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Some say that the utopian experiment of the 1960s ended with the first news of the Manson Family murders. The decade of testing authority, redefining domesticity, and countercultural idealism had found its nemesis, and Americans grew wary of social outliers. Horror films featuring extreme, Manson-like transgressions drew audiences, supplementing the more subtle psychological thrillers of the sixties; Hollywood canceled long-standing sitcoms focused on the harmonious nuclear family and introduced a wave of new television shows and films that suggested the instability of the domestic unit. D-L Alvarez's work mines that breakdown, drawing attention to the ways that we are conditioned, by family conventions and the media, to understand the boundaries of human behavior.

The drawings in Alvarez's series *The Closet* (2006-07) read as film stills, sequentially from left to right. The drawings are based on images from the 1978 low-budget slasher film *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), in which a psychopath returns to the childhood home where he had murdered his teenage sister to kill again. Carpenter's use of shadows and stalking camera movements were startling at the time, but especially shocking was his choice to set the action in seemingly innocuous domestic environments. These stage sets mirrored, detail for detail, the surface reality of the typical American home, which now, in the advent of home video, also doubled as the movie-watching environment. As the killer, Michael Myers, creeps in and out of the shadows at the edges and corners of the shot, he seems to be moving alongside the viewer's own peripheral vision, in the space of the home.

Exploiting Carpenter's active use of the frame, Alvarez's graphite drawings deftly convey the horror of the intended victim, Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis). The initial drawings in the series hone in on the critical details: her hand, as she repels his attacks from inside of a closet; the killer's mask; and the hangers she uses in defense. Beyond those few moments of recognition, however, Carpenter's realism breaks down and Alvarez's abstracted compositions take over, fracturing the carefully edited montage into grainy sections of gray tone. Like a degraded VHS tape, copied over and over, or low-resolution surveillance footage, the lost bits of information frustrate the drama and conceal the picture behind a silver screen. Carpenter's subjective camera angles, switching from inside Myers's mask to the victim's point of view, made the viewer both complicit in his evil acts but also terrified of his aggression. Alvarez uses pixilation to obscure the physical details of the images, suggesting both electronic and digital fragmentation—Laurie's hand reaches out from behind the matrix of gridded boxes, seemingly as much afraid of her impending virtual entombment as she is of Myers's knife.

Alvarez also transforms the domestic psychology of *Halloween*. Carpenter paid homage to the master of the genre, adapting Alfred Hitchcock's suspenseful build-ups and voyeuristic camera angles to compel the story into a more subconscious arena. He even cast a young Jamie Lee Curtis, the daughter of *Psycho* (1960) actress Janet Leigh, as the protagonist. This conflation of the actresses, mother and daughter, is epitomized in the closet scene, which mirrors the editing and soundtrack of *Psycho*'s infamous shower sequence. Both directors conceal the killers' faces and employ disorienting camera angles and Eisensteinian montage, so that audiences watch from the aggressor's point of view. Each scene is sexually charged, either by Janet Leigh's nudity or by Jamie Lee Curtis's innocence and, as the narratives build up around Norman Bates and his mother and Michael Myers and his sister, the knives imply a taboo familial penetration. But Alvarez isn't interested in replicating conventions of Hollywood horror. His technique masks the identifying features of both victim and perpetrator but, more importantly, it extends to the surface of the screen itself. The screen, a fixture in the contemporary home, becomes the new closet of terror. Pointing to that ultimate mediator, Alvarez fractures his surfaces into abstractions, subjecting them to the same treatment given the masked assailant in *Halloween*.

Alvarez recognizes another cinematic device in *Something to Cry About (I)* and *(II)* (2007), patchwork bodysuits made of children's clothing arranged over wooden armatures. They call to mind children's footed pajamas, but are draped ominously to look like the grisly costumes that psychopath Ed Gein fashioned out of his corpses' skins in order to make a "woman suit" that resembled his mother. Gein was the model for cinematic murderers such as Norman Bates in *Psycho* and Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and both characters mimic the actual serial killer's chilling methods and psychology. Together, Alvarez's fabric works and drawings recall the terror of watching a horror film as a child on the TV in the living room, but also to the social and domestic unease following the Manson Family murders. In both works, Alvarez points to the aesthetic guises that conceal us from greater horrors.

Dena Beard

ASSISTANT CURATOR

D-L Alvarez lives and works in Oakland. He has had participated in exhibitions at the Drawing Center, New York; The DePaul University Art Museum, Chicago; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Participant Inc., New York; Schwules Museum, Berlin; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. He has also created performative installations for the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Highways, Los Angeles; and the LAB, San Francisco.

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Front D-L Alvarez: *The Closet #13 and #14*, 2006-07; graphite on paper; 17½ × 21¼ in. each; courtesy of Derek Eller Gallery, New York.