

'CARTER' - THE NAME
ALONE HOOKS YOU IN.
THE VERY FACT THAT IT'S
A NAME, ALONE.
WHY IS IT UNQUALIFIED?
WHAT HAPPENED TO
THE FIRST BIT?
OR IS IT THE SECOND
THAT'S MISSING?
OR MAYBE IT'S NOT REALLY
HIS NAME AT ALL.

words MARK RAPPOLT portraits SHARIF HAMZA





ON THE FACE OF IT, Carter's body of work to date, spanning painting, photography, sculpture, sound works and video, feels just as enigmatic. In general – and this is to offer anything but a complete overview – you could say that the New York-based artist seems to have a predilection for representing mysterious heads and faces. These crop up, most often covered in hair (in a Cousin It kind of way that stops just short of suggesting obsession; there's a wig thing, too) most often in drawings and paintings, reduced to outlines or rendered, as in the paintings in his latest London show, as floating blobs with creepy, staring eyes. There are equally strange Polaroids of shiny shop-dummy arms 'making' the other works (preparing the background of a painting, for example, or poised over a drawing), which, as much as anything else, serve to redouble the mystique of their maker. The loose-limbed theme is repeated in video, photographic and sculpture works (notably in a 2008 exhibition at Yvon Lambert in Paris) featuring solitary legs arranged in some sort of homage to Robert Gober. And, in the background to many of his paintings and the set-up of his exhibitions, there's a more widespread interest in modernist interior design (and, perhaps, the domestic setting).

In recent months, Carter's *Erased James Franco* (2008) – a 63-minute film in which the titular actor reprises fragments of different scripts and scenarios from all his film roles, collaged into a bewildering, yet mesmerising whole – has brought the New York-based artist to a more general, less artworld-specific attention. The film's title is a tribute to Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953). Famously, Rauschenberg went over to the master painter's studio and said he'd like to erase one of his drawings as a work of art. De Kooning agreed. It took one month for Rauschenberg to complete the act and no record exists of the pre-erased drawing. On the other hand a glance at the listed materials – 'traces of ink and crayon on paper' – seems to indicate that somehow it's still a drawing, but a drawing stripped down to the bare minimum of existence, an Ur-drawing. Carter's video, as you watch it, appears to bear no connection to this work.

Just as Rauschenberg selected de Kooning because he was a star, you watch Carter's video with the knowledge that Franco is one too. But in Franco's case the so-called erasure serves to highlight his celebrity – a reminder that the subject is, on some level, important enough to merit the labour of the 'erasure'. The result: you're more conscious of Franco than you might ever have been before. To some extent, as he spins out disjointed dialogue (in particular one-sided telephone conversations that served some sort of linking purpose in the films from which they are extracted, but blur into incoherent babble when stitched together in Carter's script), Franco appears a bit like a remotely controlled dummy. Yet he simultaneously becomes a maximal presence: Franco, apparently, unmasked (there are no costumes, just jeans and a t-shirt). The erasure itself seems to be erased.

But back to unmasking Carter. The name thing's no big deal, the artist says. But not before he tells the tale of how the invitation card for one of his first New York shows featured a photograph of his sister's head, covered by her luxurious and abundant hair. "People who didn't meet me thought that was me," he says with evident glee. Still, let's not get carried away: Carter is simply what people have been calling him since he was a kid. "Once you stick to something there's no going back," he says with the same air of fatalism that wafts though the Franco film. You can't erase a Hollywood star, just as you probably can't now repeat the erasure



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that Rauschenberg perpetrated. In any case one quick hop-click-and-jump to Wikipedia reveals Carter's other name.

In Carter's most recent solo show, *And, it, the, constant, although* (at London's Hotel gallery this summer), there was a sculpture titled *Likeness* (2009). It comprises two similar-looking busts, one black and one white, on wooden stools at either end of the gallery, a train of carpet running between them. "I'm really interested in forensic artists, not in the aspect of their relation to the law but in the way in which they find, say, a skull and then have to recreate, through clay, glass eyes and fake hair, the identity of a missing person: a loss that someone's trying to address. And this half-assed artist-slash-law-person constructs this thing and they hope that someone will recognise it; but it never looks like the person they find. But there's still this care and interest in trying to solve the loss, and it produces this weird sculpture that's kind of becoming but doesn't quite make it, that's almost there. I find that really interesting: trying to reconstruct something that you only have pieces of."

At times that's exactly what it feels like to experience his art. Take *Untitled, (area)* (2009): on its surface float amoebic forms suggestive of faces, which, together with some cubiform



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geometric studies and a couple of botanical drawings, are set in modernist interiors, bizarrely equipped with Rococo furniture, all of it greyscale with random splashes of rouge and Lichtensteinesque paint flourishes splattered about like so much jism or broken shards of china. It's as if the busts from *Likeness* (and there's a profile outline not dissimilar to that of the busts lurking to the left of the painting) have been expanded and collapsed at the same time.

The connections between one work and another are an important part of a Carter show. And certainly he sees his work as part of a connected linear flow: "Growing up I thought: 'Doesn't every artist work in the same way? Doesn't every artist make one piece and they're all related and they're all about creating and yourself?'" he says. "But artists all work very differently. Which is odd, because I always think that's always the way you should make art: it should be very personal and it should be very linear and connect." At last, the ego has landed.

So, given that, and the name business (which, however much I want it to go away, cannot help but be an elephant in the room) it's no surprise that the artist, talking about his work in general, states: "It really is about portraiture; although it's probably more about self-portraiture than I'm willing to admit. Everything is about self-portraiture to some degree. Even the film I did with James."

At this point he decides to talk me through the evolution of a painting, *Area with tree and Picasso* (2009). He starts with the image of a room, he says, then there's a lot of Photoshop work, then the drawing and then the painting. The paint is very specifically placed, the outlines around the brush strokes consciously referencing Lichtenstein, the splatter effect reminiscent of Pollock. "I want to be both poetic and cold," he says. "There's this cold computer work and then this warm paint-work." There's also a Picasso painting on the wall and a shape reminiscent of a Henry Moore: anything but, it seems, Carter. It looks like a psychiatrist's waiting room, full of the ghosts of art history. "It's important to build upon things that are already done for you and to reference them and to honour them."

So is Carter's art a form of therapy or an attempt to locate his absent self? "I hate to say yes on that, because I can't stand that connection," he replies. "But I have to say yes. Although in the day-to-day making of it – no." Erased again. ♣

Carter's next solo show is at Salon 94 Freemans, New York, 9 September – 17 October

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Untitled, (area), 2009, digitally altered and dated interior on folded and defaced laser prints, acrylic ink, paint, pencil, coloured pencil, and gel medium on paper and on canvas, 107 x 135 cm

And, it, the, constant, although, 2009 (installation view, Hotel, London). Both images courtesy Hotel, London

Constant (James Franco As Inanimate Object As Robert Gober Sculpture) No. 4, 2008, cast of James Franco's left leg (polyurethane elastomer, synthetic hair), 56 x 12 x 31 cm (leg)

Erased James Franco, 2008, DVD, 63min, 34 sec. Edition 2/5. Both images courtesy Yvon Lambert, Paris