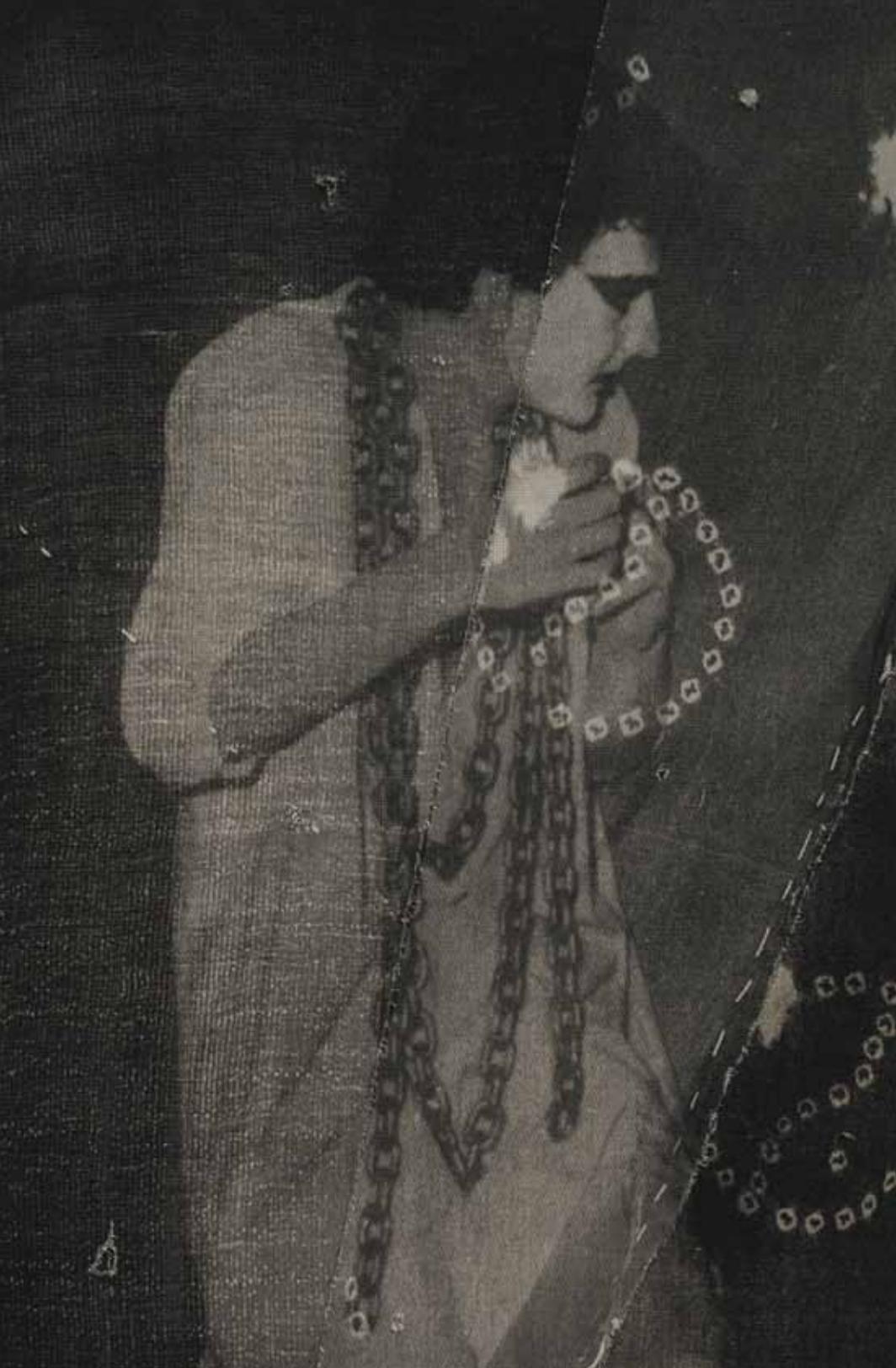


CONTEMPORARYARTMUSEUMSTLOUIS



Above: David Noonan, *Untitled*, 2010. Screenprint on linen, 84.25 x 119.69 x 2.36 inches.
Private Collection Rosana and Jacques Seguin, Switzerland.
Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.





David Noonan

The work of Australian artist David Noonan (b. 1969) presents images of people engaged in various performative activities that prompt consideration of the importance of masquerade, role-playing, and the collective experience of theater in contemporary society. His work suggests the profound effect that photography and other documentary media such as film or video has had in often being the only way that performances or events are experienced. Drawing on an ever-expanding private collection of magazine and book clippings, film stills, and other sources, he layers pictures of performers (or surrogates such as puppets) to create strange and mysterious new scenes that defy an easy or immediate association with a specific time or place. These images are transferred onto various fabrics that are roughly collaged to give them a more physical and tactile presence and to signal how our belief in the truthfulness of photographic information has eroded due to photography's increasing "dematerialization" by computer technology. Noonan also incorporates images of textile patterns over the figurative photographs to encourage an additional degree of visual distortion and to establish a tension between the abstract, tactile, and figurative elements within the work.

These superimpositions resemble the similar technique of montage in filmmaking, in which images are layered and combined to suggest relationships between characters or locations and to create transitions between scenes, thus exaggerating the fictive quality and nature of Noonan's use of documentary materials.

This exhibition features a selection of works in various media from the past half-decade that explore the manner in which staging and the production of theatrical effects shifts our perception of the world, of history, and of one another. The focus of Noonan's practice has developed significantly from the outset of his career in the mid-1990s, shifting from collaborative film and video projects that questioned cultural notions of science fiction, to works made in the early 2000s that allude to utopian and socially-progressive collectives of the 1960s and early-1970s. A constant characteristic of these earlier productions, as well as the more recent and ambiguous depictions of historically "placeless" figures in costumes and make-up, is a darkly evocative and foreboding visual sensibility. Fabrics and textiles have also remained consistent in Noonan's work as either the depicted subject or as the

actual surface, with an emphasis on their tactility and functionality as well as their patterns and design. This is evident in his larger photographic fabric-based works' resemblance to Japanese Boro textiles—rough-hewn, unconventionally beautiful, and geometrically abstract combinations of different rags or rag-like cloths. (Noonan actually punctures the fabric surfaces of some works in a manner consistent with these textiles.) The complex synthesis of the pictorial silk-screened images and the abstract, "sculptural" quality of the works' material composition is further complicated by the incorporation of a photographic "layer" of Boro pattern imagery over the more figurative elements.

The screen-printing technique employed in Noonan's larger works recalls Andy Warhol's iconic silkscreen paintings of the 1960s. Warhol emphasized the ability

of this process to mechanically transfer an image to a surface and potentially make an infinite number of reproducible paintings. Noonan, however, uses this approach to create singular and unique works. Despite their different historical contexts and divergent intentions, both artists ultimately criticize modern culture's trivialization of contemporary life through its insistence on experiencing things through mediated forms—Warhol by exaggerating that effect and Noonan by transforming the images into objects that must be encountered in person in order to be fully appreciated. Another interesting comparison between Noonan and Warhol can be made in terms of their relationship to theatrical performance. While the subjects of Warhol's paintings and films were usually already celebrities or desired becoming famous through their portrayal or participation in this

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work, the figures depicted in Noonan's works remain anonymously engaged in unknowable scenarios—a critical aspect of his emphasis on creating a more general understanding of theater and how it informs and affects our lives.

In addition to the large photographic fabric works, Noonan's exhibition features smaller collages and sculptural objects that develop his broader themes of the importance of the physical and material as well as the visual through the

experience of theater and performance. A series of wood cut-out sculptures produced specifically for an exhibition at the Chisenhale Gallery in London in 2008 features screen-printed images of figures frozen in various gestures creating a complex consideration of how photographic documentation of dance and other performances "flattens" the human body by removing it from its original spatial context. Noonan "restores" the physical presence of these dancers' bodies by displacing them from the



original site where their performance took place and installing them in the new three-dimensional location in the Contemporary Art Museum's Performance Space. However, the flatness of the wood cut-outs not only reconfirms the ultimate two-dimensionality of the photographs but also likens the dancers to the inanimate theatrical props that typically provide the background or scenery for living performers. Noonan also presents a new sculpture in which the lone figure of an owl, a constant motif throughout his career, sits upon a marble table as a response of sorts to the similarly modernist architecture of the Contemporary Art Museum's building. The owl's recurring presence in

his work owes much to its multiplicity of symbolic associations—both positive and negative—in many cultures throughout history. In this particular sculpture, its stylized appearance and placement on a structure reminiscent of mid-century modern furniture could represent the often fraught relationship between nature and culture that has come to define our times, especially in the often negative affect that modernization has had on the natural landscape. The owl might also be perceived to be positioned on the "stage" of the table as both a theatrical protagonist and an observer to extend Noonan's overarching meditation on how we all participate in the theater of life as both the actors and the audience.