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New York Scene



Lorna Simpson, *Kid Glove*, 1989. 5 color polaroids, 5 plastic plaques; 78,7 x 340 cm. Edition of 2. Photo : Ellen Page Wilson. Courtesy of Josh Baer Gallery, NYC

Lorna Simpson, Josh Baer Gallery, New York, September 8 to October 14, 1989 —

Lorna Simpson's multipanel photo/text pieces are designed to disturb and provoke. Her confrontational strategy addresses both a political issue — the identity of the black woman in contemporary America — and the aesthetic formalisms inherent in her conflation of image and text. A conceptual artist who was trained in photo documentary, Simpson carefully manipulates her Polaroid portraits of an archetypal black woman (not the artist herself, but a model) and plaques of text to suggest an eerie discontinuity that hints not so much at narrative or autobiography, but at vast spaces that can be filled with cultural flotsam — assumptions, stereotypes, racial and sexual clichés. These pieces are at once open ended, iconic, schematic and accusatory. They give us just enough information to be hungry for more, to feel a void, to seek completion even as we realize that any completion we achieve will be neither total, satisfying, nor true.

The work is not media appropriate. We are not presented with images of black musical divas (Diana Ross, Aretha Franklin) or current political figures (Tawana Brawley, Winnie Mandela). In fact, the individuality of the black woman is completely stripped down to its barest essentials, is purposely kept generic and non specific. Her "blackness" resides in her skin and her dreadlocks. She is denied a name and a face (photographed from behind, or from below the chin) and is placed against an undifferentiated neutral backdrop. Her simple white cotton shift, reminiscent both of hospital gown and of the antebellum plantation, emphasizes her passive role as victim, one who is acted upon (as a patient or slave).

Here is a black woman decontextualized and anonymous, a pared-down icon, a carrier of cultural

codes. She is not an individual character : she is a cultural protagonist. Simpson achieves great resonance through this controlled anonymity. It is left to the viewer to supply a context for these portraits, and thus become a participant in the construction (reconstruction) of a black identity, with little to begin with except our awareness of color. In this sense, the portraits are passive, like a movie screen, awaiting our projections. What we finally decide about them will reveal our own prejudices.

Nor do Simpson's laconic captions overdetermine our response, although they do serve to focus attention on particular black feminist issues. For example, *Three Seated Figures* (1989) deals with rape. The three portraits, differing only slightly in hand positions, are each captioned with a clinical/legal sign of violations : "Prints," "Signs of Entry," and "Marks," which are then subjected to a female/male polarity of interpretation : "her story" on the left, and "each time they looked for proof" on the right. In this archetypal rape inquest, the model's body registers neutrally and unemotionally, as a locus for sociopolitical determination by the government and the courts (by the white patriarchy).

Similarly, in *Untitled* (1989), where the issue is birth control (or abortion), the three Polaroids of the model's torso are rigid, uninflected and composed. Clear plastic plaques are mounted directly on each photo over the model's belly (womb). The centre panel, labelled "refuse," shows the model's hands clasped below the plaque, denying sexual access. The other two panels, "prefer" and "decide," show the model's hand at her sides. Perhaps there is a suggestion here of a woman's sexual self-determination, of freedom of choice regarding reproduction. But the general reined-in passivity of the model's stance reinforces her status as specimen, as object to be used for demonstration or to be acted upon.



Tyler Turkle, *Plastic Water #1*. Acrylic on photograph; 101,6 x 152,4 cm. Courtesy of Greenberg Wilson, NYC

Despite feminist inroads into the iconography of contemporary art, it is the image of the ruling (female) class that we generally encounter; the underclass of women is rarely depicted in high art circles. Simpson addresses the general absence of black feminist imagery in the arts in *Easy for Who to Say* (1989) which sounds like the title of a Charles Mingus tune. The face of the black model is overlaid, in each of the five panels, by the five vowels, underscored by five plaques labelled "amnesia," "error," "indifference," "omission" and "uncivil." Simpson is not only referring to the ignorance and denial of white America towards black women and their aspirations, but is also showcasing the linguistic barriers that rise up between conventional English and Black English, creating differences of pronunciation, inflection and meaning between America's racial subcultures.

Simpson turns the tables in *Kid Glove* (1989), giving social stratification a sly nudge. The simple addition of a pair of the eponymous white gloves imbues the black model with sudden authority. Where before her passive stance was most easily read as powerlessness and disenfranchisement, her stasis now seems stolid, indomitable. Like charm school semaphores or the hand signals of a traffic cop, the five frames of hand and arm postures are subtitled to connote various codes, from "social isolation" to "social agreement." With a simple wardrobe change, Simpson appeals to our realization of the shallowness of authority systems, that are indeed habituated to take orders from people who know how to wear white gloves.

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**Jack Risley, Postmasters Gallery, New York,
September 14 to October 14, 1989 —**

Jack Risley's wall sculptures are initially attractive for their hint of polymorphous perversity. Attached to the walls with oval, bolted aluminum brackets (shades of Captain Nemo and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*), the pieces continue as loose, draped skins of leather, rubber, latex, canvas and fibreglass mounted over interior armatures, suggesting nothing so much as impossible prophylactics for genitalia as yet undiscovered or unimagined. Risley's appeal is to that same god of biotechnology that feeds the imagination of movies such

as *Robocop*, *Aliens*, *Terminator*, and the film version of *Dune*, an image of the funky future in which technology has run amok, not just as an external variant to the human or animal form, but as an actual, morphological integration to the very substance of life.

This insight is immediately recognizable and resonant. It is, in fact, part of the popular imagination that has gone beyond science fiction to partial realization in medical science (artificial organs, prosthetic limbs) and hospital care (respirators, electrocardiogram monitors), as well as industrial and agricultural use (robot factories and crop harvesters). Risley's suggestion is a hybrid of the organic and the inorganic, of the feral and the mechanical. His sculptures reach outward from the wall, and in a mimesis of friendly, elephantine grace, gradually slump their way, over various armatures and/or connective brackets, towards the floor. Although composed entirely of industrial elements, the pieces have a strong sense of figure and function. They know that they are grotesque, and the innate consciousness of their repulsion somehow makes them highly seductive, engaging, and possessed of an eerie, dark humor.

Were it simply this monstrous carnal freakshow, Risley's work would inhabit only a sideshow arcade in the contemporary art world. Luckily, he mines two distinct strains that inflate the resonance of his work beyond the mere one liner. First, there is his adherence to the inherent qualities of his industrial materials, which explore the formal dialectics of soft/hard, shiny/matte, tight/loose, dense/flaccid. This leads directly to his ambivalent love affair with the machine, and with technology as ultimate savior, an ambivalence which he shares with many sculptors of his generation.

Risley seems to pick and choose his juxtapositions of materials at least as much for the possibilities of their formal contradiction as for their potential narrative connotations. So that, on the narrative plane, a particular piece might well evoke an oversized, mutated vacuum cleaner, with its attendant fetishistic associations of sewage and waste disposal. But simultaneously, the formal underpinnings of the work, its loyalty to materials liberated from the design of automobiles, sports equipment, and other commercial/industrial usages, links Risley to an entire group of contemporary sculptors, including R.M. Fischer, Tom Butter, Joel Ottersen, TODT, and Ti Shan Hsu.

Through multifarious strategies and priorities, and by no means linked as a school in any conscious or manifesto-type sense, these sculptors celebrate the iconography and spirit of American industrial design, suggesting utility in the deployment of their work even as they undercut such intimations of apparent functionality with objects that deny functional access. There is, in other words, an ambivalence towards the notion of progress and technological development, that coexists with the sculptors' more instinctual, less qualified celebration of the sheer physicality of technology. To quote from an article which I wrote in 1987: "Technology... once embraced by the Minimalists as a positive, liberating force, is now viewed with scepticism and ambivalence in the wake of OPEC, corporate chicanery, Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. It is no longer seen as an anonymous benefactor but as a tool, yielding up its autonomy to the will of special interests!"

Risley's work benefits from its resting on the horns of this contradiction, poised in a tenuous relationship with technology that embraces the brawling, romantic endeavor of American industry while remaining clear-eyed and cognizant of its discontents. It is his awareness of the possible impending dystopia, which could be the ironic capper to decades of post-Futurist machine-age optimism, that lifts Risley's sculpture above mere physical slapstick buffoonery to a total realization of the grotesque.

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***Plastic Water — The Last Criterion,
Greenberg Wilson, New York,
September 7 to October 7, 1989 —***

Somewhere back in his childhood, Tyler Turkle might well have seen an ad for paint: the upended can pouring over a world globe, the northern hemisphere already thickly blanketed by a dripping mass hastily making its way to Antarctica, and the famous headline reading, "Sherwin Williams: Cover the Earth." This ad, at least, begins to suggest the formidable plasticity and volume that Turkle has discovered in his treatment of simple acrylic paint. His strategy is so obvious, so redolent of the idiot savant, that one wonders why no one has thought of it before: to laboriously pour thin sheets of acrylic paint, one layer over the other (giving each adequate time to dry before the fresh application), so that they form a flat pillow or sheet of color, which can be readily peeled off most surfaces and readhered to others.

In other words, Turkle has given paint, and paint alone, an independent sculptural basis, although admittedly his soft plastic sheets do require some sort of surface on which to adhere in order to maintain their structural integrity. Fortunately, Turkle's peel off/press on zones of color also derive much of their elbow

in the rib humor from their context, their interplay with the found surface. And they may be mounted on a wide variety of surfaces, as an instructional letter from the artist testifies: "I think you can place the work on almost any surface that will accept it. By that I mean anywhere it will stick and peel off without damage to either the surface or the piece. I have tested the following and found them to work: 1. any wall (surface) painted with latex or enamel paint. The flatter the paint the less the piece will stay put. Stay away from 'chalky' walls 2. refrigerators and all enameled metal surfaces like: 3. stoves 4. microwave ovens 5. cupboard doors (painted and metal) 6. bathroom walls (tile) 7. windows 8. doors 9. formica countertops 10. toilet (and seats) 11. car doors 12. TV screens 13. desk tops 14. baby cribs 15. mirrors 16. vinyl wallpapers 17. plastic floor coverings 18. leather briefcases 19. glass shower enclosures."

Previous bodies of work have featured pages from anatomy textbooks or magazine illustrations in which the figure outlined on the page was completely filled with a plastic skin of paint that added color and volume while completely obliterating any interior detail. Most of these were mounted directly on the magazine or textbook page, but some of the anatomy sections were designed to pull off and readhere to other surfaces, so that they could appear as free floating blobs on shower doors or windows. More recently, another show featured Turkle's nod to neo-geo abstract painting, his "New Criterion" series, derived from that art magazine's two-color, two-rectangle cover graphic format.

Turkle's current show is called *Plastic Water — The Last Criterion*, and features large framed color photographs of beaches and shorelines looking like enlarged tourist postcards, with the immediate difference that the artist has filled in all bodies of water with his trademark acrylic sheets. This work incorporates a baleful ecological subtext. Since every time one opens a newspaper one reads of medical waste and oil spills washing up on beaches, what could be a more appropriate objective correlative for our current environmental collapse than the covering of the oceans with gobs of bright, unnatural acrylic hues? The shoreline, usually associated with freedom of motion, play, and the ebb and flow of the tides, is here given a closed, claustrophobic connotation of incipient disaster. Like Risley, Turkle is having a bit of fun with his visions of dystopia.

Steven Kaplan

NOTE

1. *Artfinder*, New York, Spring 1987, p. 97