

## Diego Ramirez, *Vampires of the Earth*

For any medium has the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary. Prediction and control consist in avoiding this subliminal state of Narcissus trance.

— Marshal McLuhan, 1964.<sup>1</sup>

Directly after copulation, the devil's laughter is heard.

—Arthur Schopenhauer, 1851.<sup>2</sup>

*Vampires of the Earth* is a continuation of Diego Ramirez's enquiry into the symbolic potential of the vampire and its associated iconography. Here, a poetic conflation of blood and oil unites the works exhibited, all titled *Gentrified language stained with capital like blood in a vampire's teeth*. He recomposes neon, resin, latex, found objects, and images in sculptural works and multi-media collages—a meeting of materials and cultural detritus that points to the slippages and contradictions implicit in our cultural landscape with a mind to reveal sublimated desires and unacknowledged ambiguities slick with fluidic metaphors.

Ramirez is adept at reconciling seemingly incongruous ideas and aesthetic vocabularies. For instance, rather than merely pointing to the breakdown of high and low culture—the juvenile iconoclastic gesture par excellence—he subtly unravels their symbiotic relationship in works that integrate the affective successes of both. Two abstract works featured in *Vampires of the Earth* are glossy messes of resin and black aluminium resembling wet tar. These turbulent surfaces are contained in matte latex frames that appear to have bubbled and dripped in the drying process, leaving a patchy, globular finish threatening to slide off the vertical support. It's rather gimmicky. Latex is a material commonly utilised in gory special effects. Indeed, the dripping effect Ramirez employs is synonymous with low budget horror flicks. Yet, the tension posed by the vertical presentation recoups the formlessness of modern art. Painters like Clyfford Still, Morris Louis and Jackson Pollock vertically suspended messes of unruly paint, as if the picture plane refused the laws of gravity: a modernist trick or a painterly “special effect” that inadvertently parallels the B-movie trope in high culture.

The engulfing darkness of the aforementioned work is broken only by flecks of ambient light bouncing off its chaotic ripples. As Noam M. Elcott highlights, for the ancients through to the early moderns, darkness signalled ‘chaos and absence, evil gods and melancholic thoughts.’<sup>3</sup> Moderns, in their forward march, conquered darkness and its associated spectres with artificial light.<sup>4</sup> The most imposing works in *Vampires of the Earth* are two sculptures comprising large neon-lit black Perspex ovals that boast Ramirez's kitsch drippy motif. They are six feet tall, matching the artist's height. Interestingly, these dimensions recall those of an iconic work of American minimalism. Tony Smith's black steel cube *Die* (1968) was also six feet tall. Smith chose this scale due to its correspondence to human stature and its morbid connotations. ‘Six feet’, Smith asserted, ‘has the suggestion of being cooked. Six foot box. Six foot under.’<sup>5</sup> Death also haunts Ramirez's black neon-emblazoned

Perspex ellipses, which he created with a drop of oil in mind. Indeed, oil is synonymous with death, environmental devastation, and war.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the myth that oil comes from dinosaurs—*very old, dead things*—is compelling as a poetic motif. The persistent theory suggests that a resource derived from a pre-Christian world (one Creationists deny) drives today's global powers. Onto other reawakened dead things: as reiterated in literature and film, the vampire can't see its reflection in the mirror. We can just see ours in the reflective surfaces of these black ovals. This teasing of self-reflection is a nod to our complicity in vampiric practices of exploitation and extraction. We are all—albeit involuntarily—subjects dependant on oil, and on complex, interrelated systems of exploitation. These exploitative systems *take care* of our needs.

Ramirez made the works featured in *Vampires of the Earth* in pairs, each posing a particular duality loaded with political, linguistic, or iconographic significance. On the lower curve of the Perspex ellipses, neon traces imagined catchlights in the form of vertically oriented half-moons. One smiles and one frowns. The overall effect resembles a minimalist interpretation of the comedy and tragedy masks. In Ancient Greece, these masks served a pragmatic purpose. Even audience members seated far from the stage could see the masks and understand the emotions being portrayed unburdened of the distracting ambiguity of individualised facial expressions.<sup>7</sup> Ramirez contemporary take on the masks read like giant steampunk emojis. Turned virtual, the theatre prop becomes an abbreviated emotional vocabulary: useful shorthand when so many people that occupy our lives remain at a distance, literally and figuratively, lest the pantomime of *good vibes* be betrayed.

Common abbreviation “OK” and acronym “KO” (meaning “knock out” or “kill off”), feature in another of Ramirez's twin works. The letters are formed by resin casts of deflated balloons, like withered red viscera. Framed again in dribbling latex, the confetti of older artworks that Ramirez sacrificed sit in the bottom like shattered glass in a debased lightbox, a pale mess of wasted potential. (A pun on “seminal” work?) Ramirez cites “R U OK? Day” as a partial inspiration for this pair. The annual event, which encourages people to enquire about the mental health of others, was conceived by an Australian suicide prevention organisation that has received millions in taxpayer funding since 2011.<sup>8</sup> Though critics hasten to praise good intentions, many consider this method of intervention superficial and troublingly informal. ‘All she wanted to do was to make herself feel good by asking the question’, one R U OK? target reported, ‘I felt ... like I was being used like a gimmick.’<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the cutesy abbreviation itself highlights the thoroughly gimmicky status of the HR department-ready sentiment. Another twentieth-century artist that utilised balloons was Piero Manzoni in his *Fiato d'artista* series (1960). When first inflated, the balloon's bulbous form offered a lively alternative to static sculpture. Today, they are limp skins plastered to the boards on which they were mounted. The wilted forms evoke another sexual connotation, again of the postcoital. Cast in resin, Ramirez renders the limpness of overzealous, premature gestures in solid form.

A discernible, albeit digitally enhanced, trace of the artist's hand appears in panels bearing the text "I see you" and "I hear you" in energetic handwriting. The red cursive floats over generic image of gravestones, suggesting a dialogue with the spirits. Superficially, these might resemble a goth inversion of the motivational slogan "live, laugh, love", but the phrases themselves have an import adjacent to self-care and wellness culture: a signal of acknowledgment, to "see" or "hear" the other. The acknowledgement typically covers grievances, accomplishments, or identities. Again, it is easily weaponised as a performative buffer in the ruthless context of contemporary culture wars and rampant virtue signalling.

The gentle curves of the handwritten acknowledgments contrast with the bold assertiveness of arial font featured in panels reading "5 uncomfortable signs you're becoming the person you're destined to be." More graveyard vistas accompany the text, dragging the vapid self-improvement rhetoric into an acknowledgment of mortality. It's a joke on the listicle or the infographic, formats that boomed in the 2010s through online platforms like BuzzFeed and Instagram. But it's another pertinent conflation. The denial of death is a necessary cope after the dissolution of the belief in the soul, a wound crudely sutured with dubious reliance on the capitalist-driven cult of youth and the doomed fantasy of ever-increasing value and virality. The format Ramirez targets imply doctrinal or bureaucratic rule in their faux scientific ordering of information. Indeed, soft control operates today through enforced positivity and distracting therapeutic rhetoric. The infographic or listicle performs critical thinking for us, so we don't have to, while simultaneously banishing any regard for nuance and complexity. Like a children's picture book, bright lettering and a diverse cast of bulbous-limbed flat animation figures (a cheerier version of the robotic humanoid consumers in fascist-era Italian advertising) candy-coat delegated ideologies that foreground the performative politics of "care" and "empowerment".<sup>10</sup>

Ramirez's appropriations wrest rhetorical cues from their associated iconography to highlight their failings or oversights in new, brutal juxtapositions. Panels bearing the text "5 forms of gas lighting" are particularly aggressive examples. Though muted, each of Ramirez's panels appropriates a media-sourced image of fiery chaos: an apocalyptic photograph of the ocean on fire after an underwater gas pipe burst in the Gulf of Mexico, and an image of a police officer being set alight by a protestor. The latter assault occurred in Ramirez's hometown of Guadalajara during a riot sparked by the fatal beating of a 30-year-old man at the hands of the police. Introduced to the lexicon by a 1944 film, "gaslight" is a colloquialism that gained traction in the mid-2010s via self-help and amateur psychology.<sup>11</sup> It refers to the experience of having one's reality questioned by another to the point that one begins to doubt their mental faculties. Ramirez deftly contrasts the pseudo-psychological colloquialism and the echo of its literal referent in this cutting juxtaposition of image and text.

Today, liberal discourse often eschews moral complexity or transgression, dismissing artistic displays of aggression or antagonism as “problematic” or, worse, “toxic”.<sup>12</sup> Yet, while moral complexity is drained from art, a delight in cruelty reemerges in the obviously libidinally invested tyrannical policing of others. Indeed, despite their professed open-mindedness and benevolent aura, the Guardian-reader set are some of the most punishing and cruel characters you could have the misfortune to encounter. Terms like “imposter syndrome”, “gaslighting”, and “microaggression” are often overutilised by those insulated from the reality of violence, an insulation that leads them to conflate violence with speech acts. Ironically, in a twist that seems like “gaslighting”, the use of such umbrella terms can help obfuscate particularities for the purpose of—depending on the context—compounding punishment or absolving accountability.

Another *inflammatory* pun, “Light my fire” is written across the gallery floor in a dribbling resin scrawl that pools and thins letter to letter. The ejaculatory mess is contained by two gas pump nozzles positioned like inverted commas. Oil, blood, and semen (or tears, according to the artist) mix in a fluidic metaphor that invokes the joy of transgression—in the careless spilling of dangerous liquids. In his article “Psychoanalysis and the Geography of the Anthropocene: Fantasy, Oil Addiction and the Politics of Global Warming” (2014) Stephen Healy highlights the role of repressed desire in perpetuating global oil addiction. An apt metaphor, Healy insists that an acknowledgment of the ambivalent nature of pleasure itself is required to mitigate catastrophe.<sup>13</sup> There is clearly a pleasure in spending, spoiling, and soiling. Our desires are rarely pure. Often, our pleasure is lubricated by another’s pain.

If there is a cruelty in Ramirez’s work, it is no more threatening than the crude hypocrisies smuggled in his source material. Yet, Ramirez doesn’t launch a critique scaffolded by an idealised alternative or utopic “beyond world”. Rather, he poses an ambivalent gesture towards the acknowledgment of implicit contradictions and their dubious role in maintaining the existing power structures of an ever-changing cultural landscape where aesthetics and language are endlessly fungible, their manipulation often a means to nefarious ends. The artist is a vampire too, one that saps the vitality of a highly ambivalent and covertly religious culture for creative and monetary gains.

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, [1964] 1966), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, "Chapter XIV: Additional Remarks on the Doctrine of the Affirmation and Denial of the Will-to-Live", in *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays. Vol. 2.*, trans. Payne, E. F. J. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1851] 2000), 316.

<sup>3</sup> Noam M. Elcott, *Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern art and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Tony Smith quoted in Eleanor Green, "The Morphology of Tony Smith's Work", *Artforum* 12, no. 8 (April 1974), 55.

<sup>6</sup> Recent studies revealed that over eight million people died in 2018 alone from fossil fuel pollution, including thousands of children who die each year from respiratory illnesses. Moreover, in India, thirty percent of all deaths of people over the age of 14 were caused by fossil fuel pollution. Harvard, School of Public Health, "Fossil Fuel Air Pollution Responsible for 1 in 5 deaths worldwide", 2 September 2021. URL: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/c-change/news/fossil-fuel-air-pollution-responsible-for-1-in-5-deaths-worldwide/>.

<sup>7</sup> Cynthia Whissell, *Engaging with Emotions* (Cham: Springer, 2023), 209.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Saunders, "No, I'm Not Okay: The isolation of R U OK? Day", *Overland Journal*, 13 September 2018. URL: <https://overland.org.au/2018/09/no-im-not-ok-the-isolation-of-r-u-ok-day/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed exploration of Italian fascist era advertising, see Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising Under Fascism* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Ben Yagoda, "How Old Is 'Gaslighting'?", *Chronical of Higher Education*, 12 January 2017. URL: <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2017/01/12/how-old-is-gaslight/>.

<sup>12</sup> Often this also means *masculine*, or *phallic*. Aesthetics of tweeness or cutesiness cloak cynicism.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Healy, "Psychoanalysis and the Geography of the Anthropocene: Fantasy, Oil Addiction and the Politics of Global Warming", in S. Pile and P. Kingsbury (eds), *Psychoanalytic Geographies* (London: Ashgate, 2014), 181-196.