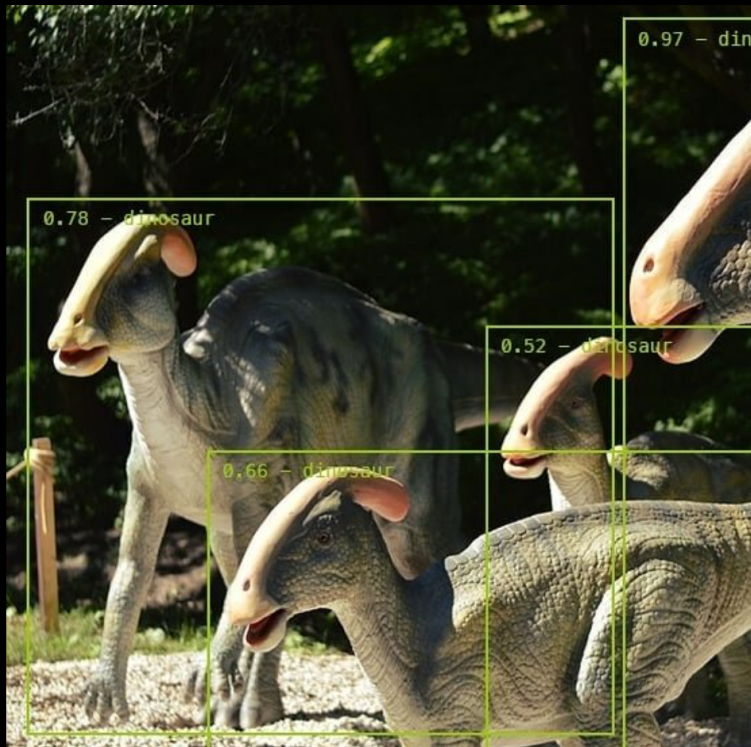


8 days ago

BOB BICKNELL - KNIGHT

ART

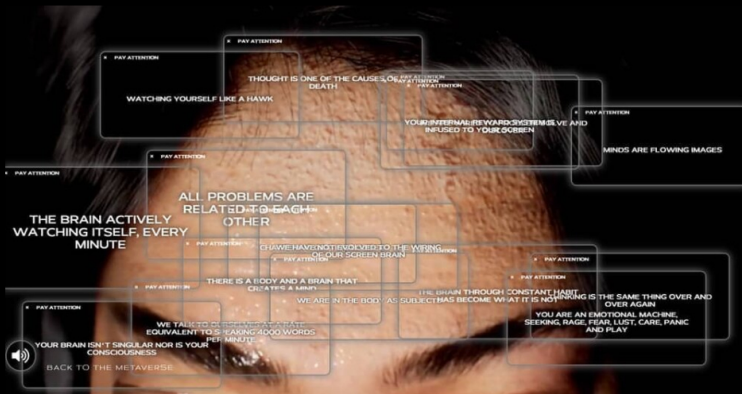


London based artist, writer and curator, Bob Bicknell-Knight is not only the face behind the contemporary art platform *isthisit?* but also a multiskilled artist who has been developing a rich body of research-based work analysing hypercapitalism and its effects on human behaviour. Most recently, his work has been looking at tech billionaires and their multinational companies, as well as investigating mass surveillance and the uprise of drone technology.

Fluctuating between digital and physical mediums, Bob's paintings, sculptures and videos follow a symbolic and substantially visual based language, often referencing internet culture and corporate communication. Working with multiple layers of information, his works stimulate the viewer to look and listen attentively in order to fully absorb their messages.

In our conversation Bob shared some of the themes explored in his latest solo show *It's Always Day One* at *Office Impart*, the symbolic language in his work, notions of internet time and the running of his self-founded platform *isthisit?*





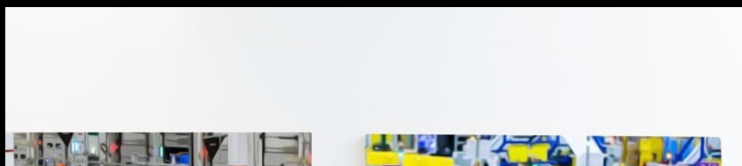
Currently, you have got a solo exhibition at Office Impart, entitled It's Always Day One. Could you talk a little about the inspiration for the exhibition title?

So the exhibition forms part of an ongoing research-based body of work that I've been working on since the beginning of 2020, concerning the technology company Amazon, their Fulfillment Centres and the relationship Amazon has to their human employees.

The title of the exhibition It's Always Day One refers to Amazon's founder and current CEO Jeff Bezos and his most popular phrase, used regularly in shareholder letters and press briefings. The term is the basis of Amazon's methodology, to always act as a business that is undergoing its first day of operation. It's a term that encompasses the idea that businesses, at the beginning of their life, must make tough, unflinching decisions, in order to increase their longevity.

Amazon is famous for underpaying their employees, setting unreachable targets and collapsing traditional independent brick and mortar stores. The problem with Amazon having this term embedded within their company policy is that they're a multi-trillion-dollar company. They no longer need to underpay staff or increase their revenue streams, they are no longer a start-up and can afford to set reasonable work targets and allow their employees to join a union. Many Amazon employees, particularly pickers who are responsible for picking up and scanning purchased items, have extremely strenuous workdays, timed toilet breaks and will slowly be replaced as artificially intelligent (AI) driven technologies become more widespread.

For me the phrase was the perfect title for the exhibition, encompassing why Amazon is such a ruthless company, and how they make this fact incredibly overt, both to their employees and customer base.





In the show, there are some 3D printed arms with embedded memory cards that contain interviews with some Amazon employees. This idea of embedding symbolic elements and playing with different layers of information seems to be very present in your practice. What attracts you to this symbolic language?

I try to create work that has multiple layers of understanding. Work that, in a way, rewards those that choose to spend more time with it, uncovering certain conceptual elements and symbolic choices.

Let's take the 3D printed sculptures as an example. As I mentioned before, the work in the current show in Berlin revolves around Amazon and their human employees. I'm particularly interested in how these workers are being treated like machines, as well as having their jobs slowly erased and replaced by intelligent robots as time moves on.

Each sculpture's main body or structure is made from an aluminium modular extrusion system commonly used in autonomous forms of production and to build office partitions. This autonomous structure supports the 3D printed body parts that have had SD cards embedded within them. Each artwork in the series represents an Amazon worker and the body part that they use on a regular basis in their job whilst working for Amazon, body parts that will soon be replaced by intelligent automated machines. Within each 3D print, an SD card is embedded that contains an interview with the affected employee, speaking

about their experience working for the multinational technology company. The embedded technology references the ongoing practice of unpaid and underpaid labourers hiding 'cry for help' notes in different products, attempting to alert authorities to unsafe working conditions and forms of modern-day slavery.

I enjoy making this kind of multi-layered work, hinting towards certain ideas through the use of different materials and referential imagery. Some time ago, before I started making hybrid interdisciplinary work about new technologies, my practice revolved around creating conceptual sculptures that embodied certain emotions or feelings. Even though I no longer make this kind of work, I think this interest in embedding elements of meaning inside my art has continued and grown. Rather than utilising a certain texture to represent an emotion, I now harness imagery to make meaning.





As you were mentioning the way your work rewards the ones spending enough time to uncover its underlayers, do you also believe this is how we should approach visual content online nowadays?

Ah, that's a nice question! I think it would be tough for me to take that approach to all the visual content that I encounter online, simply because there's not enough time in the day to spend reading into and fully engaging in everything that I might click on. I have about 80 or so tabs open on an average day and rarely have the time to cycle through them all.

From experience, this is the same for a lot of people engaging in art online. The amount of time people spend looking at an online exhibition on *isthisit?* (the platform for contemporary art that I run) is painfully low, clocking in an average time of around 2 and a half minutes. This, when an average exhibition features one or more videos that are usually around 10 minutes or so, makes you painfully aware of how little time people spend engaging with visual content, and particularly art, online.

I don't necessarily expect people to spend so much time looking at my own work either, as I certainly don't spend huge amounts of time in every exhibition I go to. I'm an artist because I like making art, with the people who engage with my work being a secondary concern for me. If I was too focused on creating work for my audience I would probably stop making work that I love to make, and at that point what would be the point of being an artist? I'm always incredibly thankful though when people do take the time to look and think about my work for an extended period of time, I think that's a real privilege.

Since launching *isthisit?* in 2016, how has your own practice been influenced by the platform? Do you see them as complementing each other or as two separate practices?

I see my art-making and art curating as one and the same, part of an overarching practice that feeds into one another. I definitely wouldn't be where I am in my art-making if I hadn't started the platform in 2016. Through it, I've met so many fantastic artists, curators and writers who have both influenced and contributed to the thinking behind my own work. A lot of the past *isthisit?* books have focused on themes that I myself am thinking about in my own artwork. What better way of learning about a certain idea than to research and edit a book that features a range of artists and writers who are working around that same concept? *isthisit?* is kind of like my research tool in a way, feeding my own art-making.

I've also been invited to be part of things with my own art because of my curating on *isthisit?*. A lot of people might research the platform, and then research me and my personal work. It's sometimes the other way around, although at this point I think the platform is a lot more known than the artist behind it.

Ultimately *isthisit?* has and continues to be a fantastic way of connecting with people around the world, one that I've greatly benefited from in my personal practice as it's grown.



Having in mind your Instagram posts depicting a traditional painter's studio with canvases on a white wall and paints on the floor that almost have a 'staged' quality to them. It feels as if the artist persona you create online is very calculated and it rarely reveals entirely who the person behind the work really is. Are you interested in this idea of being some kind of an undercover artist?

So for a few years now I've been crafting this online persona of a painter, who has, over the years, inhabited many different studio spaces. I spend days crawling the internet, sourcing images of artist studios which I then edit my own digital images into using Photoshop. These images are then posted to Instagram with the hashtag "studioview", creating this visual public facing image of an artist in their studio.

I wouldn't call myself a painter per se, but I do translate these digital images off of the screen to create what I call hybrid paintings. In a way I am a painter, but not in the traditional sense. The images that you see in the studio spaces begin on the screen,

manipulated and created on Photoshop. The works are then produced as physical, real world objects. The digital images are printed onto canvas, stretched and then partly painted onto with acrylic paint, with the offline artist's hand interacting with the original online digital image, creating a hybrid painting.

The artist studio images that I post to Instagram then go through this same process, being printed and painted, exposing and enhancing their simulated reality. The work stems from my interest in performing for social media, the politics surrounding painting and painters, as well as this fetishised image of an artist spending countless hours in their chaotic studio.

I'm not interested in being an undercover artist, I don't hide my identity or anything like that. If you research me and my work it's fairly easy to see and understand what the work I'm making is. I have a very extensive and thorough blog which goes back to 2015 that's very open about my life and artwork, as well as lots of interviews online where I speak about crafting this persona, so it's not like this part of my practice is actively hidden away and left undiscussed.

I think this lack of research from an audience perspective is built into the work, alongside ideas of faux or fake news, and comes back to what I was speaking about with regards to people not spending the time to uncover what an artwork is online. If you're just scrolling through the Instagram feed and come across my work you might assume that I'm a painter, but if you take the time to read a bit about me then it becomes quite overt that these are faux spaces. This mimics how people have been interacting with the news in recent years, taking news stories and complex data at face value, rather than taking the time to research what they're actually looking at and digesting.



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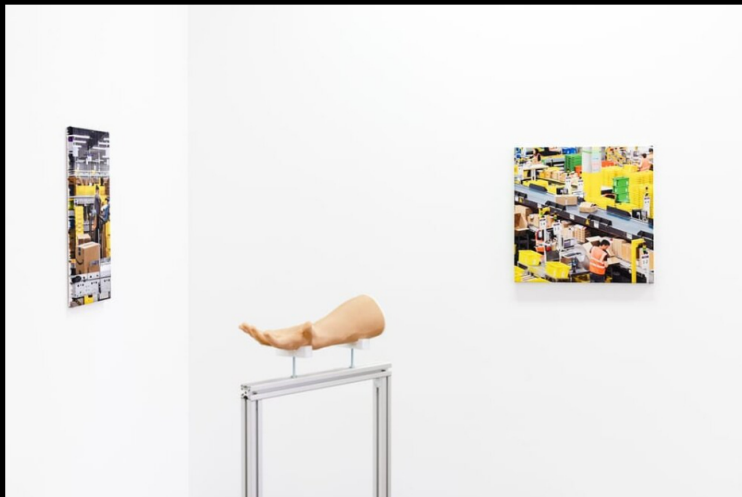
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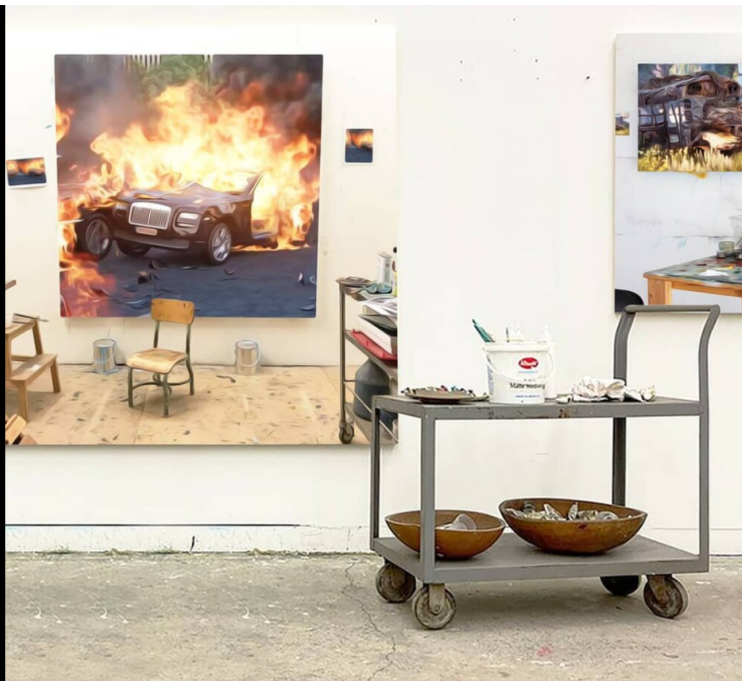
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FTSE 1.23%





What other projects have you got coming up this year?

I have a few things coming up. For some time now I've been organising and curating a group exhibition around algorithmic bias at [Senne] in Brussels which was originally going to coincide with the physical iteration of Art Brussels in 2020. Sadly that was delayed due to the coronavirus, but should be going ahead later this year if restrictions continue to be lifted.

I'm currently in the very early planning stages of a new programme of online residencies on the Isthait? platform, focusing on artists that make work about the positive aspects of digital technologies. This should hopefully happen towards the end of this year, or the beginning of the next. I'm also currently working with the online platform Off-Site Project and artist Petra

the online platform on-site Project and artist Paula Szemán on a collaborative online exhibition. We'll be joining both of our platforms together in early 2022 to showcase a series of digital artworks that are being commissioned by Szemán.

Coming up in June, I'm also working with Szemán to curate a solo exhibition of her video works for Mock Jungle, a TV screen that's viewable from the street at the Chapel of Santa Maria dei Carcerati in Bologna, Italy. That'll be happening from the 14th - 28th June, viewable 24/7 by those who pass by and visit the chapel.

With my own art, my solo exhibition in Berlin at Office Impart continues until the 6th June. Some additional works will also feature with them in this year's online iteration of Art Brussels, open between the 3rd and 6th June. I also have an upcoming solo exhibition in Paris at Galerie Polaris, currently scheduled for the end of June, called Est The Rich, featuring a body of work about trophy hunters and the richest people on the planet. I'll also have another solo exhibition towards the end of the year at Industria in Brno, opening in November 2021 and continuing until February 2022.

On top of this, I'm currently working on two new video commissions. One will launch both in Bucharest and Cluj, and is co-commissioned by Quote-Unquote and Cluj Cultural Centre. I'll be continuing my research into Amazon and its human employees to create a new video that considers the future of work and labour. The other will be part of a group show in early 2022 that's funded by Arts Council England, considering digital avatars and game worlds.

Other than these more focused projects, my work is currently viewable in the group show Fun & Games: Playtime past & present at The Portico Library in Manchester, will be part of a group show at The Assembly House in Norwich in June, a large group show at the Museum of Museums in Seattle in October, Proyector Festival in Madrid in September and at Big Screen Southend at Focal Point Gallery at some point later in the year.



BOB BICKNELL-KNIGHT

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interview **PIETRA GALLI**

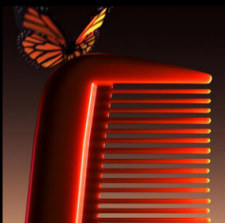
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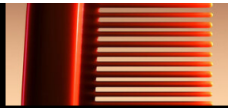
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