

# LANE CORMICK MBARZALONA

## ESSAY BY MICHAEL ASCROFT

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The performance artists of the 1960s and 1970s made themselves both the “subject and the object of the work”.<sup>1</sup> It was the immediacy of this form that was new and attractive to the artists involved, but they had convictions that went beyond interests in formal innovation and rested on ideological grounds. Maybe, also, behind their wacky ideas about liberation there was also an attraction to the idea that there should be some personal at stake in making art, some responsibility alongside the thrill of taking the stage at extreme events. The way Lane Cormick draws on this tradition makes you think so, anyway, because it seems to be that for anyone who today is in a serious way interested in those ideas about immediacy and performance, the first thing to notice would be that the ideologies from which those artists derived their artistic ethics are completely gone. The question is, what could justify that kind of work, or really, do justice to it, if it is to be more than rehashing the past, less than self-conscious and put-on?

Here “character” seems to play the part of a kind of moral centre in Cormick’s practice. The qualities of character (according to Erving Goffman) – courage, gameness, integrity, composure – can however be put to good use as well as bad. The test of character that maintains or creates character involves also a performance of a particular kind, which can be made into art – but that doesn’t oblige a good deed, or even the mistaken idea that the artist concerned might be responsible for one. Maybe on balance Cormick’s performances, in which a kind of self-destructive adrenalin is the key to creating that sense of immediacy, tip further towards the work of bad characters than to the good. But you could say in response that’s to be expected when thrills are at stake, now as forty years ago – and good reports coming from the audiences of works like *Cook Mustard* *Beale Swan* would seem to confirm this. Just as importantly however Cormick abides by a rule that he will only make use of a “character” he actually knows, as in, it has to be someone from real life. No outsourcing – not with the important stuff. Alternatively, he puts himself in the spotlight. So the idea of responsibility has been there all along, as an anchor, that keeps the work from becoming too staged, too easily packaged.

Most of this relates to Cormick’s work across the 2000s. Nowadays the stakes are somewhat different. Installations like *MBARZALONA* are not so much works about that immediacy as it appears in a performance where something is genuinely at risk. The new works are confined to controlled spaces, the performers are choreographed, Cormick himself is less present. The various errors that Cormick lets partly direct the work during its making, and that same mysterious immediacy are there, but subtly so and in lieu of an event, so “it” sort of hangs in the air around the arrangements of objects and images like a haze. That special quality is not that hard to place, since it has familiar sources, for example, symbols of wealth and power, fame, music, or generally, a suggestive, cultish vibe. But the combined effect, unlike his past works, is on the side of the imagination more than real, physical presence. Still, there is a new aspect that has opened up in these quieter kinds of room, from where Cormick in places still makes use of his “characters”, now partly in the form of measures and reminders of what is missing.

1. Foster, H., Krauss, R., Bois, Y. A., & Benjamin, H. D. *Art Since 1900*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007, p. 565.