

Jonathan Allen

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation.
—Guy Debord

The work of Jonathan Allen is composed of densely layered images and text that swirl, collide, and unravel into complex tableaux bordering on the fantastical and apocalyptic. Over the past few years, Allen has been working at the intersection of painting, drawing, and collage, crafting intricate paper and canvas compositions that reflect on the schizophrenia and cacophony of postmodern capitalist culture. His process begins with meticulous scavenging, culling images and text from a myriad of found sources, from fashion magazines and photographs to movie posters and other ephemera. By juxtaposing these snippets, often torn or spliced into jagged geometric shapes, Allen creates a scenic meshwork of abstract, festering landscapes—a jumbled palimpsest of contemporary culture. The subsequent incongruities work to engender fresh associations, and a unique pictorial language emerges from the artistry, one which engages notions of spectacle and mass mediation while commenting on the social inequity, alienation, and anomie associated with rapid urbanism and globalization.

Much of Allen's assemblages are imbued with extremes of violence and desire, manifesting prominently in places where images of war and chaos are set alongside iconic representations of superficial beauty and symbols of marketing. In *Can't Get There From Here* (2009), gleaming lipstick tubes stand erect like skyscrapers. Shimmering diamond bracelets interlock with a handcuff, while below, laboring figures from an old black-and-white photograph arrive on the vivid floor of the stock exchange. A U.S. soldier on bleak terrain hunches in the foreground, his dull fatigues in sharp contrast to the ochre glow pervading the backdrop. Altogether, the composition functions as a stark reminder of the Janus-face of capitalist modernity. The confluence of competing forms creates a dynamic, vibrant work churning with signifiers of greed and desire, alluding to the implicit violence and profound emptiness inherent in mass consumerism. Another large-scale collage, *The Aisle* (2006), relies on visual tropes and characters from science fiction to present a nearly inscrutable scene of ruin and destruction. Figures donning white-plated spacesuits stand amidst a quarry of black and gray detritus. The shelves of the supermarket aisle flanking them offer an infinite repetition of goods and commodities. It is an otherworldly vision of a postmodern dystopia, contrasting opulence and leisure with deterioration and filth, while simultaneously insinuating a collapse in time and space—it appears at once futuristic, present, and archaic, as if this drive towards standardization and unbridled consumption is destined to forever be part of our history.

Of all of Allen's small-scale collages, *W Baghdad* (2009) is perhaps his most powerful and poignant depiction of the harms caused by rampant acquisition and consumption, focusing not only on the plethora of goods and services pushed to our fingertips, but also responding to a world mediated by spectacular imagery—that is, an image-economy perpetually bombarding us with depictions of everything from violence, poverty, and squalor to hyper-sexualized, artificial concepts of beauty. In *W Baghdad*, a scene from the war-torn city rises from within the lavish interior of the W Hotel, a consummate emblem of the capitalist dream. The skewed perspective examines the devastation embedded within our desire for wealth, symbolized by the lavish architecture that functions as a porthole through which one sees the 'truth behind the walls,' the reality beyond representation. The dichotomy of images, selected for their extremes, not only highlights a jarring union of violence and aspiration, it also suggests an overwhelming estrangement from reality, a place where spectacle engenders an insidious passivity.

Drawing from the feverous activity of city life, numerous elements of architecture, vernacular culture, and politics are often deftly repurposed by Allen into works that channel the electricity of an expressionistically rendered global metropolis. These pieces are deeply informed by the topography of urban landscapes, specifically New York, pushing the city's architecture into abstraction as part of a commentary on rapid urbanism. Thus, New York becomes a tangible force within compositions such as *Across the East River* (2008) and *Night and Day* (2008), where bridges and skylines are sliced up and interwoven, torn apart and inverted. The burning reds and oranges of *Sugarloaf Mountain* (2008) and *The Day I Decided to Move to New York* (2009) communicate the decay of their twin environments, a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah razed and resurrected by flames and the harried hands of developers. For Allen, rapid urbanization promises a false sense of immediate growth and progress, oftentimes leading instead to cataclysmic erasure and overwhelming anomie. By creating surreal landscapes where the city itself is unraveled to abstraction, dissected and rearranged to reveal its entropy, Allen's compositions critique the issues underlying urban alienation and disaffection.

To quote critic and curator Okwui Enwezor, globalization has signaled the “terrible nearness of distant places,” a phenomenon that has not only impelled and amplified fluidity between different cultures and ideologies, but has also exacerbated socioeconomic divisions through the transformation of class structures. The global city is increasingly characterized by widespread social inequity and jarring disparities in wealth, a polarization poignantly mirrored—formally and thematically—in tumultuous compositions such as *Day Labor* (2009). Within this collage, the juxtaposition of toiling bodies beneath the weight of glowing architecture exposes a striking imbalance. The work's contrasting imagery, compositional hierarchy, and variances in color and tonality highlight inequalities embedded within movements of labor and capital. *Away We Go* (2009) sheds further light on the dynamics of power embedded within class relations. Here affluent women donning luxurious fur coats literally scale a mountain of coupons for discounted produce, a straightforward allusion to the wealthy advancing at the expense of the impoverished. A similar sentiment is reflected in *Survival of the Fittest* (2009), where the truncated legs of two well-heeled women gleaned from a fashion magazine purposefully ascend a foreboding apocalyptic cityscape. Beside them a section of text reads, “They came, they saw, they conquered the big bell skirt.” This incisive conflation of aspirational lifestyles and decadence invokes the tension within developmental clashes spurred by rapid social transition, as the ‘upwardly mobile’ continue to scale the socioeconomic ladder to the increasing detriment of the downtrodden.

In our current climate of globalized mass culture, the aesthetics of Allen's work seem to echo Guy Debord's seminal thesis on the ‘society of the spectacle,’ which appears all the more topical in a contemporary context. Yet Allen's enigmatic collages propel Debord's theories into a distinctively postmodern realm, wherein the intermingling of diverse visual languages and histories with multiple markers of time and place reflect a new state of hybridity, which Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have termed ‘Empire.’ Through the painstaking process of cutting and reconfiguring various signifiers, Allen forges unique connections between otherwise disparate iconographies. The power of his work lies in this very practice, as the gaps and fissures of each composition create a critical space for other interpretations and associations while offering commentary on globalization and its discontents. Within the microcosms of these mosaic tableaux, the sense of alienation and social inequity that characterize our global order are embodied, compounded, and subsequently ripped apart, reflecting Allen's simultaneous engagement with and critique of the very culture he boldly addresses.

—Persis Singh