


# frieze

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## Jeffrey Vallance

SANTA MONICA MUSEUM OF ART, LOS ANGELES, USA

'The World of Jeffrey Vallance' is a fun place to visit. You can go there without really leaving suburban American culture behind. Which isn't to say that the readily accessible yet profoundly idiosyncratic domain inhabited by the peripatetic artist's paintings, drawings and sculptures is anything like the bland, pre-programmed space in which artists predisposed to being social critics insist we all live. Although Vallance's world and that of pre-packaged tourism are banal, and extend well beyond the borders of the United States, his version is unashamed of being mundane. Its quest for the extraordinary is never predicated on a denigration of the everyday. His world reflects a vision too generous and hands-on to settle for the abstract platitudes of criticality. What distinguishes Vallance's wide-ranging works from the clichés spewed by the tourist industry - and institutional authorities - is that his version of the world is fascinating, playful and empowering, rather than standardised, compartmentalised and distant. It presumes (and demonstrates) that with the right outlook and a little creativity, anyone, anywhere, can live in a world suffused with mystery, where innumerable interconnections weave a web in which the prosaic is regularly linked to the sacred.

Vallance's homemade souvenirs, re-created relics and wacky documentations of trips to Iceland, Tonga, the Vatican, Vienna, Samon, Mexico City and Canoga Park are a testament to the resonance of the everyday. Driven by a radically democratic impulse, they're personal without being self-indulgently autobiographical. Two extensive projects are as significant for their exploration of a long line of Christian iconography as they are for articulating Vallance's identity. His thoroughly, if quickly documented, recreations of the Lance of Longinus (which pierced Christ's side after he died on the Cross), and the Veil of Veronica (on which a portrait of Jesus was printed when she wiped his face on the way to Calgary), chart a rich history interwoven with myth. At the same time, these holy relics spell out the artist's name: run together, 'veil' and 'lance' sound suspiciously like 'Vallance'. All of his projects insist that everything begins with individual experience. They also leave each of us free to decide for ourselves how open-ended these experiences might be. Given Vallance's example, individuality embodies shared traits and traditions, without in any sense diminishing one's uniqueness. As his art eliminates distinctions between the profane and the sacred, it also refuses to segregate commonness and individuality.

To Vallance's fertile imagination, the blood-stained cardboard under a frozen, cellophane- wrapped chicken purchased at a supermarket bears a family resemblance to the Shroud of Turin, the legendary burial cloth which wrapped Christ's body. This striking similarity took the artist to Vienna, where his research uncovered a curious link to George Washington, whose silhouette, printed in Christ's blood, seemed to appear on the Shroud. Further study of the stains led to Vallance's discovery of four portraits of sinister clowns. Enthralled by these multiplying connections, he then travelled to the Vatican, where he splashed cappuccino on his face in a re-enactment of the miracle that produced Christ's image on Veronica's Veil. The Veil's and Lance's place in history, and in Vallance's imagination, continued to grow. The artist went on to suggest that since Elvis Presley was purportedly reading a paperback about the Shroud of Turin when he died, the sweat-stained scarves he often tossed to ecstatic fans must be the Shroud's distant, but still legitimate cousins. Pushing things to a feverish pitch, Vallance even proposed that the miracle of Veronica's Veil is not a distant, long-lost moment in history, but a living event re-enacted nightly at the 'Batman A Go-Go', a strip-joint in his hometown of Canoga Park, California, where dancers drape their skirts over patrons' heads to perform the 'Veil of Ecstasy'.

In Vallance's world, facts are weirder than fiction, a good story counts above all else, and, with belief, meaning proliferates. His ingenuous investigations treat modern life as an unexplored territory with untapped possibilities for experiences bordering on the sacred. There's only one requirement: these works must be experienced first hand. For viewers, this means that the world is whatever you make it. Seen through Vallance's eyes, anyone's surroundings constitute a magical environment in which mystery and enchantment are within arm's reach - if you care to grab them. Even cheesy, pre-packaged components of commodified American culture possess the potential to be talismans of something wondrous. Vallance believes neither authorities or officials, nor accepts stereotypical views. In his eccentric, innocent explorations of the quotidian, he finds compelling mysteries wherever he looks. This is do-it-yourself world-making at its best.

**David Pagel**