sexuality may depend less on bodies commingling than on location, the decor and choice stuffs around them, not to mention the nonce narratives in which they perform. Pleasure, both sexual and aesthetic, may be foreign and, at base, untranslatable.

Jones's queer juncture of things categorized as different nonetheless palpates their samenesses, the artistry as well as the melancholy archive that film can become: In his dandy's connoisseurship of pre-condom (i.e., pre-AIDS) porn, Jones uses appropriation to document the texture and verismo of bodies, places, cityscapes gone—from unsteroided muscle, location shoots that capture "Gay Power" graffiti, and street hustlers to interior shots noting the little amber bottles of Locker Room poppers lined up in the freezer. *V.O.*'s foreign-film "sound track" to these images further comments on absence and obsolescence, both in its uncanny melodrama and in the fact that all its cinematic sources are now out of distribution in the United States.

In one of the few segments of *V.O.* in which the footage remains synced to its original sound track, a commanding

naval officer in a brig puts a sailor through his paces. During most of the sequence voices speak in French (and, as throughout, subtitles appear over the images), derived from an excerpt of the notorious 1985 BBC interview with Jean Genet. While we see the sailor nervously slide his T-shirt over his head and the officer stare, we hear the interviewer pose a question to Genet ("Did love begin for you with a boy?"). The British interviewer's French accent, however, is imprecise, and Genet responds, noticing questions his interviewer did not even consider he might be inflecting: "Did you say 'love' [*l'amour*]? I heard 'death' [*la mort*]." The interviewer laughs, "No, I wasn't talking about death." The sound track immediately switches to its original source, and the officer barks: "Lick my shoes, Jones." When Jones hesitates, the officer barks again: "A court-martial's a sticky business, Jones. Lick 'em!" As Jones licks the officer's shoes, Genet continues talking, saying that his love began not with one boy "but with two hundred boys." The other Jones, the filmmaker, is too deft a semiotician to have to point out how, in the aurora of AIDS, Genet is already attuned to something, the most recent inflection of *une petite mort*.

Jones, by the quasi-Rousselian device of his mash-up method, finds his work and himself interpolated between an earlier era of gay life and of cinema and the present moment. Jones's art attempts to bridge connection. The last words we hear spoken (in Portuguese) and read (in English subtitles) suggest the challenge, the translation, inherent in this mourning work: "Remember me. Live, to explain to the world, with your loyalty to a shadow, the reason why you led me to this chasm." □

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