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London Artists Today

Solitude: London Artists Today, Galerie Upstairs Berlin, January 24 - March 25, 2006

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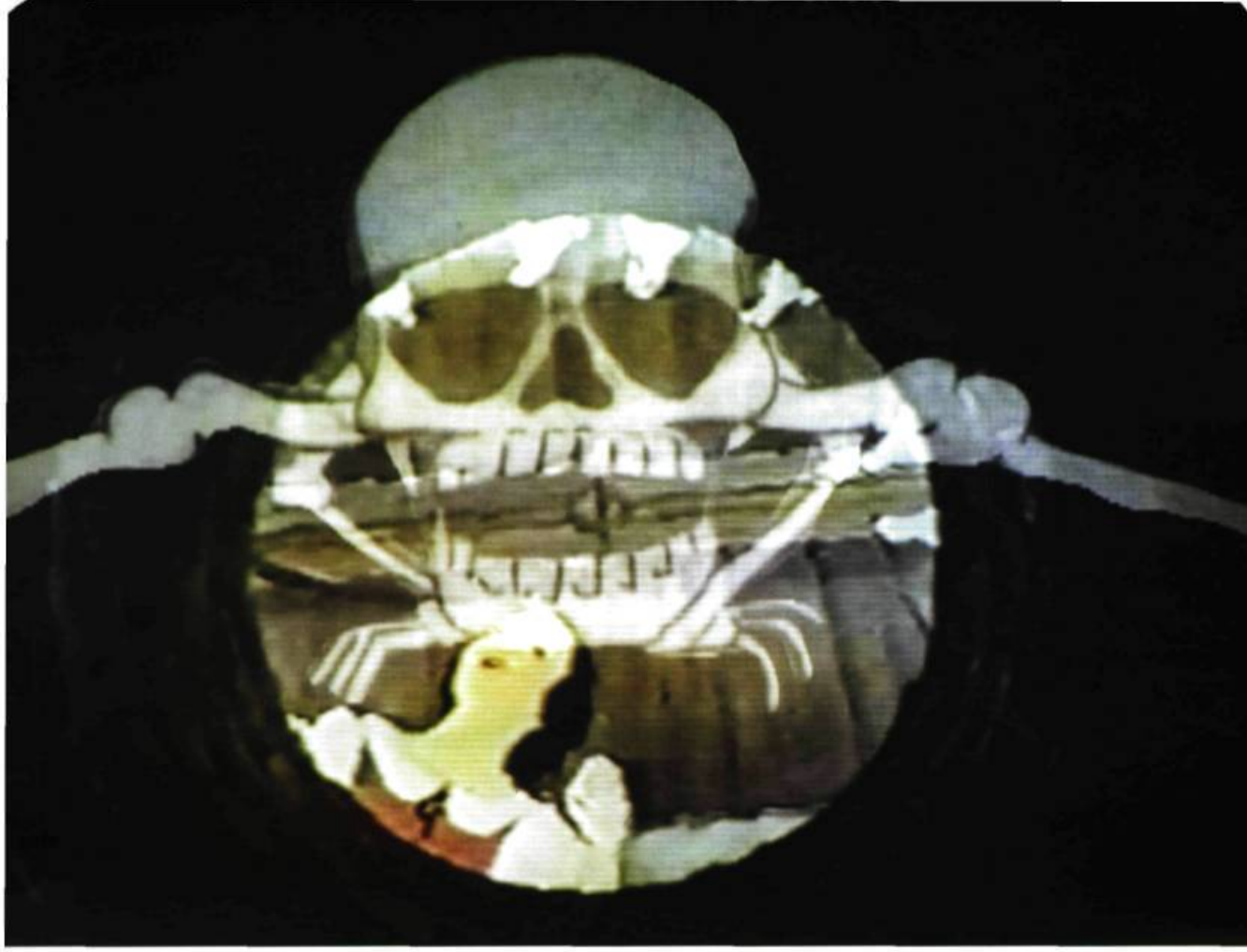

Loukia Alavanou, Wishing Well, 2005. Single-screen projection, video 3 minutes. Courtesy Upstairs Berlin © Loukia Alavanou.

Berlin

London Artists Today

Solitude : London Artists Today, Galerie Upstairs Berlin, January 24 – March 25, 2006

The title *Solitude : London Artists Today* brings back memories of the debates surrounding the exhibition *Sensation : Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (1999/2000). The latter was held in New York's Brooklyn Museum of Art and became a news item after Rudolph Giuliani, then mayor of New York, perceived the art as "anti-Catholic." The city threatened to revoke the museum's lease and remove its municipal funding unless the art of the YBAs was taken down. The public showdown was not triggered by Damien Hirst's bloody cow head pickled in formaldehyde or by Sarah Lucas's installation of a dirty old mattress. The wrath was caused by a painting of a black Madonna, in which Chris Ofili included tiny vaginas as compositional motifs and elephant dung for bodily accentuation. Giuliani described the art as "disgusting, horrible and awful."[1] Museum officials reacted quickly. Legal intervention – with the support of many individuals in public office, among them Hillary Clinton – helped win the case in the name of freedom of expression. *Sensation* also shaped public perception of contemporary British art as loud, rebellious and sensational.

This next generation opted for a quieter language that is loud in its quietude. The *London Artists* explore new cultural topographies via dense compositions into which viewers are slowly absorbed. The show was an aesthetic pleasure in process, not thrills of repulsion or shock. The Danish curator Michael Bank Christofferson speaks of a muted rebellion : "Previous generations have entered the scene loudly with bravado, gusto and indeed big bangs," and, "silence is the only possible reaction to noise."[2] This next generation, as he refers to the artists (most of whom were born in the 1970s and live and work in London, did not disappoint. If the YBAs stood for a more unified program, championed by Charles Saatchi – who, notably, also collects art of this next generation – the London Artists work singularly, some in isolation. Their projects do not emphasize solitude in the traditional Romantic sense, burdened by a melancholic gravity : Each project mediates instead the positioning of the self in respect to that

what each fathoms and projects of its essence, may it be reactionary traces, memory, philosophical currents, the authentic outdoors or sweetening death. If melancholic relations are felt, they should be seen as strength.

Mat Collishaw's photograph *Punk Flowers* (2004), displayed at the entrance, was a perfect transition from the art of the YBAs to that of *Solitude*. As the oldest of the ten artists (he was born in 1966), he incorporates reactionary traces. He spray-painted lilies, adorned them with razor blades, chains and feathers and produced a digital shot, evenly lit. An undefined, black background adds a productive tension. The composition hovers between a traditional still life, or *vanitas*, image and image-making where a thread is uttered, control emphasized (due to absent shadows), violence inflicted and marks left behind as in graffiti.

Shane Deegan's photograph *Chris (16th Birthday, Hackney)* (2006) draws the viewer into a narrow backyard where a theatrical act of isolation is staged. An adolescent sits in the traditional 'Thinker' pose, framed by trees in bloom. A soccer ball points to his choice of sports, perhaps to a soccer hero he admires, to identity and becoming. Themes of spring and awakening meet the classical one-point perspective of picture construction intersecting with that of the viewer. The title turns the site into a historical and geographical space, which will soon be outgrown by the young man. Deegan's strategy, he concedes, is memory re-enacted. When memory is presented as a "stage-set-up," argues Luce Irigaray, it conjoins a present and a past whereby the present specularizes the past, which is defined as present that has taken place. [3] *Chris* opens up this present or past, spreads it out and unfolds it in suspense to act on the viewer.

Marisa Favretto's painting *White Rabbits* (2005) is immediately arresting due to its size and furry subjects. The composition makes one anxious after looking at it for a while. There is no space for us to enter the fictive realm except for the lower right corner – a significant edge. A force seems to move outward as the animals take on humanized features. There is no thread, however. Rather, the familiar turns uncanny as we fail to isolate a single rabbit in the mass of over

Hadassah Emmerich, *Hawaiian Skirt*.

one hundred. Favretto's canvases can be understood – cats and wolfs are included – as visual parallels to current discourses in theoretical philosophy where animals are granted greater cognitive and emotional potential. Dominik Perler, who was awarded the coveted Leibniz Prize (1.55 million Euros) for his innovative research, opens his book, *The Mind of Animals* (2005), with Hume's dictum: "No truth appears to me more evident than that beasts are endow'd with thought and reason as well as man," echoed in the rabbits' humanized features. The arguments presented by Perler question Malebranche who, contrary to Hume, denoted: "Ainsi dans les animaux il n'y a ni intelligence ni âme... ils mangent sans plaisir, ils crient sans douleur."[4] *White Rabbits* thematizes these burning issues and ties us into a debate that works on transforming our understanding of what the mind is while subverting traditional philosophical ideas of man's superiority over other beings. The space in the painting's lower right corner opens entry into this new world of thought most effectively.

The search for artistic experience in the rugged outdoors away from urbanity links Barnaby Hosking to Canada's Group of Seven. In his installation, *Snow Painting Once Removed* (2005), we enter a space between a ten-minute DVD loop, projected on a black screen; a canvas painted white and a black mirror. Like the Group of Seven artists, who in the early 1920s left their studios in Toronto to go north to capture the essence of Canada and devise a language independent from European modernism – F. H. Varley's *Stormy Weather Georgian Bay* (ca. 1920) or Lawren Harris's *First Snow, North Shore of Lake Superior* (1923) come to mind – Hosking, too, headed north.[5] He opted for North Cape, Norway, where he went on February 5th, 2005, to set up his easel outdoors. A companion filmed his arrival (by van) and his painting amid drifting snow and heavy winds, the effects of which can be seen but not heard in this stunning, silent black and white reel. We watch the artist apply white acrylic paint (a brand workable in cold climates) on a canvas primed black, with a thick brush and determined strokes. Notably, the act of painting becomes the composition not the observed scene. Nature's breathtaking scenery rendered in chromatic tones by the Group of Seven is not Hosking's primary focus. Weather conditions and nature become a filmed background and expand

Mat Collishaw, *Punk Flowers*.

the visual space. Light – the intensities of which are captured via celluloid and paint, in black and white, then bounced back in the exhibition – is the focus of attention. Painting, which is privileged in modernist discourse as the most ambitious and significant art form because of its combination of body and trace that secure through metonymy the presence of the artist, as Griselda Pollock argues (Getty lecture, Los Angeles), is supplemented by video sketches. Video, the privileged post-1980s disseminator of film and shaper of contemporary visual culture, now enhanced through DVD, is employed here in a manner comparable to early 20th-century filmmaking before the talkies. Watching Hosking paint his canvas in *Snow Painting* means also watching the camera's slow movement: parallel to the scene from left to right, and right to left without zooming in. Close-ups are made whereby the cameraman walks slowly towards the canvas, then backing up likewise. There is remarkable emphasis on the process of artistic production by employing various media that shift and displace the viewer in time and place. A complex medium-to-medium discourse – painting, film, video and DVD – is initiated into which we enter to partake in the North Cape experience. We are transported out of doors, but are soon reminded of the artistic construction and thus removed from the experience. And so is the painter, *seen* in the projection but to be *found* in the traces left on the white canvas. Brecht once wrote that aesthetic/political experiments are necessary to open spaces for critique. *Wishing Well* (2005), Loukia Alavanou's three-minute DVD loop, is a case in point. Projected next to *Snow Painting*; it seemed a bothersome intrusion into the quiet space. The intrusion was caused by a high-pitched girly voice continuously singing: "I love you, I miss you." The voice-over belongs to a montage of familiar film/cartoon characters from various Disney productions. They are layered with images of skulls and bones, and played to a different speed. It takes some time to fully recognize those fleeting features of death over the figure of Snow White, especially since viewers are returned to the familiar storyline and a feel-good space. The comfort is brutally disrupted when we recognize the symbols of death. Why this intervention? In Europe, Disney cartoons are associated with America, its culture/country that is disrupted here and critiqued. The underhanded

Shane Degan, *Chris*.

visual intervention acts as a figure of speech. It is a political allegory of dissent likely directed towards the current U.S. administration and those allies involved in a bloody, seemingly nonending, war. It is also a memorial to victims of armed conflict, especially children. The girly voice, in its repeated excess, sweetens death. After *Solitude* Alavanou held a solo show at Upstairs Berlin titled *Dead Real : New Video Works* (April 11 – June 8, 2006).

Between *Sensation* and *Solitude* lies a threshold of time. The first exhibition belongs to the postmodern, the second to the postsecular, to borrow Jürgen Habermas's term. In between were the terror attacks, drawing the dividing line. After the historic rupture in 2001 – when terror and death became a *world* picture – aesthetic experiments have shifted towards the exploration of new cultural topographies internally and externally articulated well by the London Artists Today.

Maria Zimmermann Brendel

NOTES

[1] Quotes of Giuliani are taken from "The Art of Controversy, Oct. 8, 1999," website : Sensation, Brooklyn Museum of Art.

[2] Michael Bank Christoffersen et al, *Solitude : London Artists Today* (Berlin : Upstairs Berlin), 2006, 5. Sincere thanks go to Dr. Nina Roy, Nicolas Roffet and Minh-An Ha.

[3] Luce Irigaray, "The Stage Setup," in Timothy Murray ed., *Mimesis, Masochism & Mime : The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought* (Ann Arbor : The University of Michigan Press), 1997, 76.

[4] N. Malebranche : "And so animals have neither soul nor intelligence... they eat without enjoyment and scream without pain." *De la recherche de la vérité* (VI, 2, vii). D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (I, 3, xv) in Dominique Perler and Markus Wild, *Der Geist der Tiere : Philosophische Texte zu einer aktuellen Diskussion* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp), 2005, 7. Perler initiated in Germany a philosophical direction that has had currency for some time in English-and French-speaking countries. The *Leibniz Preis* are the prizes given in Germany in the humanities.

[5] The Group of Seven sketched on site and completed most of their canvases in the studio.