

BRUNO V. ROELS

'On Postcards & Palm Trees with Bruno Roels' by Callum Beaney on December 24th 2020 on [c4journal.com](http://c4journal.com).

# LOOKING FOR PARADISE?

## On Postcards & Palm Trees with Bruno Roels

December 24, 2020 / by Callum Beaney

Recently, the artist Bruno Roels has been making short runs of postcards, tear-off flyers and silkscreens, and sending them out to people on Instagram. Known for his framed grids of tea-toned darkroom prints of palm trees, he exhibits with galleries and fairs worldwide. Though playful in form, Roels' interest in these trees is a serious one, digging deep into history. Callum Beaney got in touch with Roels and they chatted about how he thinks about photography, history, colonialism, Ed Ruscha, and the art industry.

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CB: I've seen you posting about these smaller distribution projects, such as those postcards, next to your gallery sales on Instagram. How do you think about them next to your more commercial side?

BR: *The connection between art and money is vexing. It equates price with quality and with value, but that's not very useful. As an artist I love selling works, because money means independence. I also believe that people sometimes do not get the value of something that they didn't have to pay for. And yet, I keep on giving stuff away.*

*One of the artists I look up to is John Baldessari, and he said that an artist always has to have 'an affordable line'. I took that to heart. So I do make editions, and they are sold at 'more democratic' prices than the rest of my work. In Baldessari's case, this meant that I (as a collector) was able to buy a very nice edition for a reasonable amount. His works typically fetch prices that are far out of my range.*



Excerpts from Roels' postcard collection

Was there a particular motivation behind the postcards project [*Post Card Series #1 – Noli 2019*], and how it ties in with your wider palm-trees-oriented practice? I know there's a rich history behind it but

*I started looking into the history of palm trees as a visual icon. That took me to colonialism, empire, the history of photography, orientalism...*

*I think that the contemporary, Western, definition of the palm tree is formed not by 'high art' but by vernacular imagery (postcards, stereoscopic photographs, toys, advertisements and later cinema and television...). In the beginning of the 20th Century there was a postcard craze; they were printed in Europe, shipped globally, sent from all over and collected. I collect these and they are amazing documents.*

*I'm very interested in those ways to disseminate my take on palm trees. Postcards are a wonderful way to get images into the world in a way that makes a more lasting impact than an instagram post. I'm working on my next book, which will consist exclusively of postcards and vintage prints from my collection. Stuff from 1885 – 1935. Images made in the colonies predominantly by Europeans for Europeans.*

## **I think that 'empire' seduces. That's part of orientalism for instance: it seduces with mystery and beauty, and obfuscates the horrors of colonialism.**

Could you tell a bit more about that upcoming book? RE: using postcards, I was going to ask – though you've got the archive, most of your works are printed from your own negs right? Will this change with that?

*My own work is mostly printed from my own photographs, yes. Because I love photographing (the act). Last year I experimented with sending friends off with a single use camera to bring me back palm trees images from their holidays. I haven't used it in any of my works yet, but I probably will. It's the logical evolution of my 'a palm tree is a palm tree is a palm tree' mantra.*

*I'm also trying to figure out if other printing processes like silk screen printing can have a place in my 'oeuvre'. I'm pleased with the results of the 'Fixing History' serigraphs I made. These are based on a vintage postcard I scanned and I can see myself doing more of that kind of appropriation.*

*The book I'm working on will consist of postcards and vintage prints 1885 – 1935, made in / bought in / sent from the European colonies. The idea is not to just reproduce these photographs and turn it into a historical overview. The images will be reproduced as bitmaps, black and white and grainy. Making the images even more 'timeless' (if that's even possible).*



Bruno Roels, *Post Card Series #1 – Noli 2019* consists of 80 customized post cards.  
They were sent to the people that reacted to my call on instagram: "If you want a post card, leave your address, and I'll send you one"

Has that iconic palm tree changed much from the oldest images in your collection to the most recent, be it in style, those layers of history that they've got hiding behind them etc.? I wonder how they'll be thought of in 50 years, given the environmental impact of harvesting oil palms.

*The oldest objects in my collection are coins (200BC). The meaning was different yes, but still related. Palm trees often signified success (they still do, in a way. Le Palm d'Or as a prize at the Cannes Film Festival comes to mind). I'd argue that posting images of palm trees on instagram also signifies success. 'Look at me, I am wealthy and take my holidays in exotic or luxurious places.'*

*The ecological impact of the palm oil industry is one thing to think about yes. I'm not sure it will impact the iconography of palm trees, but it's a fitting symbol for the way money corrupts almost anything it touches. In my mind, colonization begat globalization and mass industry as unholy children. Another is that climate change *is hurting the 'normal' date palm tree industry as well.**

*Some of the most iconic palm trees, the ones in L.A., are dying off. They are getting too old (they were planted in the early 20th Century to give the city the allure of the French riviera, so people would come live there) or palm weevils are ravaging them. In many cases the old palm trees are replaced by indigenous plants that bring more shade and are far more economical in terms of irrigation. Which makes total sense.*

Do you ever think about moving from the more directly symbolic and art history side, to more location-specific work? The mental image of those LA palm trees is eerily allegorical.

*No, my interest lies with the symbolic. The idea that I can use globally relevant 'exotic' iconography without leaving Europe, proves the impact that these images have. Across continent, across cultures.*


*I'm interested in the mental seduction that goes on. Empire seduces. Money seduces. Success and luxury seduce. Mental health, peace and quiet are all seductive notions. I'd like to find out where that seduction comes from. How our minds are hardwired. We see, we want.*

*But you're right, the allegory of those L.A. palm trees, the rise and fall would make for an interesting series.*

← Bruno V. Roels  
bruno\_v\_roels

Today 11:16 am



By the way, I make 'works' under my own name that may never be shown in the gallery. But I stand by them. You could see it as an effort not to be pigeon holed. But it's mostly doing what i think will teach me something. So it might be shit but i will have learned something along the way.



This is a bronze corrugated box stuffed with 100 plastic palm trees

I like the contrast between something expensive and labour intensive as bronze with the cheapo chinese almost throwaway vibe of the palms

The official title is 'A Box Of Cheap Mementos (From James To Thomas Cooke), 2019'

It has nothing to do with photography.

But it's an answer to your pigeon hole question

At the root of the question is 'validation'

Who validates art

At the root of the question is 'validation'

Who validates art

I validated this object by making it (and spending more money than i do on my photographic works) but that doesn't mean anything

It might be validated if I show it somewhere

The ultimate validation -by the market- is to sell it.

I'll be happy if it's included in a show somewhere

And I'd be happy to sell it, but i dont count on it

would you be interested in including a small bit about this piece in the article?

Sure



Bruno Roels, *A Box Of Cheap Mementos (From James To Thomas Cooke)*, 2019

Were you as focused on these historical aspects when you first broke into the artworld? I remember older conversations around your work being mostly about repetition and embracing imperfection. It's hard to actually see this post-colonial discourse in your grids and gallery pieces.

*When I started tugging at the iconography of palm trees, the postcolonial angle revealed itself. It's not present in my gallery pieces (yet). I haven't figured out where it will take me. I let my archive and the research I do / read take me along. I feel that I have much to learn yet. (That's a shit answer isn't it? it's the truth however.)*

Thing is, with these little projects, you're using Blurb-type publishing, plastic toys, copier prints set up like tear-flyers etc. right? And whether someone can get one is really down to whether they engage with you enough on Instagram that the algorithm puts your posts high in their feed, and a bit of lucky timing, which I dig.

*I try to take away as many hurdles as I can to see how far and how quickly I can put an idea out in the world. It needs to be down to earth or it doesn't really work. I'm very democratic and send out to everyone, if they ask politely.*

*At the same time, I like using systems that have been in place for a long time. Mail is an obvious example, but the tear-away poster is a time-honored way of communicating with the world. I've also silk-screened protest posters around Leopold II (still a big unresolved issue in post-colonial Belgium). That has a definite counter-culture vibe to it. Knowing full well that the impact of those things is minimal.*

*The "Looking For Paradise?" tear-off poster I made is a good example. It's a simple piece of paper, printed on my home printer, but people still keep it around or frame it even. As an artist, what more could I possibly ask for?*

## **The photography world has a habit of not understanding that the most interesting photography looks at a lot of different disciplines.**

Does the minimal political impact aspect bother you?

*I need to believe in the powers of a growing post-colonial discourse. I need to believe that all those little changes may in the end affect structural change or at least have some impact on the discourse that is evolving.*

When the art world challenges itself, it's often in a way which at one step or another reaffirms whatever it's challenging, be it Billy Apple or Mathieu Asselin. If you could swing it, would you make something that that system can't digest?

*That's a good point. I don't think I could make anything that would place it outside the system. I do think I might be able to shed a light on 'understanding' the allure instead of just 'participating'. At least, that's what I hope to do. It's an interesting notion to make something that that system can't digest.*



Bruno Roels, *Looking For Paradise?* (2020). Pigments on a pink dye-imbued pulped wood-fibre substrate. Exhibited at Hollingsworths Store & Butchers Gallery, England.



RE the Looking For Paradise? flyers. A lot of folks collect them, but do you see many put up on street corners?

*None, except for the ones I put up. That's okay, especially in times of quarantine and lockdowns. If I had 'fuck you'-money, I'd make billboards like the legend Larry Sultan.*

I'll put one up at my local. Do you think younger folks might see the palm-icon differently? A friend who lectures told me that some of the students don't know what the Holocaust was – I've got to admit, it was only after reading up on it that I became consciously aware of this kind of iconography.

*I take things at face value. Just having a look on instagram tells me that young folks (or most folks in the West) use/interpret palm trees as signifiers of holiday, adventure, luxury and paradise. It's only because I wondered why that is, that I came across the long history. Human beings have trouble putting things in any kind of real historical context. So I doesn't surprise me that a lot of them have no idea what the holocaust is. "L'histoire se répète" say the French, history repeats itself mostly because humans draw no real lessons from the past. I sound like an old man :-)*

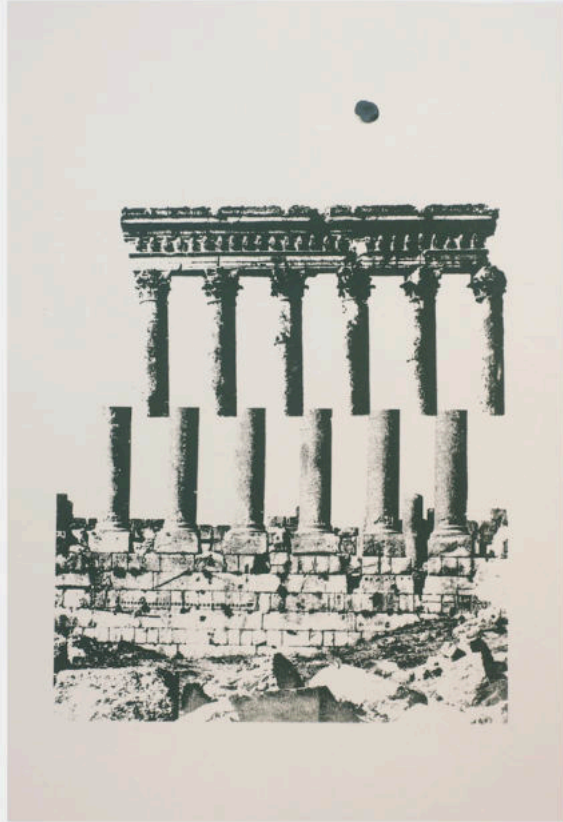
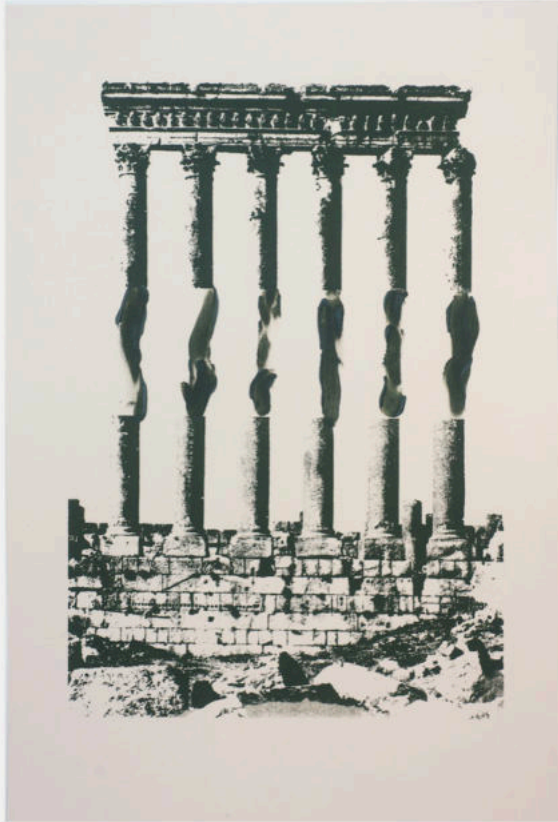
*To be clear, I think it's perfectly okay to see a palm tree and think of holidays. Not everything needs to be deconstructed all the time.*

Your interest in history goes pretty far back, right? I remember you mentioning researching as a graduate.

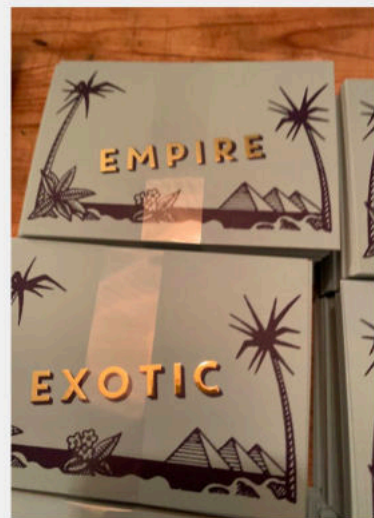
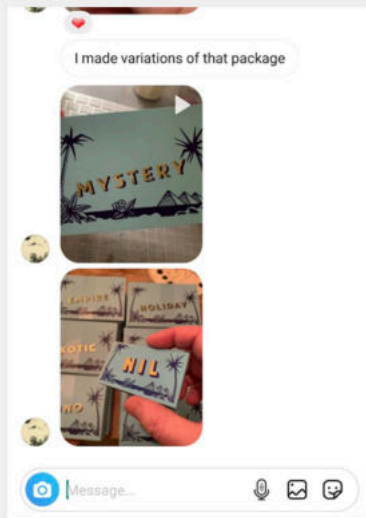
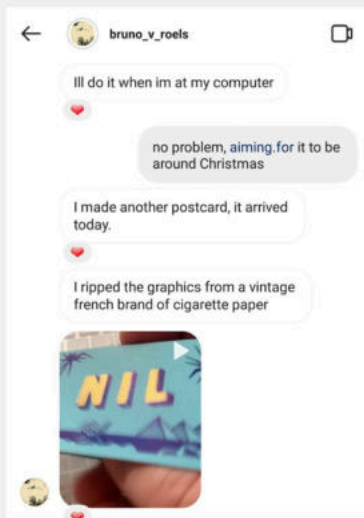
*I wrote a dissertation on libertine 18th Century erotic literature. I spent months and months looking through handbound folios from the 17th and 18th Century and I loved every minute of it. I had to come to grips with philosophy, literature and psychology, which was quite the trip.*

*Some of the scenes from Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho come straight out of de Sade's works (almost verbatim). Ellis' novel caused quite the uproar when it was published in 1991, yet de Sade had paved the way two centuries earlier. I like that kind of broader context; it highlights the important issues and filters out the 'outrage of the day'. Western history is very 'serial', but to me, history becomes more interesting if you look at it as cyclical. (There is a Hellenistic god of time called Aion, he's represented as a man between a green and a bare tree (summer vs winter). He represents cyclical time, whereas Chronos stands for linear time (past – present -future).)*

*History – anthropology – psychology: I find that if I pull at those strings, I get a small peek behind the curtain.*



Bruno Roels, *Fixing History (Missing The Point)*, 2020



As someone in the industry, signed up with publishers and galleries, and with a fairly recognisable aesthetic, what's the law on changing what you do? Do you ever feel typecast, expecting galleries and fans alike to lose interest if you dare to try something too different?

*I had a show in New York and a woman walks in and says 'I've seen this at Paris Photo'. Now as an artist, this can mean two things: you're stuck and you're never getting out, or you've succeeded in creating a body of work that is so coherent that it is recognizable on a global level. I was raised in provincial Belgium, I didn't ever think I would show in New York, not even if I was pushed to dream wild. That woman gave me the biggest compliment without knowing it. I'll take "making work that can be recognized at a fair like Paris Photo" over "I'll do whatever I want but nobody knows what I do" any day of the week. Would I put on a show with wildly abstract stuff? no, not yet, maybe never.*

*The reason I self-publish now and then is also to scratch an itch of stuff I don't expect a publisher to be readily interested in. And that's okay, I don't feel the photography world owes me anything.*

*Your question is a relevant one: should an artist shy away from making work knowing that 'the market' will probably not appreciate it? I can't answer this for everyone, but I try to make everything I want to make. And I see it as part of the dialogue with 'the art world' to make sure that they'll understand what I'm trying to do.*

Have you ever made under a different name to get around that kind of boxing-in?

*I waited a long time to 'show' my photography in a 'serious way'. When I did, I felt fairly certain I wasn't going to do documentary photography or fashion. I don't feel pigeonholed as a photographer. I do have an artistic alter ego, some kind of outsider artist persona that does massively different things. It's a low-key undertaking, for fun. The work is ribald, scatological and poorly executed. The poorly executed part is on me, but ribald and scatological art has been a staple in art history, so I'm in good company.*



Stamps from Roels' archive, and Leopold posters by Roels

^ I also asked that because I feel there's sometimes this pigeonhole of "the archive artist" floating around how people categorise artists. I like that you're using your own images as well as exploring the historical materials, but find something uncomfortable in that, even if you were to make grids using postcards that more or less resembled your own shots, people might appraise it differently. Is this cynical? (ok a little)

*I've said publicly that I could make my own work with nothing but vintage photographs I buy on ebay. I have 19th Century prints from the same negative but printed slightly different that would make a perfect Bruno V. Roels. I like 'archive artists'. People like Batia Suter blow my mind.*

*Tell me, are you saying that if I made the same work but with archival materials, people wouldn't appreciate it as much? Maybe the fact that I actually do some work in the dark room makes the difference? People distrust artists that do no real work :-)*

For me it doesn't make much of a difference. Maybe I'd think more of old archive boxes rather than imagine you in the darkroom, but depending on the print, the result could be more or less the same right? Just like how the art photography world is very isolated from the artworld at large, maybe being labelled as a certain "type" of artist is its own kind of isolation.

Where do you place yourself next to the artworld, then? You clearly don't limit yourself to photography, unlike many of your contemporaries, who seem more focused on photography about photography, about the "photographic program".

*I don't care about the 'photographic program'. I care about it as a photography enthusiast; as an artist I don't, I just do what I like. I think that the photography world has forgotten a lot about the possibilities of photography when compared to the early pioneers/modernists. I like the idea of working in a 150 year old tradition. I like the idea that the pioneers were less rigid than a lot of contemporary photographers are now.*

*I also think that 'the photography world' or 'art photography world' is doing itself a disservice keeping itself so separately. (Another thing that the modernists did better). So what you call 'photography program' is of no interest to me, not compared to a bigger, more encompassing 'art program' with roots in history, anthropology, psychology.*



Bruno Roels, *A Few Model Palm Trees*, 2019, Art Paper Editions. Based upon Ed Ruscha's *A Few Palm Trees*, 1971

I remember my tutor Jean pointing out that people on the "art side" tend to be more free with photography, materials-wise. Less adherence to standards.

*I think so, they see it as a tool, not as a fixed set of rules and frameworks and history. The photography side has a habit of not understanding that the most interesting photography looks at a lot of different disciplines.*

*My favorite bookstore in Belgium is in my hometown. They have a sizable photography collection and it's positioned all the way from 'the real arts'. Where do I want my book to be? I dunno.*

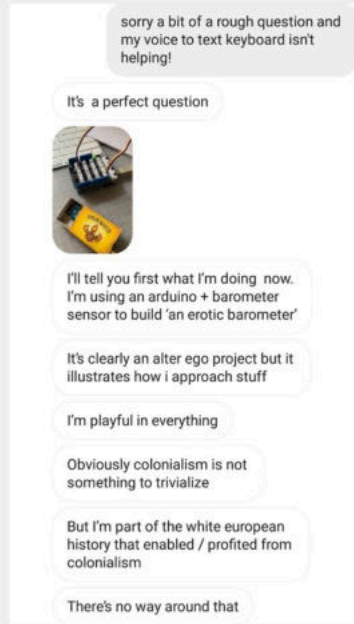
## **My favorite bookstore has a sizable photography collection and it's positioned all the way from 'the real arts'. Where do I want my book to be? I dunno.**

I wasn't aware of Ruscha's *A Few Palm Trees* up until I read about your response to it, (*A Few Model Palm Trees*). Even though Ruscha's book is pretty hard to access now, it's great to pluck at a historical thread and give it new life in doing so (also, do you know why he left so much of it blank? did he ever give a reason?)

*The Ruscha book was me tipping my hat at other artists working with palm tree imagery. Ruscha and Baldessari for that L.A. vibe, Marcel Broodthaers and Sigmar Polke use palm trees to make fun of the bourgeoisie. There are others, of course.*

*The obvious thing to do was to use my own photographs to make my version of his book. But because I'm also fascinated by dioramas, it took it one step further. It made more sense to me, but it makes for a weird, almost useless book. That's fine with me. I see the book as a key, as a kind of declaration of my interests, influences, scope. It's also me breaking down the walls of the box that I'm in. I don't know why he included so many white pages in his books, but I was more than happy to follow suit. The publisher got a lot of questions about it, people thought it was a printing error. By the way, there is a book that consists of all the empty pages in Ed Ruscha books (*Various Blank Pages* by Doro Boehme and Eric Baskauskas). So meta!*

*I also made a series of collectibles (multiples) of 5 of the plastic palm trees I've used for *A Few Model Palm Trees*. I've packaged them the way cheap toys would be packaged. The toys I gave away when I presented the book. I had big crates for people to choose from. It's a gimmick but also I get a strong vibe when I see all the multiples someone like Joseph Beuys produced during his life. It's an endless list of silly and not so silly prints or 'objects' and it warms my heart.*







Top: A postcard from Roels' collection  
Bottom: Bruno V. Roels, *Fake Billboards (Looking For Paradise?)* #1, 2020

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