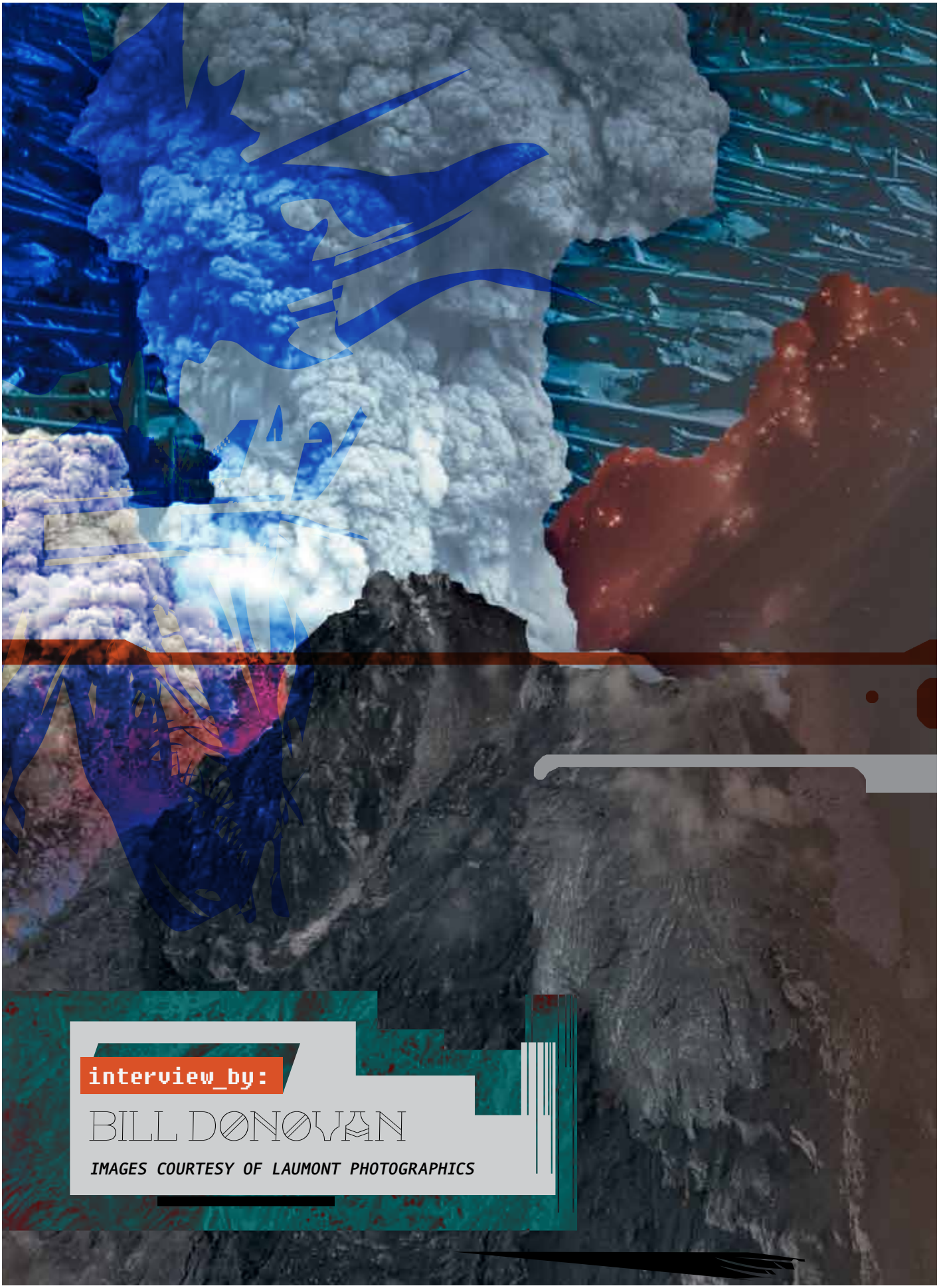

interview_by:

BILL DONOVAN

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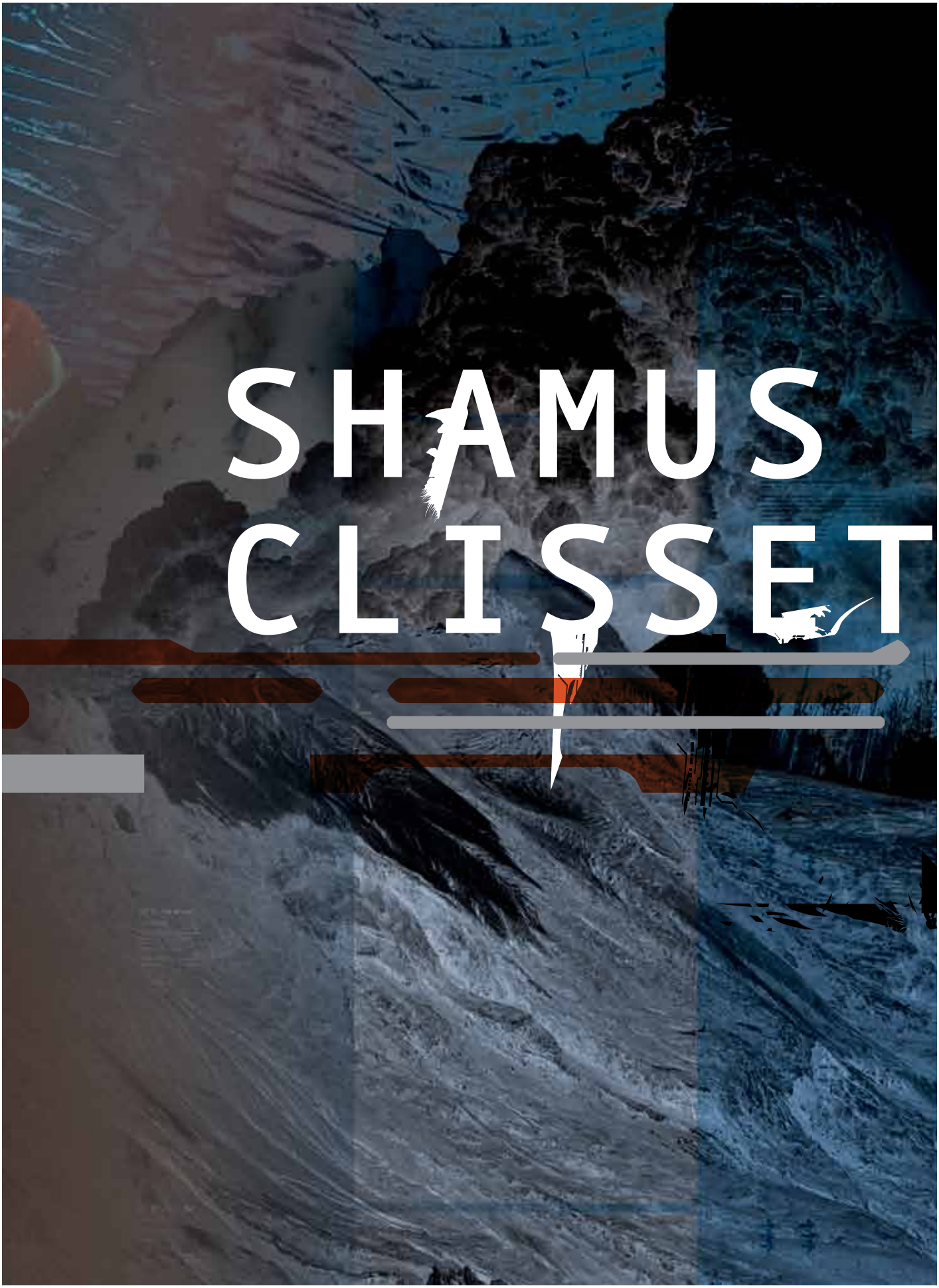

SHAMUS
CLISSET

When he's in the studio, Shamus Clisset hangs with his imaginary friend

FakeShamus. They co-design large-scale digital C-prints of fantastic scenes. The work demonstrates, paradoxically, an almost unbelievable faithfulness to reality, because it is a deception as the images are completely invented by Clisset.

Clisset's topics range from spirit animals, to floating building supplies suspended in a ballet of symmetrical space, to what is arguably the hottest sports car of all time, the Lamborghini Countach. Clisset has a predilection for camouflage, and mixes everyday spaces and objects with fantasy objects. His combination of reality, irreality, and disguised versions of both, has the effect of blurring the real and not real with the disguised. His art erupts into a churning redneck celebration of pop culture and Americana. If you pick up what Clisset has thrown down, you're getting your proverbial teeth kicked in, and a tattoo of a redneck fighting a bear in his backyard wrestling ring.

For Shamus and FakeShamus, working together in the studio came naturally. It's as if they can read each other's mind. Needless to say, they get along well. They have the same sense of humor. They make stuff together which might embarrass Clisset were he to make it alone. FakeShamus likes basically the same things Shamus likes, but he's less shy about walking around with his dick bobbing in the breeze. In fact, FakeShamus might wink at you if you catch him au naturel. We don't care if he embarrasses himself as long as he comes with the goods.

As every artist knows, you have to be willing to "bare your soul" to make great art. Great art goes past good and bad and heads over the cliff in a mélange of suicide dive and exploring uncharted territory. Critical theorists put it another way: They say that the holy grail is an artist capable of self-criticality, but whatever. The point is that, if you're an artist, you have to take a-long-hard-good-look-at-yourself, then display what you discover clinically. You have to be like an entomologist pinning an iridescent butterfly to a board, careful not to touch the fragile wings while displaying the dead insect as an object in an indexed grid. Also, in this metaphor, the butterfly is a stand-in for the part of you which makes you you.

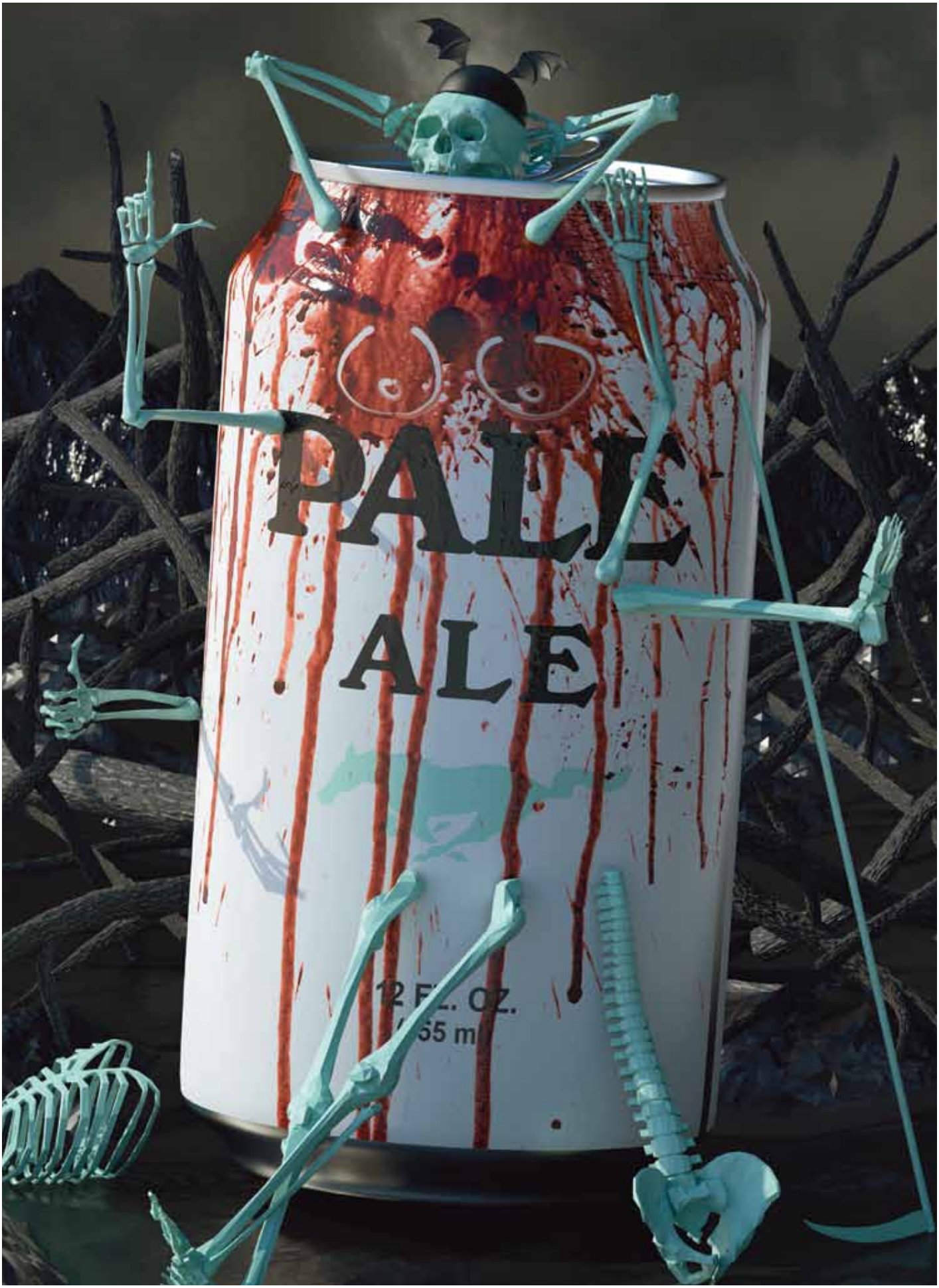
Soul baring makes you vulnerable, has more downsides than upsides, and is embarrassing and painful. It's destructive to the status quo, personally and publicly. That's why conservatives, who fight against change, come across as soulless robots; and progressives, who fight for change, as soulfully unstable.

The upside is that if you really go for it, and cross over a big taboo, you go past being emotionally mind-fuckable through the process of catharsis. It's like that scene in *The Usual Suspects* where Kevin Spacey, playing Verbal Kint, is telling the story where the Hungarian mob rapes Keyser Söze's wife and then kills his son. Keyser Söze then "shows these men of will what will really was" by killing the rest of his own family. Once Clisset makes art about his personal obsessions he is an open book, and the old cliché, which applies to his work, is that the truth will set you free.

Everything about public vulnerability goes against the image of strength we normally present in public. Expressivity isn't about truth (facts). It's about truthfulness (intention), and that's why Picasso said, "Art is the lie that tells the truth." Although in Clisset's case it may be closer to say that he bares his soul, or shows us the true Clisset, through the proxy of his inner world of beer cans, survival knives signed by John Rambo, bear costumes, and suspended-gravity-dream physics.

In the image "FakeShamus Conjuring the Countach", Clisset digs into the subject that first provoked him to learn to draw in grade school, the Lamborghini Countach. The Countach, in the center of the image, floats above a bloody demon skull, shoes, and shotgun shells. A pentagram made from the half-serrated survival knives, made famous by the movie *Rambo*, floats above the scene in the same place that, 400

RIGHT
"Pale Rider (aka Batty Boy Beyond the Terrordome)," 2011
C-print.
80" X 53.25"


PALE
ALE

years ago, Clisset would have painted Jesus on the throne during Mary's ascension. Disembodied hands flit like cherubim, sending messages like Roman propaganda–thumbs up (bitches)!" There is an assortment of shotgun shells arranged among this blood-smeared pubescent boy's fantasy bouquet of status and violence lubricated by Countach-branded 40 oz. malt. In the background we see some dramatically beautiful snowcapped mountains. This seems to me to be an embarrassing image, and for that reason it is art, because here is Clisset's butterfly, dead and indexed. You can see his stupid fantasies. I can't look at this without cringing, and also feeling like Clisset has revealed something about himself in a brave way. At this point you should also admit that you have equally stupid dreams, unless you're a perfect person without problems.

Clisset's C-prints are completely manufactured images. Although they look real, they are made using computer programs, with the help of university high-quality 3D scanners and image repositories (at Georgia Tech and Stanford). Clisset is a master at manipulating an alternative reality. His

RIGHT
"Elmer's Back Yard (Bumbaclot)," 2011
C-print.
80" X 58.25"

images are photographs of virtual sculptures that mimic reality so closely the images fooled me at first. I did not know how he made them, and turns out, he arranges them as three-dimensional virtual objects in a variety of high-tech programs, then captures the resulting sculpture as a flat image. It is then made into a real object as a high-quality print. Most of the work is printed as large scale C-prints, but he does release a limited amount of smaller work as well.

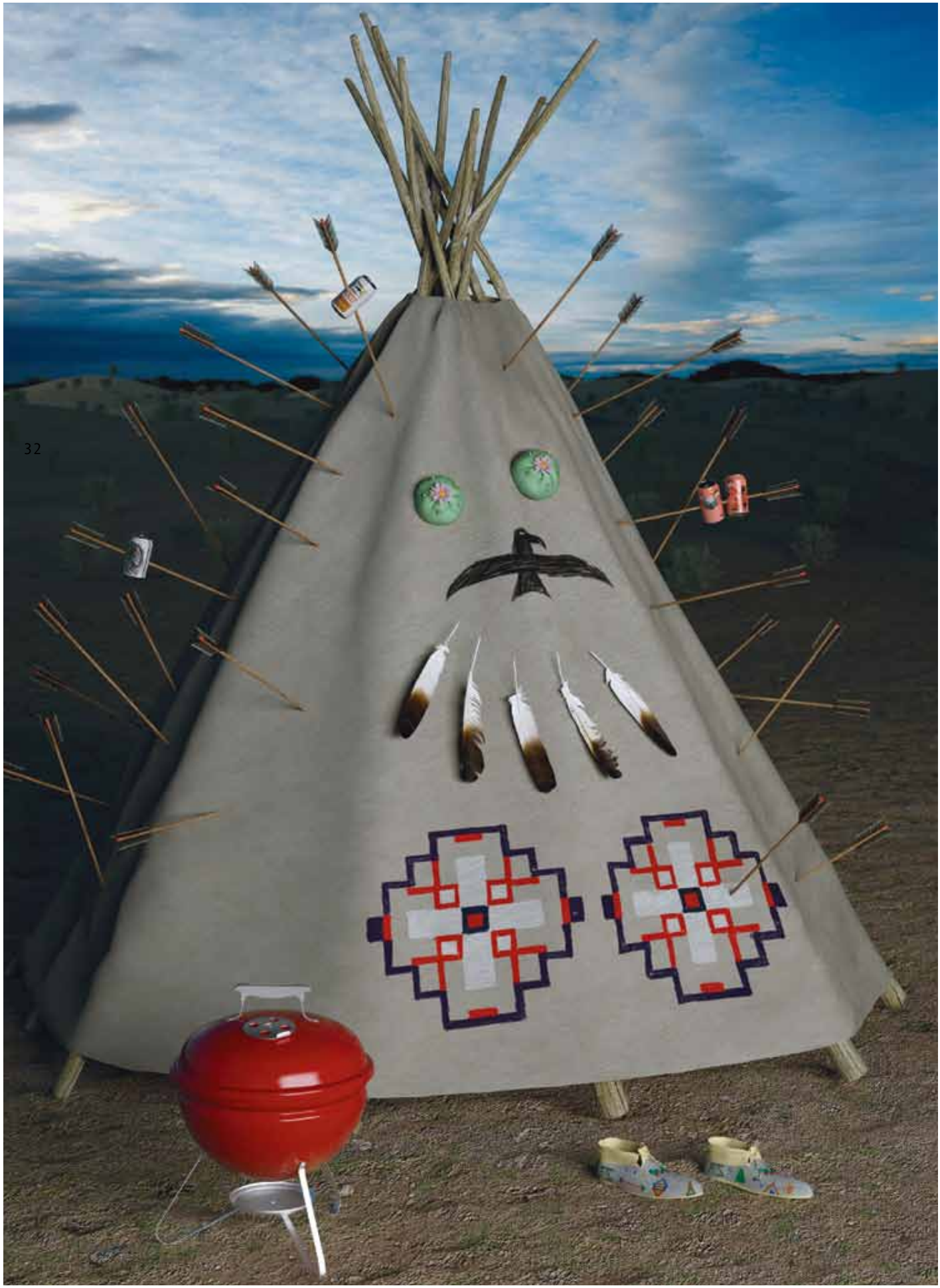
Clisset describes his process this way: "I'm using a physically accurate simulation (unbiased rendering)–I want to be making pictures that are basically real, but reside in a sort of alternate dimension of digital space. In the same way that the world around us is real, but the images in our heads are equally just mental models that our brains conjure up and piece together."

Anyone who learns to replicate reality with illusions also learns how to fool people. The main groups of techno wizards are pretty much confined to magicians, physicists, and artists. The best of these creatives usually embark on an intense self-education, and the really top people change the way the rest of us see the world. They start out on their

LEFT
"Christmas Katana," 2011
C-print.
80" X 53.25"

RIGHT
"Happy Death Day!," 2011
C-print.
80" X 53.25"


HAPPY
DEATH
DAY
POP CORN



LEFT
"Peyote Eyes," 2011
C-print.
80" X 60"

TOP
"Hammertime (working title)," 2011
C-print.
80" X 53.25"

FOLLOWING PAGE LEFT
"FakeShamus Conjuring the Countach," 2010
C-print.
80" X 53.25"

FOLLOWING PAGE RIGHT
"Deep Camo (Ghillie Suit)," 2010
C-print.
80" X 53.25"

path because they enjoy being held in rapture by someone else's illusion. They think to themselves it would be cool to paint like Salvador Dali, or maybe they get sucked into the vertiginous space of the mysterious light hole/paintings of James Turrell. Years later they wake up and are making their generation's versions of Dalis and Turrells.

Once your self-education progresses to the point where you understand the inner workings of the human perception of reality, in order to create an illusion of something that will hypnotize and fool people, you are capable of doing amazing things and making amazing objects. For the average Joe and Jill, the people who believe your magic, you are doing something spectacular. Your experience, though, is one of just working, part of the way you craft an illusion is like the way a barista crafts a cappuccino, or how a carpenter adds an extension to a kitchen. The best moments occur when you forget yourself and fall into your own illusions.

The huge personal drawback is that for you, the magical illusions that drew you into becoming interested in art/science no longer seem so magical. At this point you begin to understand things about yourself that might be better left undisturbed. Once you tread behind the curtain and start playing with the abstractions that build the edifice of reality, you go from a consumer of images to a producer of images, and you begin to understand the mechanical aspects of human perception. It is just as deflating an experience to realize that your vision of the world is a mental construction as when Dorothy encounters the silly-fat-old-man who is the Wizard of Oz. This knowledge can make you start to feel like two people, the one who experiences things directly, and the one who knows better. A real Shamus and a FakeShamus.

This technical understanding of human perception can lead to a feeling that you are a machine, which, when combined with the whimsical imagination of most creatives, leads to a lot of unusual solutions. On the other side of the curtain, you have to start asking questions about identity. *Who the fuck am I if all this shit which I believed is just made up by someone like me?* The world can spiral into an arbitrary and disarticulated jumble of man-made signs, as opposed to a natural environment.

Artists have probably always slipped from their skin and assumed personalities or alter egos as ways of exploring identity. The fact that we are all able to drop one personhood and replace it with another is based on the terrifying notion that who you are is a construction. Shakespeare wrote about the assumption of identity when he compared the world to a stage and said that the "men and women are merely players." "Player" is another word for actor, and Shakespeare was saying that we all are playing a role. It is likely that if you ended being an artist, you questioned basic societal assumptions about your identity. You probably had authority figures like teachers and parents who told you "not to think so much," or to "go with the flow." They were trying to keep you in the play, playing your part. Don't think so much! Thinking is dangerous, FakeShamus!

Thinking about identity leads to identity creation, thinking is the gateway drug that leads to more dangerous forms of identity. To put the assumption of an alter ego into a broader context, the assumption of an alter ego is a theatrical technique that musicians and other performers use. Some use it to gender bend, like David Bowie when he became Ziggy

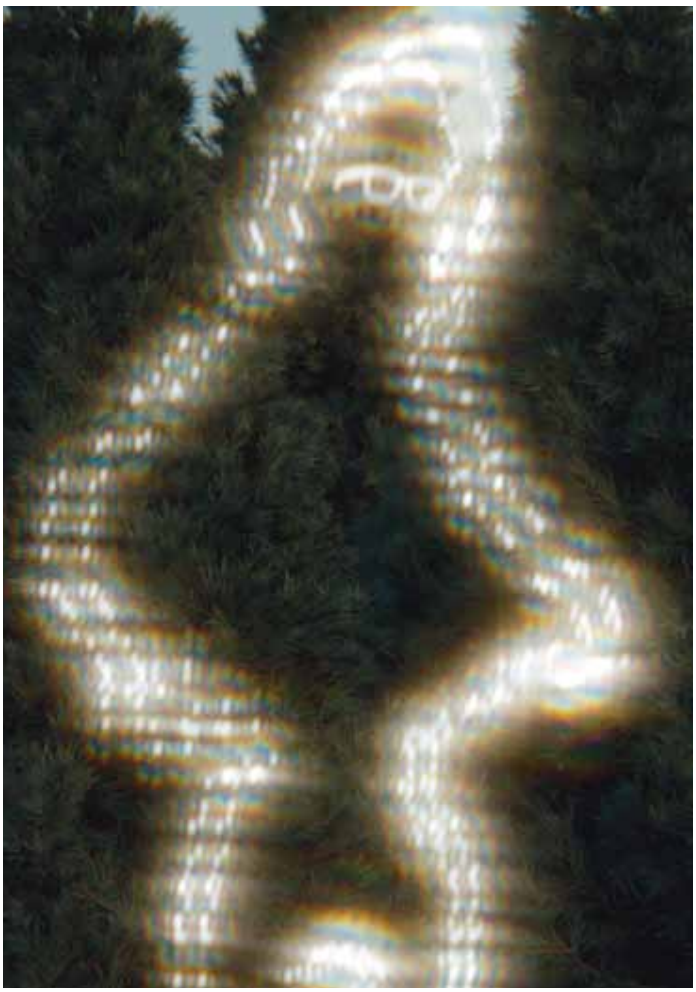
BOTTOM
"Sno Dik (...This Guy!)," 2011
C-print.
80" X 53.25"

LEFT
"Golden Fleece (The Totally Bearable Heaviness of Not-Being)," 2011
C-print.
80" X 53.25"

Stardust and the legions of hair bands that followed him in 80's. Others use it as a way to become something larger than life, like Gene Simmons and the bejeweled, tongue-intensive demon character he plays as the frontman for KISS. Spinal Tap's hyperglam is an example of the alter ego as satire. All of these musicians perform in front of speakers that overwhelm the crowd with their voice. They are examples of exaggerated, flamboyant alters, and they give the cue to everybody else that it's OK to loosen up a little.

An alter ego is a way for people to take the things they normally would want to do and push them farther than they normally would, and to escape any feeling of guilt because they are able to place the blame on this other person. Alter ego literally means "the other I." No, no, silly–I don't want to dress up like a beautiful girl, and sing love songs, that's someone else, an invention. You can't blame me for anything I do while I'm dressed up in these other person's clothes. Clisset compares his alter to a golem, saying that "the whole 'FakeShamus' character started out as a sort of imaginary friend thinking of the 3D space as a mental construct. Over time, I got interested in legends of the golem–a creature created to do its master's bidding, usually meant for good, but it only follows instructions literally (a lot like a computer) and it always ends in disaster. So the pictures started to reflect the sort of supernatural creative/destructive side of that myth, and then how it reflects on our contemporary digital culture. I am building a world entirely within this void of a digital space, then setting this supernatural creature loose and he's wreaking havoc on everything."

BOTTOM
"Spirit Animal," 2011
C-print.
80" X 56.5"



RIGHT
"FakeShamus, Manifest Destinaut (Grizzly-Suit)," 2010
C-print.
80" X 60"

It seems as if Clisset is saying, don't blame me for wanting to live in a pure world of intoxicating violence, beer, and fast cars, the world is accelerating too fast. The great Marshall McLuhan anticipated Clisset's work when he wrote that "violence, whether spiritual or physical, is a quest for identity and the meaningful. The less identity, the more violence." Here, McLuhan points toward the painful honesty, which is very close to the surface in Clisset's work. When Clisset breaks his own identity into two he reveals much more than he could have as a unified identity.

In "Beeramid," Clisset lets FakeShamus run rampant. FakeShamus is playing at full volume, emblazoning his *FS* initials into the front of the tottering aluminum pyramid, in an amalgamation which brings to mind images of Moses parting the Red Sea and escaping Egypt to grindcore, while the ancient Egyptian sun god Ra plays a slow dirge according to the prehistoric rhythms of the earth, side-by-side with a 19-year-old bassist who likes to get lit and slamdance. This is a really striking image, powerfully geometric. It's also a wedding picture, something old (pyramid) and something new (aluminum mass-manufactured beer cans) and alcohol. Critical theorists might say this is a synthesis of tradition and modernity, a hybrid of meaning past its due date and meaninglessness. Clisset is making an image for history's castoffs.

Mcluhan also said that "when things come at you very fast, naturally you lose touch with yourself. Anybody moving into a new world loses identity...so loss of identity is something that happens in rapid change. But everybody at the speed of light tends to become a nobody. This is what's called the masked man. The masked man has no identity; he is so deeply involved in other people that he doesn't have any personal identity." Clisset appears and disappears in these images, and it feels like we know him, and then that we don't. I wonder if he feels the same way.

In “Deep Camo (Ghillie Suit),” we see a camouflaged figure who is wearing a ghillie suit, an outfit that has plant material glued to it, so that a hunter or sniper can hide for days at a time in undergrowth. Our sniper’s party hat and shooter’s glasses (amber lenses) are flying through the air. We don’t know if he threw them into the air, or if some unpictured sniper just took his head off. Our man has three hands, one of which is holding an Uzi submachine gun fitted with a big silencer. Strangely this is a short-range weapon (I know from my days in the Army)–usually snipers carry 50 caliber rifles. FakeShamus wants to be close to you and see the whites of your eyes. It’s related to the sort of dramatic lust for choreographed violence that fills our popular culture, and that most of us secretly like to watch.

Men become women, women become aliens, and secret desires are broadcast at max volume. An alternate personality is a way to escape from a normal identity. When I visualize the process of shifting from one identity to another, I see it as an amplification outward. When I visualize Clisset’s process, I see it as a focusing inward; he is choosing to become a second version of himself. Clisset uses his alter ego, FakeShamus, as a way to really dig deeper into himself. He is using FakeShamus as a way to be expressive, to reveal his intentions toward the world.

FakeShamus can act out real Shamus’s fantasies in art, which involve the Lamborghini Countach and the “Bazooka subwoofers I lusted after even before I had a car to put them in; the mountains, trees, and suburban landscape of growing up in Colorado; and then generally just the aesthetics of guns, beer, and violence...”

Outside of work and school we all choose the type of people we hang out with, except in rare instances–like, you’re kidnapped, or it’s a holiday and you have to talk politics with your Fascist uncle. Another instance when we lose control of the company we keep is when a friend chooses us. When

we’re little sometimes the friend that chooses us is imaginary. As adults we still have imaginary friends, but because we are socialized out of believing in imaginary friends, we call them alter egos. Artists have the privileged position of having their work and their life blend. Shamus Clisset has blended his fantasy world with the real world into a particularly specific and convincing illusion that revolves around what it means to be alive in modern times.

Cheap mass-produced objects exist alongside rapidly developing microtechnology and imaging systems. The way we extend our humanity into the world is becoming faster and more complex, and we are becoming more aware of ourselves.

Clisset gets permission from FakeShamus to reveal secrets and break taboos that aggregate into a kind of taxonomy of male desire: hunting, fast cars, knives, guns, and beer. His work is flooded with references, and they have something to tell us about Clisset, about ourselves, and the time we live in. Are these images post-reality art for post-humanity living in post-history? Separated from tradition and belief structures, pentagrams of Rambo knives float where sacred imagery would have only a few generations ago, but it doesn’t seem purposeless. It feels like this art has something serious to say if you have the right mindset to consider it the same way a Venetian considered a Titian, or Gertrude Stein considered a Picasso. You know, as a reflection of the times we live in.

LEFT
“Beeramid,” 2010
C-print.
80” X 53.25”

RIGHT
“4-D (DD) Demon (Pale Rider 2),” 2011
C-print.
80” X 53.25”