

THE PROTAGONIST

Like Ezra Pound's decree for the world to be made new, my friend Julia Muggenburg states "We do what we like..." when speaking of Belmacz, a *kunstkabinett* for experimentation, steered by this ethos. This salon of *délights* hosts the unusual, the erotic, the erratic, the esoteric, the sublime and the otherwise. It displays Julia's extraordinary objects of personal adornment, and artworks she has selected for her special exhibitions. It is an intertextual space where ideas are brought together to form a non-fixed result. As the world's storm rages about us let us sit among the bracken at Belmacz, to take tea and eat fine chocolates, and pause for a moment of while. We look to an exhibition, entitled *The Protagonist*.

The Protagonist celebrates 25 years of the incorporation of the name Belmacz, and commemorates this living room, salon, breakfast room, gallery — a space for wonderment and discussion on Mayfair's Davies Street, since 2010. Over 50 years ago Nicolas Roeg filmed a flurry of b-roll on this street for his rather mad and radical movie *Performance*. A black Rolls-Royce hurtles through Mayfair, with beautiful gangsters as passengers, passing 45 Davies Street, but not stopping, continuing on to Mount Street. The *protagonists* of *Performance* are the devastating James Fox and Mick Jagger, with the siren Anita Pallenberg as their foil. Watching the film, one sees a London of the fag-end of the Swinging-Sixties, a city both real and imagined where one could still smell the cigarette ash that used to linger in the neo-Georgian phone boxes that appear on London postcards. The film is a dark and dazzling fruit, playing out a world of London which would become synonymous with rogues and rebels, vagabond rock stars and aristocrats — *protagonists* of varying degrees — often the stars of their own *divertissements*. Mick Jagger, in his saggy elegance, is divine sprawled out on the Persian rug! I can see him in my mind, late 1960s Mick sauntering down Davies Street, pulling the bell and calling on Julia for some extraordinary variety of fine tea. He comes through the door clouded in an almond-green vapour, swathed in leather and velvet.

Of course, the underworld storyline plays second fiddle to the wildly glamorous aesthetic and set design of *Performance*, epitomising the particular late '60s return to the late Victorian aesthetic, which had been killed off for decades in Britain by the trial of Oscar Wilde. Decadence was re-activated in the '60s with a vengeance, and its progenitor was the antique dealer and style luminary Christopher Gibbs — immortalised through the sets he designed and dressed for *Performance*. Gibbs had an overtly pronounced style, drawing from a taste for Asian and Middle Eastern architectural motifs, rugs, and furniture mixed with a rarefied old, English look. Nik Cohn, who documented the menswear of the time wrote, "Christopher Gibbs had gone to Morocco and brought back Arabic robes and slippers, and quantities of hashish. He sat at home, propped up on his Marrakech cushions and surrounded by his friends, and this was among the first English attempts at what later became the *hippie lifestyle*." "He was very flash," writes Cohn. "Sometimes he just wore tight jeans or fancy dress... but mostly his tastes were more elaborate: suits with double-breasted waistcoats and cloth-covered buttons, and velvet ties, and striped Turkish shirts with stiff white collars, and cravats. Above all, he had a passion for carnations and was forever buying new strains, pink-and-yellow, or green-ink, or purple with red flecks. "I must have thought I was an aesthete," Gibbs said. "A gentleman aesthete. But I was a bit grubby as well; a dandy with bitten fingernails." It is the heady collision of East End crime and libertine Chelsea bohemia where the Gibbs aesthetic is amplified. Julia, a dandy of the highest order with plumage and silks, always divinely hatted and ready for action. It has been an enormous pleasure to see Julia's collection of millinery feasts. We join arms and go into the night.

I met Julia in an antique shop on a hot summers evening, and ever since we have collaborated on projects and discussed at length people, places and ideas. Julia and I endeavour to embody the Belmacz credo of showing and doing what we like... Like Christopher Gibbs we trust our taste and eye above all, with style holding equal importance to substance, and special projects carried out with aplomb. Our exhibition, *What am I doing Here...?: Travelscapes* expressed our desire to think about ideas of pilgrimage, walking, exploration and voyage. It was an exhibition dedicated to Bruce Chatwin, my hero, and the show took its name from his collection of essays, and the last published work in his lifetime, before his death from AIDs in 1989. Chatwin throughout his life was trying to make sense of the visual and material world through traversing and travelling the globe. Belmacz is a lighthouse for beautiful objects and things. *Things* are important, things that Julia loves and wants to be loved by others make up the House of Belmacz.