

This Artist Just Gave Away Half a Million Dollars in Clothes

By Steve Dool

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Bjarne Melgaard has not smoked crystal meth any time lately. The divisive Norwegian visual artist is quick to make that point, lest anyone think a short film he created — part of a sweeping multidisciplinary exhibition, “The Casual Pleasure of Disappointment,” opening Thursday at Red Bull Arts New York — implies that drug use is a part of his daily routine. The clip in question follows a puppet created with Jim Henson Company, which closely resembles Melgaard, as he window shops, scrolls through Instagram surrounded by piles of clothing, stares contemplatively at his reflection in the bathroom mirror at a gay bar and, briefly, clutches a meth pipe.

If the viewer is looking for deeper insight about Melgaard from what, on the surface at least, appears to be a very personal exhibition, it won't come from the artist himself. Melgaard remains coy about which parts of the project, if any, are reflective of his own life. “It's not very autobiographical,” he says of the puppet video, for instance. “Part of it is just fictional that we made up for the movie.” (He also won't confirm whether or not his felt counterpart is the first Muppet to use drugs. “I don't know what Kermit does when it's after hours,” he shrugs.)



A video featuring a puppet version of the artist Bjarne Melgaard, created with Jim Henson Studios, is one of the elements of Melgaard's new exhibition, “The Casual Pleasure of Disappointment.” Courtesy of Bjarne Melgaard Studio

Along with the creative director Babak Radboy and the stylist Avena Gallagher, Melgaard has transformed the two-story Red Bull gallery into what he deems a “psychopathological department store,” replete with decaying fixtures reminiscent of an erstwhile suburban shopping center. Visitors at the V.I.P. opening tonight had the option to participate to partake in one-on-one sessions with Melgaard’s own therapist, and on Tuesday night the public was invited to rifle through racks of pieces from Melgaard’s extensive personal wardrobe and take home whatever they’d like for free. (Press materials for the show priced the giveaway at \$500,000 worth of clothes.) Gallagher repurposed other items from the artist’s closet into new looks that were cut apart, sewn back together and displayed on mannequins. Melgaard refers to getting rid of his clothing as “a purge,” but says that word refers to the empty, addictive consumerism that plagues both art and fashion and not an act of personal catharsis. “I had enough clothes,” he explains as the motivation for dipping into his own collection. “It’s not more difficult than that.”

A related, concurrent installation at Gavin Brown’s enterprise on the Lower East Side showcases Melgaard’s collaboration with the jeweler Bjørg Nordli-Mathisen, as modeled by a set of 15 live teacup pigs. Are the pigs to be interpreted as a symbol of conspicuous consumption, or perhaps a self-parodying remark about charging \$1590 for a necklace with diamonds that spell out “Cheated for Cash”? Melgaard isn’t biting. “I think they’re really cute,” he says. “It’s not some deep, existential meaning behind it.”

“Bjarne’s life and his practice are a thin line,” says Max Wolf, the chief curator at Red Bull Arts New York. “His work is very auto-fictive, too. ‘It could be me, it could not.’ I think that ambiguity really is what’s interesting.”

And some controversy is very much a part of Melgaard’s work, as well. Among some unprintable slogans found in a series of streetwear-inspired capsule collections also on display is a T-shirt that reads, “I Hate Rihanna,” and sweatpants with “Relapse” printed down the leg. Another hoodie bears the slogan “Not Your Gay Friend,” inspired by Bash Back!, the queer anarchist movement from the early 2000s. “I think that a lot of gay men really lack aggression,” Melgaard says. “It was very interesting that there was actually one movement that was very aggressive.” He stops short of connecting that point of view to current political climate, though. “A lot of people think it’s a response to the election, but it’s really not,” he explains of the hoodie. “We were working on these ideas a long time before Trump was president.”

Just about the only definitive stance Melgaard will take is that whatever comes next will not involve fashion. “The next show is going to be paintings and sculptures,” he reports. “Enough clothes for now. I’m kind of over it.”