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# Hiding In Plain Sight

## Yannic Joray's «Crackpot Realism» at Galerie Bernhard

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In Yannic Joray's solo exhibition, *Crackpot Realism*, sculpture and drawing are used to examine the subversive powers of institutions, science, and technology in historical accounts of post-war mind control operations. Through tactics like withholding, bombarding, or diverting the viewer, the artist adopts strategic moves that subtly gesture how easy it is to manipulate a willing audience. *Crackpot Realism* is on view through May 27, 2022 at Galerie Bernhard.







Exhibition view, Yannic Joray, *Crackpot Realism*, Galerie Bernhard, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Bernhard, Zürich.

Yannic Joray's *Crackpot Realism* is an inquiry into facades and surfaces—however rough or shiny, slick or unfinished they may be—each encapsulating conspiratorial narratives around post-war espionage and the paranoiac world inside the Western sphere of political influence. All of which, in this day and age, may or may not be true. Much of the mystique around the work is a lot like the enigmatic artist, who is without a website or wider online presence but whom I do know to be a real person existing in Zürich. According to a previous exhibition, Joray was born in or around Bern in the mid-1980s, but how and why he came to art or his artistic concepts, I don't know. Within the exhibition, there is a poetic balancing act that is simultaneously equal parts overwhelming and withholding, bordering on obsession in giving a glimpse of a reality that could seem unfathomable to some but unsurprising to many.

The starting and ultimate endpoint for the exhibition is a work that isn't even listed as being one. The eight-page press release, notably approved for the day of the exhibition opening, is an excerpt out of eighty pages written by the artist and most likely little read. Laid out to look like a classified file, each page has a black line across it and various redacted parts. There are forty-nine footnotes. The release weaves in details upon details, explaining (or redacting) the infamous American counterintelligence operations, known more broadly as MK-ULTRA, that attempted to exert mind control through various methods on human subjects. Funded in part by various Ivy League research institutions and the U.S. government, and experimented with in secret confines, MK-ULTRA is undoubtedly one of the most horrifying acts of the CIA in the twentieth century. But while the release attempts to inundate the reader with information, the artist quotes the exhibition's namesake early on in a subtle act of self-awareness: «...Elite power struggles were also the breeding ground for what sociologist Charles Wright Mills called ‹crackpot realism› in 1958, the consequence of a self-inflicted political climate creating a ‹paranoid reality› …»[1]



*Embassy of the United States of America in Havana* (2022), Yannic Joray, *Crackpot Realism*, Galerie Bernhard, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Bernhard, Zürich.

But in the backrooms of Galerie Bernhard, *Crackpot Realism* could very well be misconstrued as a study of some kind of early Americana-esque architectural styles, mimicking a student's models of perspective and scale. On a sheen but drab square tablecloth in the center of one room, four works face out with their supportive scaffolding clearly visible. Notable characteristics of East Coast Colonial Revival, Federal Colonial, or a Georgian Townhouse are carefully crafted in plaster but are marked along the sides by the messy, layered process. Though they are noticeably plaster, there is a painterly patina to each piece to give an illusion of age or casted shadow. Titles hint at names and locations, providing further context that only generates broader questions. Who are these people and what have they done? Or, even more acutely, who are the unknown people hiding behind the institutions that grant them the power of anonymity.





Exhibition view, Yannic Joray, *Crackpot Realism*, Galerie Bernhard, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Bernhard, Zürich.

On a tabletop, Joray has managed to create a visual fantasy, wherein four different places in time and space can exist next to one another. Two small, unstately looking facades are depicted: *Puharich's Lab 9, Ossining NY* (2022) and *Gottlieb's House, Mount Salem Ave, Washington VA* (2022). Simply put, they are two unremarkable things in unremarkable places—a lab and a house in New York and Virginia, respectively—that cement their ambiguity and lack of ostentatiousness, making it all the easier to look over. It is the small gesture, the hint of last name and sense of ownership, that gives the work its conceptual power and introspection into the histories of each space. On the opposite end, Joray's matter-of-fact example is the four-story mock-up, *Council on Foreign Relations* (2022), that is easy to understand: a facade of a New York City-based think tank that specializes in international relations and foreign policies. Never mind that the actual building is much, much larger than the artist's portrayal. The same can be said regarding the actual building versus Joray's other table work, *National Academies of Sciences* (2022). On that note, who's to say Puharich's lab and Gottlieb's house are exact replications; they no longer exist. The artist is giving us only what he wants us to know, engaging in the manipulative tactics of his subjects who recreate their own truths and alternative facts as long as the audience remains subdued and trusting by a perceived authority.

Two other sculptural works in the exhibition demonstrate the implied power of scale. The cornerstone piece in the exhibition, *Embassy of the United States of America in Havana* (2022) gets its own room, while the hand-size *Samadhi Isolation Tank (after John Lily)* (2022) is hardly noticeable at the entrance. The Havana embassy is well-known, part of the United States' post-war effort in expansion via soft power through the likes of modern art and embassy architecture that served to create a fundamental style that was seen as all-American and internationally marketable, i.e. Abstract Expressionism with Jackson Pollock and the recapitulation of a Chicago-based Bauhaus through Mies van der Rohe. It was an era that sought a substantial break from any perceived European cultural influence in conjunction with the pursuit of dominant foreign control during the Cold War. Although the U.S. Embassy in Havana is now better known as the site for the mysterious *«Havana Syndrome,»* a neurological illness that has fallen on diplomats as first reported in 2016, with Russian military forces widely suspected to be the culprit through the strategic use of microwave or cellphone frequencies.



*Microwaved Tissue 5* (2022) Yannic Joray, *Crackpot Realism*, Galerie Bernhard, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Bernhard, Zürich.

Thus, the sculptural work in the backrooms of the exhibition inherently inform the seven drawing works at the entry. Red marbled paper is mounted on MDF board and cut in a perfect circle, mimicking a petri dish. *Microwaved Tissue 1-7* (all 2022) are lined up repetitively and neatly, in an ideal homage to distant but dedicated scientific analysis. The marbled paper is beautiful to look at, which offers a pleasurable escape from the undoubted reference to horrendous acts of mind control and exploitation. But the question as to which era and which country the paper references remains open?

This leads us back to one country the artist has interestingly omitted in his studies of twentieth-century mind control operations—his own. It is crucial but obvious to look at the easy targets: the loud and proud superpowers like the United States or the Soviet Union, or the testaments to a Capitalist-driven reunification and globalization like Germany or China. But, in the first rule of espionage and world order, the winning move has always been to hide in plain sight. In 2020, news broke of the Swiss-based encryption company, Crypto AG.

Although secretly jointly owned by the CIA and the then Western German intelligence service (BND), Crypto AG was responsible for some of the most egregious acts of espionage, particularly around Latin American and Middle Eastern operations throughout the 1970s and 80s.

Which beckons an analysis of the second part of Joray's crackpot realism quote: «...the consequence of a self-inflicted political climate creating a ‹paranoid reality,› [the realist who strives for power in the context of a permanent state of emergency, a politics of fear.» He essentially states that the crackpot realist is one who wishes to obtain power through any means necessary, usually at the expense of others, seeking to advance their position through use of the policies and politics of fear created and controlled by the state. As it is understood now through the lens of Cold War paranoia and neocon warmongers, I would argue that the perfect example of the crackpot realist might be one who knows how to obtain advantage by fooling the masses through reverse, as opposed to reinforced, psychology. Because although Swiss officials were, of course, well aware for decades of the deceptive practices and profits out of Zug canton, parliament only chose to intervene and investigate it shortly before the news broke from the *Washington Post*.[2]

[1] Yannic Joray, *Crackpot Realism*, Zürich: Galerie Bernhard, 2022. Pg. 2
[2] Greg Miller, «The Intelligence Coup of the Century,» *The Washington Post*. February 11, 2020. Accessed May 18, 2022.

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