



Clifton Childree, *The Flew*, 1997-2003, 16mm, 90 minutes. Images courtesy of the artist and Dorsch Gallery, Miami.

CLIFTON CHILDREE

Southern Fried Auteur

BY CLAIRE BREUKEL

For the past ten years, Clifton Childree has provoked and incensed audiences with his risqué film and installation work. As a student, Childree began creating black and white 1920's vaudeville-style slapstick film, reminiscent of his Southern Gothic roots and akin to that of his birth town of Birmingham, Alabama. His background is a vital influence on the style Childree appropriates in his work, the props he selects, the musical scores he chooses for his film pieces, and most of all, on the wickedly satirical humor that underlies everything he does. In and of itself a script for a movie, Childree's childhood is where his creative inspirations originated. Now in the midst of his first international solo museum exhibition, Miami-based artist Clifton Childree is beginning an exciting global art career.

Having moved to Florida as a baby, Childree drew his influences both from his immediate family—his mother, a former nun, avid antique collector, and piano and clarinet player—and from his grandparents—whom he visited over summer breaks at their house in Mobile Bay, Alabama, and which bore the sign “Funny Farm” over its front door. He describes his grandfather as extremely bow-legged. A sailor for over forty years, he was the storyteller of the

family and told plenty of dirty jokes. Similarly idiosyncratic, his grandmother, a former vaudeville dancer, taught her grandchildren to smoke driftwood and encouraged them to stage their own plays, making the costumes and sets themselves.

This encouragement and Childree's love for the theatrical led to his immersion in the medium of film, specifically Super 8 film. This medium lent his productions a slapstick overtone reminiscent of the style of Charlie Chaplin movies, and infused with his penchant for grotesque humor, the intellectual quirkiness seen in Wim Wenders films. Finding this stylistic niche, Childree opened Theatre 1225, a space specifically dedicated to screening art and horror films. During this time, Childree began a six-year long project that culminated in *The Flew*, his groundbreaking 16mm film, which upon release in 2003 greatly contributed to Childree's acclaim in the film festival world. Finally, after having screened over eight films in over forty international film festivals—ranging from Indie Grits in Columbia, South Carolina to the likes of the Rome International Film Festival—and despite winning numerous awards—including Best Feature for *The Flew* at the Baltimore's Microcinefest, and Best

Experimental Short for *She Sank* at the Outhouse Film Festival in Baton Rouge—Childree’s unique approach began to feel out of place in the film circuit. Turning to the art world, he began exhibiting his films as part of larger installations which integrated props featured in his stories, echoing the film sets and placing the viewer into a metaphoric live scene. Ultimately, he began creating all-encompassing dioramas taking into consideration the audience’s experience in a full sensory capacity, relying not only on sound and visuals, but also on the associations to the materials used in his films which included old wood, found fabric, and plant life. The textures and smells of these often-reused materials carry with them an unexplained history, and relying on this open-ended possibility, Childree made the experience

of seeing flying feces and severed genitalia on the screen all the more real, terrifying, and sickening.

After winning the 2008 Locust Projects Artist Project Award, Clifton Childree created *Dream Cum Tru*, a monumental, interactive, and immersive arcade and live performance which wowed audiences and placed himself as *the* artist to watch. The award was sponsored by philanthropist Ernst Hilger, who spotted Childree’s talent and invited him to participate in a number of exhibitions abroad. Hilger comments on Childree’s work, “His art is a distinctive crossover between film and installation, and I like his biting humor, his absolute uniqueness, and the surfaces of the upgraded trash he transforms into art. He is what I call a true



She Sank on Shallow Bank, 2005, 16mm film, 12 minutes. In collaboration with Nikki Rollason. Music by Dan Hosker.

artist.” Drawing upon childhood influences, the film sets and installations Childree creates are self-made using found objects he scours for in his pick-up truck, which reflects his mother’s obsessive nature in collecting antiques. Originally, the filming was all done within life-size sets built in his backyard from this found material. However, as his projects grew larger and more ambitious, Childree had to find additional space to create his visions, eventually building sets in abandoned lots and loaned public spaces. The more risqué elements, however, still remain filmed in private.

Aside from this remarkable ability to reinvent found material, a

large part of Childree’s filming relies on collaboration, involving artists and friends such as fellow actors and actresses including his wife Nikki Rollason, a professional dancer. Rollason comments on working with Childree, “We have had two fights concerning me acting in his projects, both involving editing. It did not go over well when he gave me a fake wiener, but I was most upset when he used his own butt as a stand in for my butt. I didn’t want people to think I have a man-butt, but that is exactly what it looks like.” As Rollason elucidates, filming is only the beginning of the process. Childree painstakingly edits and reworks the content of every scene, and to create a dated and “time appropriate” effect he ma-



Orchestral Gestures, 2010. Installation view at Dorsch Gallery.



Fuck that Chicken from Popeyes. Installation view at Kunsthalle Wien (February 8 – March 16, 2011). Courtesy Kusthalle Wien.

nipulates the finish of the physical film by scratching, coloring, and even, for Dixie Dingo Film Festival trailer, rubbing the film through dog excrement to fit the nature of the festival's theme.

His dedicated and fastidious approach has ensured Clifton Childree's consistent and impressive progression into the spotlight. His recent success was further confounded by Childree's latest exhibition, *Orchestrated Gestures*, featured at Dorsch Gallery in Miami during Art Basel Miami Beach. As Childree's most notably layered exhibition to date, *Orchestrated Gestures* is comprised of three arcade game installations that explore the lives and deaths of three prolific musical composers: Scott Joplin, Richard Wagner, and Alexander Scriabin. Part autobiography and part fiction, Childree selects noteworthy elements from each one's life and death stories to spin together a narrative that is both laid out and accentuated through an arcade game, backdrop, and film installation. Combining a tone of respect for the composers' great talents, of frenzy to describe their fervent creativity, and of melancholy for their eventual demise, with the suggestion of foul play, Childree reconstructs the history of each composer as a heartwarmingly nostalgic yet eerily bizarre eulogy.

However, it is the video and sculptural installation entitled *Mysterium*, named after Russian composer Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin's unfinished masterpiece, which is the most somberly jarring. Using a portrait of Scriabin's mother along with a prop selection of multicolored bowler hats (perhaps to reflect Scriabin's desire to include

a color-coordinated lighting system during performances), Childree creates a ghostly scene of movements that depict the morbid death of the composer. This outlandish narrative and the replacement of human actors with ghostlike props makes *Mysterium* his darkest and most compelling work to date. Childree comments "I've always incorporated objects as characters in my work. Through stop motion animation, I am able to impose emotion that is sometimes more difficult than when I am working with living, breathing actors. I think the difference [in *Mysterium*] is that I am delving deeper into specific characters and events." Strangely life-like, a close-up of the portrait of the composer's mother reveals that she is bleeding from the mouth, mimicking Scriabin's death. (He accidentally burst a carbuncle that had grown on his upper lip whilst combing his long curly moustache, an unfortunate accident which resulted in blood poisoning and the composer's untimely demise.)

Emerging beyond the bounds of his Miami home and grabbing the world by the proverbial balls, Clifton Childree's first museum solo exhibition mischievously titled "Fuck that Chicken from Popeyes" debuts at the Kunsthalle Wien in Vienna, Austria. Described as a "gesamtkunstwerk" or "total work of art," this exhibition promises to be filled with Childree's provocative humor and enchanting eccentricity.

An insatiable and tireless creator, Childree states in an interview, "I don't know if I'll ever get there, but I know what it is, that thing that I'm going for. It's unexplainable. You can't even verbalize it." ■