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DAVID ALTMEJD VERSUS CATHIE PILKINGTON

Concurrent shows prompt an unexpected comparison. One was in New York, the other in London. One artist is male, the other female. One has an international reputation for striking and controversial themes and means, the other has quietly progressed to a leading gallery in London, essentially slips under the curatorial radar. One specializes in male figures the other tends to female figures. One is noted for monumental scale and sprawling disparity to materials and theme. The other prefers small scale and a tidier, more integrated technique. Both have been attracted to mythic animal characters or anthropomorphised figures, although one favours the reassuring characters of children's fiction while the other prefers the bestial hybrids of horror stories or distant legends. Both are part of a general trend to broadening roles for figures in sculpture, drawn from low or popular culture and the inclusion of new or unusual materials that often follows. Yet one stresses fragmentation, attenuation, while the other strives for integration and compression. Both bodies of work highlight sexuality, although one is notably homo the other more hetero. And sexuality is mainly represented as bodily imposition or disablement, as intrusion or alarming division. Yet for both, faces typically remain blank, distracted or disengaged. The person and their body strain for accommodation or even acquaintance, baulk at acceptance. One is an essentially schizophrenic dilation, the other a frankly neurotic contraction. It is the surprising correspondence and complement in theme that prompts this review. Obviously the aim is not to prefer one to the other or to argue for the greater importance of one or the other, but rather to discern some shared issues for recent figurative sculpture.

I have written about Pilkington before and outlined the general trend to the use of dolls or toys in sculpture, either as found material, readymades or fabrications and her more hands-on, freewheeling approach. This trend perhaps subsides with the emergence of figures like David Altmejd, Thomas Houseago or Matthew Monahan, where something like a monumental primitivism is revived, yet strangely bereft of any more recognisable myth. The work at best flags a lurking nostalgia, impatience with more nuanced or frivolous roles, a reversion to heroic, if slightly ramshackle ideals. The figure in sculpture would seem to tire of the well-worn pigeon holes for childhood games and instruction but as yet can find no more satisfying model nor accompanying materials or technique. The work for the moment registers merely a blundering, slipshod posturing, a refusal to smooth over the process, play by the rules. For Altmejd, this fast and looseness not only disperses pose but deliberately blurs means and ends, so that casts of hands or ears for instance in turn are used to represent other features to a figure, or fluffy toys are incorporated into larger figures, these in turn, as likely to become building blocks for still larger situations. In other examples, mythic or metaphorical attributes blur with the literal and anatomical, so that fur for example, may partly serve to extravagantly depict body hair but introduces a more bestial element all the same. And such works are only half in jest, for while it may be a game of dressing up and deliberate tackiness

outwardly, there is no discarding costume or disguise without grave impairment beneath. The figure without fur is then without hair, is then that much less convincing for it. There are no bare bones to finally appeal to either; they were made from something else as well. The viewer confronts a kind of ontological vertigo, perhaps experienced in some installations, but striking in figurative sculpture.

An Altmejd figure disintegrates into endless parts, a kaleidoscopic implosion, a wayward, flailing metaphor for understanding or analysis. And this acquires a psychological charge with some attention, declares a distinctly evasive tendency. It is notable that mirrors for example, have played a prominent role in past work as materials or settings, literally deflecting the viewer's gaze, resisting a direct view of surface or volume to the figure. This begins to look like part of a pattern. But all the glitter and ornament inevitably invite suspicions of a distraction from some meaner, less attractive substance. Altmejd's figures flaunt just this dazzle and disparity, but the lack of cohesion also starts to read as a plea for endless possibility or perhaps simply a lack of commitment. On sustained viewing the figures come to stand for an excess of possibility or allusion, an anxiety with any figure or model, any starting or end point. Another trait has been the holes or windows cut into the surface of parts of the figure. These reveal either surprising mixes or messes of contrasting substances or else puncture the figure entirely, literally picking holes in it. Here dissatisfaction or hostility is manifest, yet it is directed inward. Elsewhere figures are literally pried or torn apart, in an orgy of self-absorption or narcissism. But it is really one version of the work arguing with another, unable either to consume a rival or break free from it.

The works thus deal in acute turmoil and yet, as indicated, there is a lighter side. The sheer looseness to construction, the drips, spills, abrasions and discharges have a relaxed, gleeful feel. Techniques often seem fumbled, precious materials brazenly misused, giving an overall impression of the shambolic and superficial. And the work may well be experienced as a welcome relief from strict maintenance of a doomed archetype or any comprehensive modification. Rather, it revels in sundry digressions, silly, piecemeal adjustments at any number of levels. It is the frivolous side that has occasionally misled critics. The Guardian's Adrian Searle for example, could find only melodrama and obscenity amid the slack and sloppy assemblage and was impatient for a more elegant integration of materials, perhaps along the lines of someone like Kiki Smith's interest in bodily organs and animal affinities. Searle was right in detecting something of shop window display or 'visual merchandising' in Altmejd's presentation, but it is the camp or gay undercurrents there as much as the brittle ensembles of showy materials that resonate and while this may prompt the critic to prefer Charles Ray's *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...* (1992) with its customised shop mannequins in a sharper declaration of gross narcissism, it misses how much Altmejd's lax approach is party to the party. The fun starts in the parts, tricks with its bits and never quite makes it home or whole.

Interestingly, Altmejd's work commences as fairly abstract architectural models that at some point are simply internalised to the figure. But the transition is not so much from engineering to anatomy, as from a place to a person. In following works, staircases sometimes occur as perverse dressing or support for colossal figures but the bodily avenues Altmejd traces are more mythic or metaphorical than medical; at most suppose secrets to limbs or torso for some mysterious standing or identity. The

figures are all specimens of monumental adoration or adornment but however the body is rendered it cannot elicit a consistent or convincing person. The architectural thread alerts us to this distance from personal presence, the spatial arrangements viewed in miniature that compartmentalise lives. In recent years the artist reverts to more overt containment in the maze of Perspex vitrines that enclose even life-size figures. This trend continues with this year's show at Andrea Rosen, titled *Juices*. The enormous main work, *The Flux and The Puddle* (2014) measures 327.7 X 640.1 X 713.7cm and comprises Plexiglas, quartz crystals, polystyrene, expandable foam, epoxy clay, epoxy gel, resin, synthetic hair, clothing, leather shoes, thread, mirrors, plaster, acrylic paint, latex paint, wire, glass eyes, sequins, ceramics, synthetic flowers, synthetic branches, glue, gold, feathers, steel, coconuts, aqua resin, burlap, lighting system including fluorescent lights, Sharpie ink and wood. The audacious array carries dispersal of the figure to greater extremes but the spread is contained and compartmentalised by the interlocking Plexiglas boxes of various sizes. While the arrangement allows for the inclusion of fluids and semi-solids to figures, their properties and relations, it unavoidably constrains the viewer's involvement. We peer in through the layers of Perspex, around the shadows and reflections for the figures variously situated deep within the sculpture, but they remain all the more elusive. The intricacy and ambition of the work suggest that sound tracks and animation of some kind may well be next for the artist, but patrolling the perimeters of these giant ice cubes, one feels as quarantined as the fleeting figures within.

By contrast, Pilkington's show at Marlborough Galleries runs into problems at the other end of the scale. Her show is titled *Thing-Soul*, a reference to an essay by Rainer Maria Rilke – *On Dolls* (1913) - usefully pointed out in the catalogue essay by Benedict Carpenter. But Rilke is intent upon analysing the emotional investment placed in dolls as simply inanimate surrogates - things. As sculpture however, play is a little more confined and the contrast is properly between material and subject matter and in Pilkington's case more expressly between head and body, a person and type. Her thing is the gap or lack of soul. The show brings a marked change from the artist's 2010 show at Marlborough, *The Peaceable Kingdom* where figures were mostly engaged in sex or parent/child relations, an idle trail of grief from one to the other it would seem, even in the guise of merry animals. All were treated in a rugged and cheerful mix of materials, an appropriately promiscuous blend of carving, modelling, casting, assemblage and painting. With *Thing-Soul* however, the work concentrates on the single figure, almost exclusively female and without props, setting or loveable animal attributes, and although the mix of materials remains, the effect is smoother, less chaotic, finally less compelling. But this new composure nonetheless reveals a deep disquiet.

Once left to her own devices, divisions promptly fall within and across the figure; dividing head from body, torso from limbs, clothing from flesh or anatomy. The figure is internally fraught in ways not unlike Altmejd's more drastic disengagements. And like Altmejd's hymns to He of chronic insecurity, Pilkington's ladies are notable for fixed or blank expressions, a detachment from pose or situation. The ladies tend to zone out, not because they do not know what their left or right hand is doing, wearing or what it even looks like, but because where the task narrows to mere self-presentation, they are overwhelmed by their body's impact. Personal attraction leaves them no more than a ghostly projection upon some more animal thing, rude material they can inhabit but briefly or slightly. With time of course, bodies tire and demands grow more discriminating. *Thing-Soul* deals with some of

this, but less in aging bodies than a stricter, more abstract model. The doll-like figures find their bodies posed after noted works by Picasso, Matisse, Ray, Bourgeois, Velasquez and much Moore. Reduced to natty miniatures, they mock grander claims, cut tradition down to size. Doll heads by contrast, look quite at home on a homely scale. This aspect was present in the last show, with wry allusions to Hepworth and Degas but in Thing-Soul it becomes foremost. Where previously the dolls and animals were set raw adult tasks to amusing or alarming effect, here they submit to more restrained and traditional demands, conspicuously seek rapprochement between young and old, high and low, thing and soul.

The figures duly exchange doll-like attributes for more stylised or abstract ones, and while this allows a certain amount of parody and pastiche, differences still gnaw at the distinction. The soul thing is diffused for being spread across a little tradition and the claim is then more modest. We have something of a soul or thing, well-worn moves she barely animates, but old poses can only go so far. The careful style-skirmishes allow some displacement of limbs and notably breasts become proximal, disproportionate, a restive asset only taunting soul or thing. But one senses more might be made of such liberties with anatomy, attendant pose and costume as a further probing of person, even if the territory suggests a sculptural Soutine or Bacon. Ultimately the project needs other poses, a less cautious canon. But Pilkington has at least been able to demonstrate how the surge to diverse materials may be constrained or reconciled with a more entrenched figure and this is a quiet but significant achievement for contemporary sculpture, certainly enough for one show. Thing-Soul perhaps lapses into excessive cuteness or coyness, a little too much nostalgia for antique costume or finish, but this is the risk of working small, starting from dolls and looking back.

Where Altmejd pushes outward, can at best cling to the science diorama or window dressing as model for the figure caught in spectacular clutter, Pilkington directs her dolls back into firmer tradition, more reassuring company, only to find them cramped by protocol, daunted by expectation. As noted, both strategies bring with them a troubling psychology (and what psychology is not troubling?). For Altmejd, accessories maketh the man. But he cannot resist sacrificing old ones for new, makes room in his heart for his bladder, only to find he has neither after the by-pass and with the stairs and that the mess one makes only makes one bigger, possibly beastlier. While for Pilkington, a lady is always on notice, running late or short, by sales calendar or biological clock an impossible pose of constancy or confidence, short-changed by fashion, diet and dependents, at the mercy of an overbearing tradition, ruthless competition and the hairstylist from hell. Is it any wonder she shrinks from staying or stays and without so much as a phone or chair? There is no consolation in closing her eyes when laid on her back. The doll's lot is all art and no life when one is finally on one's own, making do.

Each artist thus forges acute expression from sculpture's stretched resources. Neither exactly solves the problem or ensures a suitable route for others but their examples remind us that scope for the personal or individual is part and parcel of the process, that they make more of themselves for engaging with sculpture's very practical and public issues, with issues of form and standards of presentation and that those issues are in some small way transformed for their efforts.