



## Jani Leinonen: *School of Disobedience* Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki

The word *disobedience* connotes bucking the authority of a parent, an employer, or the law. But Jani Leinonen's *School of Disobedience*, on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki [September 4, 2015–January 31, 2016], nuances how we categorize and apprehend disobedience itself. The word connotes a failure or refusal to comply with a person or entity of authority; typically, whatever/whoever is disobeyed (a parent, the law) has been assertive about rules and expectations. Yet Leinonen's form of disobedience confronts an enforcer that operates surreptitiously. Using signs and symbols calculated to appeal to our desires, and to instigate perceptions of need, this regulatory adversary, in Leinonen's world, is that commercial entity that seeks to "satisfy."

Leinonen explores this conflict—between these unseen rules and their enforcers, and those whom he considers them to oppress—through a host of internationally recognizable icons (mostly originating in the United States). Appropriating the imagery of brand mascots such as Ronald McDonald, Tony the Tiger, the M&M's spokescandies, and Hello Kitty, he trades on their nostalgic appeal, mimicking the visual language and marketing campaigns of the "brands we know and trust" that are as dear to adults as they are to their children. Leinonen's *Choice is Yours* (2011) and *Seven Deadly Sins* (*private label edition*) (2014) both consist of grids of modified cereal boxes that reclaim the visuals of supermarket displays. Although they appear to simply re-appropriate a Warholian strategy, the works do manage to subvert both the language of commerce and that of the pop art that cannibalized it. With *Choice is Yours*, Leinonen refashions the Kellogg's Corn Flakes brand into "OR Flakes," and the Cornelius Rooster mascot into a barker demanding that consumers choose between "Truth OR Denial," "Organic OR GMO," "Divorce OR Therapy," and a host of other oppositions, all proposed on the boxes of Leinonen's reality-checking cereals, supplanting the usual plugs for

surprise gifts or back-to-school giveaways. *Seven Deadly Sins* (*private label edition*), in which a series of product packages is modified with acrylic, similarly contrasts the fun and wholesomeness of the American breakfast table with the perceived evils of the world; here, the boxes form a sequence of directives somewhat brazenly plucked from Gandhi's "Seven Social Sins."

Leinonen's heavy-handed delivery can come across as puerile: his critique of the worlds of manufacturing, marketing, and retail is not particularly nuanced, making reference to sex toys, feminine hygiene products, sports memorabilia, and junk food (think French fries molded into the shape of a fist, its middle finger naturally raised). He imagines, then enacts the future deaths of brands such as Gucci, Rolex, Apple, Budweiser, and Brillo by arranging their insignia into recognizable tombstones that form a makeshift graveyard—perhaps rightly suggesting that even out of view, these icons' presence will linger. In 2011, Leinonen produced fake terrorist videos that adapt a very real, very current, and very violent form of messaging to his somewhat familiar critique of the fast food industry. In one video, a group of actors threatens to behead a kidnapped Ronald McDonald if their demands on food safety and sustainability are not met; another documents the beheading of a plaster copy of the same mascot, with a guillotine (an unusually design-y one, too, its blade seemingly mounted onto an Alvar Aalto tea trolley). These videos were originally posted anonymously to YouTube, and were perhaps not meant to be seen as art per se. After the artist and his team were found to be the works' producers, however, Leinonen was charged with fraud and forgery in Helsinki in 2012, found guilty, and ordered to pay fines.

This double persona is reflected in *School of Disobedience*, too, perhaps because the artist sees or at least presents himself as being both outside and inside the commercial system. When Leinonen commissions paintings of cartoon figures from a factory in Shenzhen,

China, he takes pains to spotlight the process, arguably problematizing the use of low wage foreign workers to produce branded merchandise. He also resells the results of such commissions at a profit, which makes him a collaborator, albeit on a relatively small scale, with the very institutions subject to his criticism.

Perhaps the weirdest aspect of Leinonen's practice is his love-hate relationship with Ronald McDonald. In this survey, the mascot is executed—crucified, even—but also variously depicted as George Washington, V.I. Lenin, and, in *McReincarnation* (2015), the Lord Buddha. Leinonen also casts McDonald in the role of a school principal in a video, which was projected in a temporary one-room school building that was the centerpiece of the Kiasma exhibition. This character, along with a group of teachers, listens as a rapper lectures on music's power to effect social change through protest, and a pastor urges spectators not to let others use us as pawns. "Commit to being as holy and as evil as the next person," she says. The school's apparent aim is to get viewers thinking about the kind of world they want to inhabit; its various lessons equate disobedience with literacy, and promote critical thinking as a necessary means of noncompliance. Leinonen's oeuvre is based on a view of the world as a place in which fantasy alone influences consumer behavior, distracting people to such a degree that they lack the power to apprehend matters of real significance. Leinonen wants to thwart this development by promoting alertness and accountability; in this respect, disobedience is a requisite skill. What is not clear in Leinonen's ambition is the extent to which it is concerned with the repercussions of defiance. It is easy to mock the commercial cultures that continue to dominate our kitchens, our wallets, our bedrooms, and so on, but what does it mean if the forms of criticism used are indistinguishable from the powers against which they operate, and are as marketable as their products?

—John Gayer