

Yoshua Okón at Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles

By Jonathan Griffin



Despite the dismaying evidence of recent political discourse in the US, it is still hard to believe that people like this actually exist. In Yoshua Okón's two-channel video installation *Oracle* (all works 2015), we are bouncing across the Arizona desert in a pickup truck with a portly man who looks a little like George H.W. Bush, and who interrupts his own demented diatribe about the consequences of messing with him with random bursts of one-handed automatic rifle fire, blindly out of the window. "Yeeee-haw!" he whoops.

What has got this man so riled up, we are told in the press release, is the illegal entrance of unaccompanied children from Central America into the United States. It is presumably these children he's addressing when he warns, "You mess with us and you mess with fire! And you're not going to like that. Because you're opening up hell!" The Mexican-born, US-educated Okón worked with – collaborated with, even – a nationalist militia called the Arizona Border Defenders, who were happy to restage a protest for his camera, carrying 'STOP INVASION' signs down an empty dirt road, and three others who chased their identical white Ford pickups in a dusty ring, Stars and Stripes and Gadsden flags flapping behind them. Later, schlubby men in untucked shirts and baseball caps attempt an inept homage to Joe Rosenthal's 1945

photograph *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, except their wobbly plastic flagpole won't hold straight in the wind. The metaphors write themselves.

As with much of Okón's videowork, the protagonists are doubly framed: by the artist and also by their own roleplay, by their eagerness to show him (and, by extension, us) who they are, their fragile self-images often shaped by pop-cultural tropes and clichés. In the exhibition's second half, a video installation titled *The Indian Project: Rebuilding History* is based around a segment Okón directed for a television station in Skowhegan, Maine, featuring members of the town's chamber of commerce who explain Skowhegan's 'Indian' history and then cringemakingly perform their interpretations of Native American ceremonies. All are apparently white, and most are elderly, save the chamber's earnest director, who wears a smear of war paint on each cheek. "This is our culture, folks, truly," says one lady, omitting to mention that Skowhegan was the site of merciless genocide against Native Americans. She points to the "world's tallest Indian" statue, and the high school's Indian mascot, as evidence of Skowhegan's affinity with Native culture.

Two idioms come to mind: 'shooting fish in a barrel' and 'give 'em enough rope and they'll hang themselves'. I eventually feel uneasy chuckling at the caricatures in Okón's films, and about my own personalised venting of ideological scorn. After all, it is not these aberrant individuals who are the cause of the United States' current malaise, but the ancient and ingrained systems that produce them; why else would elderly, or rural, or less educated communities so often harbour such misguided beliefs? The title Oracle – ostensibly the name of the tiny Arizona town where Okón's work was filmed – acknowledges this only obliquely. The tech multinational Oracle Corporation has long maintained ties to the CIA, and here its logo appears in place of a title screen. The gesture nods weakly at a much richer story to be told: the disconnect between the geopolitical micro and macro, and the irrelevance of the individual within the unstoppable swells of transnational capital.

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