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Elective Medicine

Michael A. Robinson, *Sweet Dreams*, Galerie Skol, Montreal.
April 5 - May 10, 2003

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ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

Montreal ELECTIVE MEDICINE

Michael A. Robinson, *Sweet Dreams*,
Galerie Skol, Montreal. April 5 – May 10, 2003

Disease makes men more physical, it leaves them nothing but body.¹

Thomas Mann

Michael A. Robinson's elaboration of metaphor begins in a small, enclosed area of the exhibition space – a small hospital room, dimmer than

the rest of the gallery. It seemed strangely intrusive to be entering this area. Because of the stormy cracking and flashing effect at the window, it was not easy to see if the figure lying in the bed was breathing or not, if it was in fact real. Having previously caught a glimpse of the video projection on a nearby wall, I was aware that the figure lying in the hospital bed might be part of a performance. There was a wheelchair to the right and also tubs to catch water from the leaky ceiling, like a large plasma drip. The whole room seemed affected.

After a time, it became evident that the figure lying on the bed was not real. The white bottles and jars on the small desk at the entryway were not medication; they were cosmetics containers with whitening products for the hair and skin. The books on the night table were *Critique de la faculté de juger* by Immanuel Kant, *Les règles de l'art* by Pierre

Bourdieu, and *Qu'est-ce que l'esthétique* by Marc Jiménez.

The artist sets up a metaphor that evolves quite differently as the secondary aspects come together. These details become important for more than the ambiance they create. There is a shift in attention that requires more complex levels of recognition and brings a sudden self-awareness to the interpretive process. This realization that the aesthetic sensibility is so strong in driving the initial response recalls the pitch of many TV newscasts that use dramatic effect to engage the viewer despite the realization that it is presented within a format that somehow mitigates further engagement.

This aspect of going beyond spectatorship is underlined by the theoretical references that the artist places on the patient's night table. Kant has treated the notion that human experience is actively originated by the mind rather than passively perceived. Perceptual input must be processed or it would just be noise – "less even than a dream" or "nothing to us." In the preface of *Les règles de l'art*, Bourdieu surveys the active process of exploration and engagement as one that enriches the viewer and reveals the depth of a work of art, rather than simply robbing the viewer of a sense of mystery. The artist also puts forward more



politically pressing terms. The open Harper's magazine on the patient's night table "Cause for Dissent: Ten questions for the Bush regime" by Lewis H. Lapham raises the issue of the detriment to us that a lack of engagement with cultural representations can bring. The allusion to sickness often serves as metaphor, among other things, to portray social corruption, a persistence in choosing error or derivative forms of expression that no longer reflect creative engagement. Here we get the message that pathological passivity is a co-operative procedure, an evolving relationship.

The video projected onto the bare gallery wall creates a particular extension of these ideas. Again, white is the predominant colour, with each of the figures made up in monochrome, carrying out a limited series of gestures, in one scene after another. Hair is whitened or white wigs are worn, white face paint applied to the skin is visibly cracked, though the old sage in flowing robes wears a mask. This character is seen tapping his temple – use your head – he seems to gesture, yet his mask and his manner do not specifically reveal him as an assuring presence. We see a nurse tending to the patient, removing the bedside books from the patient's hands. The patient turns in mild avoidance as she serves him medicine on a spoon. In another scene the patient is shown in an active role, both as teacher and pupil studying some lozenge shapes which resemble those that were given as medication. This scene reappears in a framed still photograph in

the hospital room on one side of the bed. On the other side of the bed is one of the plaster plaques, similar to those in the outside gallery area. They resemble a negative mold of those lozenge shapes, set in abstract clusters like departments of an institution. They also tie in with the large rectangular box structure in the exterior gallery. White is used as the predominant surface colour, similarly broken down and shadowed or tarnished. Again, the strong reliable look of industrially manufactured surfaces seems beset by the taint of organic weakness. The articulated interior, with vague physical resemblances to other work suggests that there might be a stretching and morphing of scale, an abstraction and obliteration of detail within this temporary construction. The lozenge shapes work like a metaphor for material that the patient has not yet processed and brought into the realm of meaning. They reoccur as abstract elements found in the transfer print images on paper as well as the cast pieces. These are physical media, often associated with dissemination purposes, even propaganda, which is by its nature unprocessed information.

This is a particularly effective way of extending the conceptual structure. The varied media don't merely take on a parallel or illustrative role; the abstract elements are fully coherent with the figurative. Multiplicity in post-modern material practices is largely understood as an inclusive means to expand and diversify the viewer's experience. This approach is in-



tended to counter tendencies in interpretation that were seen to favour a fetishistic cloisonnement of the medium. Robinson chooses to observe this general approach which finds value in diversity, but also joins things together in a way that causes perturbations to the antithetical discourses of abstract versus figurative, subjectivity versus objectivity, of mind versus body, of inner truth versus outward appearances.

The dualism of Plato and Aristotle, so much a foundation for Western thinking, propels thinkers to overcome the social inequalities seemingly inherent in this philosophical framework. While sublimated expressions of dualism have been routed out of highly intellectualized representational practices, they have been displaced rather than transformed. We know that many problematic practices still end up loaded and compressed into 'free' zones, where for some individuals, the status of the body, mind, labour, gender, etc., are considered to be subjective issues and of marginal interest to the majority. Again, the arts risk becoming complicit with the depoliticization of the idea of subjectivity.

In a structural sense, the abstract elements within the conceptual framework of the exhibition provide a reserved zone, to establish a growing connection, a sensory relation to the more charged parts of the work, in a way that doesn't yet imply a position of activism or avoidance. In this way, Robinson counters the typically dualistic elements that occur throughout the exhibition – witness the fading presence of the pa-

tient lying in the other room, identified with a binary discourse of absence or presence, yes or no, and ultimately dead and alive – activity and passivity in very literal and predictable terms.

The communiqué that accompanies the exhibition speaks about the fairly random, anti-strategic process of assembling the work. I have to argue that there was a marked coherence in the work, more than just the trace of one accidental choice to another. The way that artists choose to prepare themselves over the course of time can make all the difference, taking them to new thresholds of exploration. When there is truly no programme coming together, it is usual for people to lapse into familiar patterns after a certain time.² It is work to find the alternative, and the structures that evolve often result from a highly prepared state of mind. From a viewer's perspective, the work in its final presentation is one of the most complex and challenging exhibitions I've seen in awhile.

JOAN RZADKIEWICZ

NOTES

¹ Mann, Thomas. *The Magic Mountain*. New York: The Modern Library, McGraw-Hill, 1955. p. 178.

² Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. New York: The Hill and Wang, 1977. p. 177. This reference is from the book's 1968 essay *Lesson in Writing* that explores distinctions of the animate and the inanimate in Bunraku theatre and relates them to Western approaches.