

BLACK HEAVEN

Jan Tumliir, Spring 2014

1.

Why would one choose, in the springtime of youth, to live life as if it were autumn? And why would one wait in shuttered rooms for the day to be done, to only emerge outdoors at night when the light turns artificial? And why, instead of sport and honest work, would one favor hanging around in abandoned, out of the way places, getting drunk and high while listening to rock music? The abundant reserves of vitality that we enjoy in our teenage years are squandered in such places and on such activities. The hindsight perspective makes it plain: This is not the best training ground for health and prosperity. Aging rockers shuffle zombie-like between the nightclub and record store, no longer the dream jobs they once coveted, but more like purgatories of impossibly extended adolescence, where time is strictly measured out on the countdown clock, elapsing, and maturity is shorn of all its existential virtues. And yet, while shopping for music, one may occasionally discern a knowing glint in the otherwise empty stare from across the counter: A fine choice is covertly saluted! Automatically bonding over band preferences, we recognize one another as members of the same congregation.

Joan Van Barneveld's paintings and prints work in the same way, like a secret handshake, a code word, to those in the know. The interior and exterior landscapes that they present to us—bedrooms, vacant lots, rehearsal and/or performance stages—might initially appear non-descript, emblematic instances of suburban normalcy and boredom, which of course they are, but then they are also much more than that. Some of us will immediately identify them as hallowed grounds, somewhat like the "lieux sacrés" that the Surrealists located through their aimless wanderings, or the "psychogeographies" of the Situationist International, but now explicitly claimed for the cult of rock. Though always shown depopulated and shrouded in darkness, these sites remain charged with signs of former and future occupation. What happened there will happen again, and it will keep happening as long as there is anyone left to remember.

The bedroom is typically where we retire to be alone or else to be intimate with someone else. In the rock and roll firmament, however, it gains a sublime dimension, like a monastic cell that opens onto the infinite celestial expanse. For it is here that we begin to develop our powers of absorption and projection, mouthing the words to a song on the stereo, trying on the whole repertoire of expressions, gestures and poses that were beamed down from the stars, transforming the isolated and insignificant self before the mirror into a commanding presence, someone who might someday influence others to mimic them in turn. To the outside observer—a parent or sibling peering in through the keyhole, say—this would be a baffling spectacle, giving rise to all sorts of fantastical speculation. In the films of Kenneth Anger and the stories and novels of Nik Cohn, this mysterious play before the mirror, constantly checked against a rock iconography of album cover art, pictures in music magazines and posters on the wall, constitutes a kind of subcultural variant of the primal scene. The bedroom is where the rock spirit is first invoked in tentative, solitary rites that gradually build toward ecstatic possession. The goal is attained when the mirrored reflections become dissociated from their source, and when already one sees, behind the dancing figure of one's alien double, the endless succession of on-tour motel rooms that will come to replace this wing of the family home. Here, then, begins the process of separation from the person one was expected to be, as well as from those who held these expectations. In the bedroom, a look, a style, a whole new way of being is tried on for size, and when the satisfactory fit is achieved, it is time to step outside and find others of the same kind.

The play between the two images that comprise Van Barneveld's diptych *Mirror / trees* (2012) could be seen as opening the way out of the home and into a world that is, initially at least, no less hidden than the rooms left behind. The empty street, the abandoned shack, the forest clearing, the parking lot and vacant lot are zones of reclamation for those kids who have chosen the route of exalted exile. The magnetic allure of such places is due to the fact that they are not specifically set-aside for them, as is the school, the library, the gym, or the rec room. It is precisely by following the lay-lines that lead away from the prescribed areas of play and work where youth undergoes relentless surveillance that they find the way to the desired state of dereliction. As it appears in *Nowhere / star* or *Painting / palm* (both 2013), the vacant lot is the satanic inversion of the football field, for instance; the grass is dead, the lights are out and no one is watching. In these neglected spaces they will at last be ignored, and yet the threat of getting found out is no less conducive to the thrill of being there. The denizens of this "teenage wasteland," in the language of The Who, are committed outsiders, held together by their mutual antipathy for those on the inside, the monitors and the monitored. "Why don't you all f-f-fade away..." Should any one of these agents of control happen to

disrupt their secret gathering, it would only strengthen their group allegiances. So, what exactly are these kids up to? On the face of it, nothing, just hanging around, but then also planning the conquest of the future. They are forming a band.

Now we may turn to *Brush / stage* (2013), another diptych that partly reverses the order of the first and points back inside. The first stage is typically erected in the basement or the garage, and the first song to be performed there is one that was memorized alone in the bedroom. Now is put up for review before one's peers, to potentially become part of a repertoire. At this point, the band is also its only audience, a closed circle of producers and recipients in one. The songs that they elect to play are composed by others, yet must be able to speak for them all, while also remaining receptive to their own individual voices, so as to be spoken through. A band's first set list is comprised mainly of covers interpreted as faithfully as possible, but increasingly they will begin adapting this given music to their own emerging sensibilities until it becomes almost unrecognizable, a kind of mulch from which new music is propagated. In time, the ratio of standards to original compositions will shift in favor of the latter, and when no trace of slavish imitation is to be found anywhere in there, then the whole process may be resumed. Another fledgling band will perhaps select their first song from the back catalog of this one. This is how the rock spirit perpetuates itself, passing from the garage to the stadium, and then back again, along a trail marked by artifacts and ephemera. There are no parents, teachers, advisors or coaches to guide this process, just the music committed to disc, words and pictures on the sleeve, information in trade publications and fanzines, promotional videos and concert footage. Carried on electrical currents, knowledge travels freely between "canned" and live experience; what has been and will be recorded charges the battery, providing a stable flow of energy, but the performers are live wires.

I do not mention MP3s, websites or YouTube because the gear featured on the stages that Van Barneveld prints and paints is strictly analog. Sunk in obscurity, just barely visible, this by now is the stuff of an archaic, occult gnosis. Marshall stacks rise imposingly up through the shadows like the towering stone monuments of prehistory, reminding us that the very first stages were places of ritual sacrifice, celebration and mourning. A crude circle etched in the earth with a stick once marked their perimeter, reserving the interior for bloodthirsty communion with the higher powers. Its design is reflected in the more refined form of the earliest Greek theaters as well as Christian churches, both with their altars and orchestras, choruses and choirs. Music always accompanied the spectacle of ceremonial slaying, perhaps even occasioned it, and even after this practice has been aesthetically transfigured by organized religion and art into a range of harmless representations, music continues to point toward their barbaric origins. Of course, Van Barneveld's somber stages are presented as pictures as well, and as such they are resolutely mute. The din that would emerge from their midst can only be imagined, yet this is insistently what they prompt us to do. As with all of this artist's works, the absence of any human figure within these scenes invites our absorption. Drum-sets, guitars and microphones stand at the ready, as though caught in an interim period of latency between the end of one concert and the start of the next, and this pregnant pause, reverberating on the inner ear of the viewer, can become deafening.

The stage is the terminus point in this journey of self-discovery, or self-construction, that leads from initiation to passion, and then finally to apotheosis. Family names are renounced in favor of stage names, and genetic ancestry is traded in for an elective one, a pantheon of musical influences. Finally, the new idol will emerge from the dark wings of the theater and into the glare of the spotlight as the rock spirit incarnate, a conduit for the very first sacrificial scapegoat who "lived fast and died young," as well as all those who followed his lead. The works of Van Barneveld eagerly anticipate this triumphant moment, but also imbue it with a sense of deep foreboding, because, as we know, this is a ghost that quickly wears out its hosts, and then more gradually, wears itself out as well. Every era has a cult of youth and a youth culture, and it is not necessarily the same one, because these grow old and die out as well. In this regard, it is worth noting that the artist was born in 1978, in a decade marked by a concentrated succession of untimely rock and roll ends: Jimi Hendrix (at age 27), Janis Joplin (27), Jim Morrison (27), Duane Allman (24), Gram Parsons (26), Tim Buckley (28), Marc Bolan (29), Keith Moon (32), and Sid Vicious (21), among many more. Most of these deaths were due to prodigious drug abuse, or to the point where the Dionysian revelry that simply comes with this territory turns fatal. The faint light that illuminates the dark worlds of Van Barneveld's paintings and prints would appear to issue from this same toxic source—a "Bad Moon Rising," as he titled a recent exhibition at Paul Loya Gallery in Los Angeles. Those words are lifted from a song that Creedence Clearwater Revival released in 1969, right at the close of the "Summer of Love," and its intimations of coming disaster have been fully corroborated in retrospect. "Bad Moon Rising" is also the title of the second

album by Sonic Youth from 1985, which is haunted throughout by the bad-hippie death-drive of Manson and Altamont, and Van Barneveld cites it as a key influence on his own production. By the time that this artist becomes immersed in the rock mythos, that is, it has been wholly recoded as a tragic form. The origins story that we may make out in his works is from the first moment sunk in the shadows of self-obliteration. The stars have burned themselves out, their initial radiance reduced to a faint afterglow.

2.

This encroaching darkness is what Van Barneveld takes from the music and then translates into art, where it comes into contact with a whole other tradition—that of the monochrome, and more specifically, the black one. On the face of it, these two forms would seem to be utterly irreconcilable. The black painting is after all the epitome of the modernist reduction of the aesthetic object to its medium-specific essence—that is, to the condition of pure art, or art for art's sake—whereas rock and roll is an intrinsically heterogeneous expression of popular culture, and perhaps one of the most authentically popular. By straining this music through art's most austere, silent and static template, Van Barneveld drains out its reckless exuberance, but by the same token, he also restores some of its original iconoclastic thrust. And, on the other end, his ghostly infusion of rock imagery into the monochrome's voided field does not simply amount to a contradiction; rather more to the point, it serves as a reminder of those contradictions that were there from the start.

When Kazimir Malevich unveiled his *Black Square*, arguably the first painting of this sort, before a general audience at *0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition* of 1915, he was already keenly aware of its anti-social potential. In a brochure accompanying the show, he writes: "(I)n my desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity, I took refuge in the square form and exhibited a picture which consisted of nothing more than a black square on a white field, (and) the critics and, along with them, the public sighed, 'Everything which we loved is lost. We are in a desert... Before us is nothing but a black square on a white background!'" Certainly, such a strict withdrawal of all referential content, of recognizable figures and objects and landscapes, of legible narratives and allegories and even ideas, would be confronted as a sign of solipsistic ivory tower elitism. Yet documentation shows the *Black Square* humbly adorning a corner of the gallery, one of thirty-nine canvases hung close together like Byzantine icons. Although the black monochrome would seem to emerge at the teleological end-point of artistic advancement, a monument to stoic refusal, negation and self-sufficiency, it is tied from the outset to folk traditions rooted in the everyday religious life of the people. Malevich insisted on this ritualistic context in his work's installation, which recalls the iconostasis, the wall of Biblical representations that opens onto the sanctuary of the Russian Orthodox Church where the altar is housed. In the last photographs of the painter stretched out on his sickbed, a black square is hung just over his head, and then later, another would be mounted to his tomb. In the end it is plainly confirmed that this work, so outwardly reticent and exclusive, was conceived with an eye to the "great leveler."

Perhaps Van Barneveld was also thinking of Malevich's last days when, in the center of his 2009 solo show at Museum Het Domain in Sittard, Holland, he constructed a full-scale replica of the greenhouse where Kurt Cobain was found dead of a self-imposed gunshot wound in 1994. Through the skylight window panels that adorned its sloping roof, one could make out the selection of near-black paintings hung all around the walls of the gallery. Observed through this structure, within which the life-affirming practice of plant gestation had become inextricably linked with suicide, the monochrome was reduced to a single mournful note, one that now issued from an electric guitar. Cobain ostensibly gave up his life to safeguard the integrity of what he had achieved in his music, so that the songs would live on. In his farewell letter to the world, he explained the impossible bind in which he was caught: On the one side, rising success, and on the other, dwindling enthusiasm. "I don't have the passion anymore," he signed off; "and so remember, it's better to burn out than to fade away." This fatalistic rock mantra bears implications for monochrome painting as well, as this is a form that was immediately pegged as a limit-point in artistic advancement, one that could not be crossed with any hope of success—it could only be repeated, and with diminishing returns.

So what are we to make of the fact that it has been, and continues to be, repeated? Coating canvases a uniform black remains to this day an acceptable option for artists to pursue, just as musicians have not ceased to earnestly plumb rock's own sonic zero-degree. One could say that these efforts are symptomatic of a moribund cultural condition where the old still has to die and the new has yet to be born, but that would mean assuming a perspective on the matter that is itself outdated. Instead, in Van Barneveld's work, rock and roll and the monochrome come together to describe a resolutely post-idealistic

promise that is not to be reserved for the future, though neither should it be confined to the past. It does not build on itself in the sense of projecting outward and upward, but accrues density through its very inertia.

To those who could see in his *Black Square* only emptiness, nothing, Malevich responded, "but this desert is filled with the spirit of nonobjective sensation which pervades everything." Close inspection of this work reveals a scorched earth topography of cracked and peeling paint-work, but what might be found if one were to tunnel deeper into its elementary particles? And what if one were to proceed from this work to the next—to, say, a black painting by Mark Rothko, and then one by Ad Reinhardt, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, and so on and so forth, right up to Steven Parrino or Wayne Guyton—what exactly is it that gets transmitted between them? From the first last painting to the very latest one, it would seem that the process of working through history only yields further repetition compulsion, and yet what returns is not always the same thing. And this is not only because its context keeps changing, but because every next black painting subsumes all the previous ones into its design. It is in a sense painted atop them, black on black, which amounts to an act of historical cancelation and commemoration at once.

The music that we can imagine resounding from Van Barneveld's dimly lit stages shares in this predicament, for here as well there can be no thought of starting anew or ending elsewhere. The end-point of stripped-down purity was achieved right at the outset, only to be periodically revisited through a by now long succession of back-to-basics initiatives: roots rock, punk rock, grunge rock, post-rock. All of these are attempts to reconnect with the music's original spirit and to once more conduct its self-annihilating charge. In the evolution of each individual band like that of rock overall, the closest one gets is perhaps that first cover song. However, just as with the black painting, that song does not remain the same; with each pass, it encodes more information, becoming increasingly steeped in its own history, thick with experience.

The music that Van Barneveld has released with Ed Romijn under the name Teenage Slaves of Satan is exemplary in this regard. All of the key elements of the two to three minute rock track are here present and accounted for—intro and coda, rhythm and melody, verse and chorus, chord progression and hook—but these have been whittled down to the bare bones, a kind of rudimentary architecture that inevitably cedes way to the condensed aural atmosphere generated within. Unmistakable echoes of Deep Purple, Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin reverberate throughout it, but their virtuoso riffs now sound withered and sluggish, as if they had traveled a great distance to get here, pushing through the thick fog of the mix. Between each thudding drumbeat and crash of the cymbal we hear the kit rattle, guitars hiss, crackle and buzz, lines are jacked in and out of amps that are left humming forlornly as a song ends, only to suddenly surge back to life in the last seconds. One might put it all down to careless recording, but that would be to miss the point entirely. In fact, it is hyper-aware, as attentive to the sounds of musical production as to the music itself. The continual intrusion of the studio context into the song serves to spatialize it, to render the song into a place where sounds collect, condense and corrupt. Distortions emerging from equipment pushed past its capacities mark the music's delimiting edges in the process of testing them, and even insist on those edges as the main source of musical inspiration. This is perhaps where rock has always resided: Pushed into a corner, poised on the threshold of extinction and rebirth, like Malevich's *Black Square*.

There is something mournful and grand about all of this work, as mentioned, but it is not without a certain resilient humor. Teenage Slaves of Satan, Van Barneveld's B-movie band name offers clear indication that we should not take him all too seriously. The devolution of the classical theme of the Faustian pact toward the depths of cut-rate, genre-splicing para-cinema could serve as an analogy for what is also at stake in his garage recording and painting studio. For it is one thing to inadvertently suffer a fall for one's hubris and quite another to court it with enthusiastic DIY know-how. The dead-end fate announced by rock music and the monochrome at their very inception keeps coming, and when their paths converge as they do here, it is to rewire the loop of eternal recurrence for purposes of pleasure. Masturbation Classics the artist has dubbed his self-started label, and here as well he sounds a welcome note of levity. Masturbation will not change the world, but it can help to make it more livable. There is, after all, more to music and art, as well as the relation between them, than this tragic business of self-sacrifice. The non-instrumental and wholly goal-free exploration of states of distraction, self-estrangement, ecstatic transport, sensory delirium, fantasy and imagination—this also is part of the program. The emphatic obscurity of Van Barneveld's darkly pigmented pictures and noise layered songs is a marker of this inward journey that transforms one's relation to everyday things, detaching them from their workaday functions, alienating them, so that they can be returned to the world as aesthetic values, experiential textures, expressions of sensibility.

In Van Barneveld's works we are reminded us just how much the "spirit of non-objective sensation"

has always been rooted in music. From the earliest days of our modernity, painting has consistently followed music as a guide in the abstracting process. Music was understood as inherently abstract in the sense that whatever it communicates to the listener could ostensibly bypass the bottleneck of the signifier, and could thus be enjoyed immediately by anyone, without preparation, schooling, or any kind of pre-existing knowledge. For those invested in a non-discriminating, universalizing art, it has served as a crucial model. There are countless examples of painters who sought to transition between the aural and optical realms via a system of tonality that was understood as belonging equally to both, yet all of their various efforts to scrupulously chart the lines of correspondence between tone colors and color tones in order to compose paintings like music here devolve upon the intersection of the colorless and the atonal. The ever more experientially freighted feedback that is generated within and between them might one day fall upon blind eyes and deaf ears, and many would already write it off as a matter of specialist, antiquarian interest. For others, however, this audio-visual noise remains a crucial hedge against the overexposed and high-definition world of the present. For a confirmed adherent like Van Barneveld, it is inexhaustible manna from a black heaven.