

**I'm stuck on gum** (Kim Gordon).<sup>1</sup>

Bubble gum is such a terrible Sonic Youth song.<sup>2</sup> With its "licking" guitar spiels and orchestral come on hit it girls, it's very likely meant as satire. Reading the lyrics you might get a feel for this:

**Her name is Bubblegum Lives for moon and sun Young and so much fun Life has just begun...**

Coupled with that other b-hit wonder, "I wanna kill all the California girls", Bubble gum almost becomes a protest song, stuck in its eighties rut of anarcho-feminism lashing out at the tall, the blonde, the cloyingly fun bubble gum dis-ease of striped stockings and mid-drift tops, not to mention pony tails and that other abrasion, fluffy fringes. Anyway I digress, but already we have three of Clemens' ingredients: gums, stripes, and dissatisfaction. This spirit of malevolence postures throughout Clemens' work. Hell, his practice is sometimes just a closeted disguise for his war-mongering amory supply- he should open a store. More about this later, I promise, but in the meantime it's worth trawling Clemens' code.

**I Was a hippy I was a waster** (Black Flag).<sup>4</sup>

On its side, Clemens' blade & bubble gum wraps almost look like the Black Flag logos. That flag of adolescence constantly rediscovered as a rallying point for generations after its initial inception in the late seventies, stands out as a locus of do-it yourself initiative, anger and misconception. It also holds as a convenient Waypoint for booze-up parties and adolescent angst when the kids go awry missing the irony in songs such as Six-Pack and American Waste. So with such a double vective going on, one always gets a clash of cognoscenti (those in the know, cool kids, minority) and .dupes (the majority or by reversal, the outsider minority). Of course we've slipped into freaks and geeks territory<sup>6</sup>- it's the convenient breeding ground of dissatisfaction, of terrorism.

About the bubble gum wraps Clemens responds:

*Do you think you would hear the scream first or see the blood come out of the hydra slide. See I don't think you would feel it at first. There's a slight kick of adrenaline built in, it's a ride. The water moves faster than the body The delay depending on wound inflicted would secure safe evacuation for the terrorist. As s/he would have travelled down previously The perpetrator would have to stop full flight by jamming oneself. It would be quicker to start chewing as you entered but I think having the blade still in its package would be safer for the assailant.*<sup>7</sup>

Such forethought and detail! It's almost as though Clemens isn't y making art at all. At a time when airport security is relaxing after the 911 heave ho Clemens' practice is emerging as savvy make-do, ready-made weaponry. But again I digress.

Clemens bubble gum popped up recently in the Physics Room's Kiosk (10-30 September 2003). The official word was: "Clemens Created a simple but sinister piece referencing a common urban myth that has long kept children terrified of hydroslides"<sup>8</sup>. With its trickle of gum ooze and pink flesh reference the blade and gum is a simple and effective piece. It immediately returns us to what Anthony Byrt called "suburban anxiety"<sup>9</sup> in which the cool kids dl our domestic playpens of the fun-park, turning upside down safe generic commodity. The recent paranoia that circulated in middleclass suburban area of Maryland America in which the "terrorist" cut loose in an open frenzy of sniper randomness, is a tidy example of this But with Clemens, the terrorism is never so keen. His is more the sporadic violence that results in local turf wars eh the cool feral-free, day-roamers and those paraded and I guarded children with curfews and moral incentives. A clear example would be Nelson vs. Milho use in The Simpsons.

#### **Haircuts & Tourniquets.**

"Barbershops were always to me more about tobacco and smoking paraphernalia" (Gwynneth Porter).<sup>10</sup>

If Clemens' work has a common source point, then it's going to be the barbershop. Who else sells haircuts, biros, blades and gum? Commenting on the blade and gum packages Porter suggests "they looked like ready-to-go whizz accessories"<sup>11</sup>. Assembled together, Clemens' gum blade makes a far more menacing knuckle-duster and is far less damaging to the perpetrator than barbed wire wrap around. So again Clemens' work has this cognoscenti-cool element to it. No doubt this is what Porter is hinting at when she talks about "smoking paraphernalia" and a personal history of cadging under age smokes in back alley barber lairs more than likely lurks behind, such a veiled reference. It's this shady-lane syndrome that Clemens references with the barbershop stripes; telling me that:

*Barbers bleed people - they were the first surgeons. If you were ill why not get rid of the bad blood - right? We're talking the 16th century Imagine how much pain one would have to be in to allow some cat with a blade to cut you in the hope you will be relieved. The tourniquets used would be dried on a pole outside so they could be reused and spread hepatitis b unknowingly for years and years and years but anyway the wind would blow them around the pole, you follow? Hence the residue stained."*<sup>12</sup>

Apparently the blue was added later in some sort of advertising redress, both covering and enhancing the signification of dried blood red; another inversion considering that blue these days is added to back alley lights so that junkies can't find their veins."<sup>13</sup>

#### **Desktop Warfare.**

If Clemens has left us a trail to follow, and he has, he's been exhibiting since 1999, it starts to really kick in with the pink & white terraces he fashioned from desktop note holders.<sup>14</sup> These vacuum packed commodities are really the start of Clemens' fixation with usurping ordinary office use equipment into militaristic devices. Not that his pink & white terraces are terribly sinister. In fact they're far from it. It's actually quite a clever move, the idea of notepads and inscription works perfectly with the late 90s account of the pink & white terraces as tourism commodity."<sup>15</sup> As a centre of fascination, the pink & whites developed their own tourist literature that both competed for and eventually outstripped the real thing. In this sense Clemens returns us to the source of this fixation, pinpointing his attention to the note pad of the industrious traveller, keen enough to record the moment creating a paper trail that distances us from the real thing. Anyone who's ever been involved with an organisation which keeps minutes will know this feeling as the last meeting is read back and re-circulated into the discussion, trapping us into a vexing circulatory narrative - which is probably why in Clemens 2002 Christchurch show (Ghostings)<sup>16</sup> the office table had been thrown to the floor, in a hasty make shift front line complete with firing portals.

With bottle-brushes hijacked from the cleaner's cupboard, and biros broken free and stored in surplus, Ghostings was a show bristling with incentive. That the scenario has been so refined with commodity care since, only further highlights Clemens' intent. Mimicking Arrowhead

packages, Clemens' biro packs are ready-mades complete with instructions relating to their intended use. This storing up is coupled with Clemens' industrious market research that developed the bubble gum blade.

#### Omissions, Generalities, and Vague Conclusions.

There's a lot I haven't mentioned. Clemens' green mats are the shape of Auckland cemeteries, something the absent crosses connote. That the crosses are flung about the gallery on visitation duties, as ghosts are want to do, is part of Clemens' perpetual cycle of continuity. That any and everything is borrowed and flung into Clemens' game-world scenarios are only too apparent. His artist page for Pavement magazine was both treatment and sanitation of this markedly conceited vision.<sup>17</sup> The empty cd case (jewel case) combined with drug dispensary unit for the absent-minded and drug-addled pharmaceutical mind both plays on and invests into this culture of consumption. Twice removed in veils of irony and enjoyment, Clemens' work will continue to open up contemporary culture whilst investing in its limitations and constant deceits. It's in the crooks and crannies that culture flourishes, something the Nelsons and the Milhouses of this world are constantly finding out. So welcome to Clemens' world, good luck and enjoy.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Kim Gordon, "Stuck on Gum" SVR5, (Riptorn Music, 2000).

<sup>2</sup>Sonic Youth, "Bubblegum" Starpower ep, (Blast First, 1986).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, "Expressway".

<sup>4</sup>Black Flag, "Wasted" The First Four Years (SST, 1983).

<sup>5</sup>Black Flag band logo

<sup>6</sup>Yes you know, that mildly popular TV program.

<sup>7</sup>Private email.

<sup>8</sup>The official word comes courtesy of [www.physicsroom.org.nz/kiosk/2003/clemens](http://www.physicsroom.org.nz/kiosk/2003/clemens)

<sup>9</sup>Anthony Byrt, "Vacant Lot" Landfall 206, pp108f117; 112.

<sup>10</sup>Gwynneth Porter, "Civilisation and its discontents: The Elam open day, university of Auckland November 2003" Natural Selection No.1 (Summer, 2004), 17.2. <sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Private email.

<sup>13</sup>Both of these references and connotations come courtesy of Clemens.

<sup>14</sup>With all likelihood this was Lie Low, a duo show with Hannah Beehre at HSP in 2001, but I'm not a 100% sure.

<sup>15</sup>For the last word on this see, Lydia Wever's Country of writing: travel writing and New Zealand, 1809-1900 (Auckland University Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup>Ghostings was shown as part of the HSP recycle series in 2002.

<sup>17</sup>Pavement, June/July 2003, DP.128-129.

Captain Squirrel, ShowStoppers catalogue, Jonathan Smart Gallery, 2004