

ETC

Early Memory and the Reconditioned Object / Doris Salcedo, Robert Gober, Clay Ketter, Mirosław Balka, Luc Tuymans, *The Unthought Known*, White Cube-Gallery, London. March 8 - April 13 2002

Joan Rzakiewicz

L'obsession du réel

Numéro 59, septembre–octobre–novembre 2002

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9712ac>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC

ISSN

0835-7641 (imprimé)

1923-3205 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Rzakiewicz, J. (2002). Early Memory and the Reconditioned Object / Doris Salcedo, Robert Gober, Clay Ketter, Mirosław Balka, Luc Tuymans, *The Unthought Known*, White Cube-Gallery, London. March 8 - April 13 2002. *ETC*, (59), 62-65.

London

EARLY MEMORY AND THE RECONDITIONED OBJECT

Doris Salcedo, Robert Gober, Clay Ketter, Mirosław Balka, Luc Tuymans,
The Unthought Known, White Cube² Gallery, London. March 8 – April 13 2002

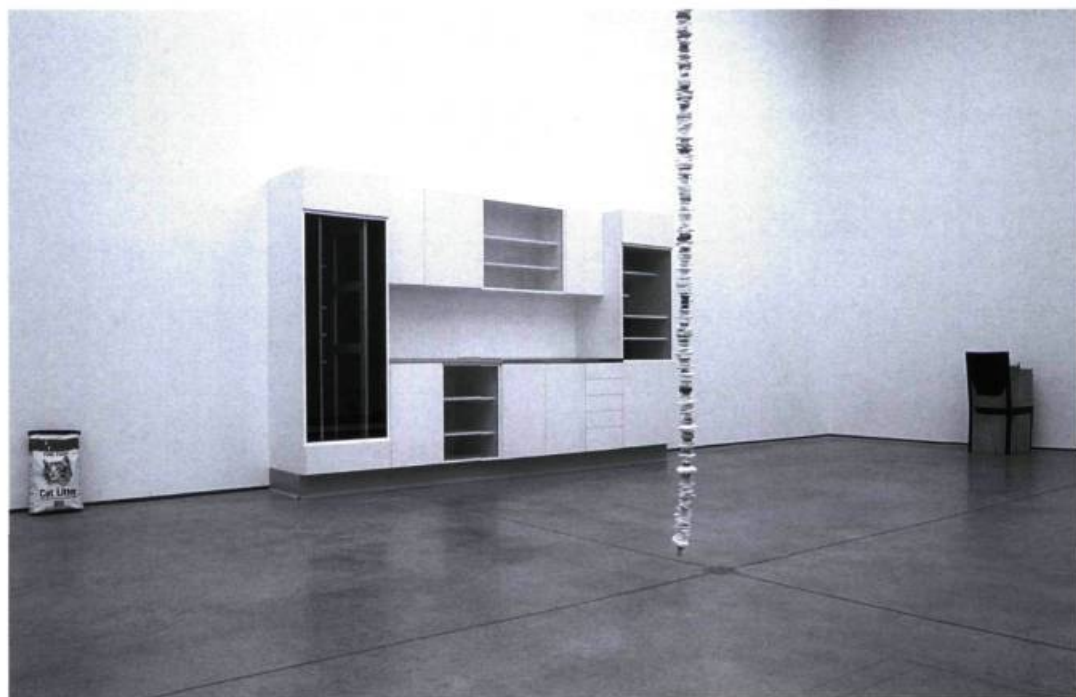
The *Unthought Known* exhibition at the White Cube² Gallery features the work of several internationally known artists, all of whom have made work which is centred around objects and images from the domestic sphere. The artist removes the objects from the familiar environment of home and daily routine and initiates some form of modification which produces the emergence of various indefinite aspects. The skillful combining of references, which call on memory with its remote origins and a broad array of perceptual associations, brings up Christopher Bollas' term "unthought known",¹ for which the exhibition is named. It describes the familiar yet inarticulate sense that certain objects and events evoke for people.

The objects present in Doris Salcedo's works express the occurrence of a type of psychic degeneration that has been expressly engineered. A once comfortable domestic chair sits facing the wall, cement poured to fill in the limits of its space. Visible from the sides, the chair has rebar rods in drill holes running through the wood frame. A forceful contrast in materials is set up between the individuated chair and the dense cement which opposes with senseless negative pressure. This chair is recalled as a site of interrogation, alluding to situations of political violence in Colombia.² The work depicts a state of privation of human life and sociability, its reason so arbitrarily withheld and made unspeakable and anonymous.

In Salcedo's untitled work at the centre of the room, an overturned china bureau is sectioned by a massive featureless wardrobe. While they seem to have been on perpendicular routes, it becomes clear that there is no indication of prior momentum or subsequent release. The frozen moment of impact is inflected by pressure cracks through the weighty masses. The large wardrobe is split on the side, warped open with its own heft. The bureau's glass doors are fastened shut, drilled through with rebar inserted, the interior flooded with poured cement and crumpled lace, its seized surface whorls approximating an internal rupture.

The appearance of the lace imbues the elements with reference to gender, similarly to the use of men's white shirts in *Camisas*; it is made evident that the dynamic of oppression is keyed to that particular expression of identity. This pile of folded shirts with gesso splattered on the yellowed sweaty fabric does not confuse itself with the North American business shirt, which is broadly seen as a sign of indomitability. Impaled through the shoulder by a length of rebar, the discrepant material density of the intruding element overwhelms any sense of mutuality between the two aspects.

Salcedo's work reminds us of the remnant of human experience which is condemned to be forgotten. As noted by theorist Michel de Certeau, forgetting is not something passive, a loss, but an action directed against the past. "This act comes into conflict with the mne-



Clay Ketter, *Eastman With Me*, 1997.

Household enamel paint, sand and wallboard compound on masonite, gypsum wallboard, steel corner bead and wood frame; 120 x 180 cm. Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London.



Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 2001. Wood, concrete, glass, fabric and steel; 203, 5 x 170 x 127 cm. Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London.

mic trace, the return of what was forgotten, in other words, an action by a past that is now forced to disguise itself." This idea is borne out by the journalistic reality typical to many situations of political conflict. It delivers the general notion that history is "cannibalistic", and that "any autonomous order is founded upon what it eliminates".³

The powerful nature of Salcedo's work is founded on the viewer's inclination to deny the anonymous nature of the elements. This points to the practical empathy that humans must learn in the early stages of their development which is necessary for fuller access to knowledge. It is evident that knowledge evolves through the process of discernment and synthesis of multiple perspectives. Likewise, the need for integrity in methods of recounting history is evident, so that a consistency, or truth, may be carried into broader relations beyond local goal-oriented interpretation.

De Certeau speaks comparatively in observing the methods of history, which favour the successive or proximate aspect of relations, in contrast to psychoanalytic structure, which recognizes the past in the present, of object or event being reproduced or retold in another form.⁴ Salcedo's work contains both structures of distributing the space of memory. The initial depiction of one adversarial aspect negating the other is in contrast to the deeper structure of the work, where the various expressions of human experience are personified or embodied within the selected utilitarian objects and their counterparts.

Salcedo's work, like Robert Gober's piece *Untitled*, contains a similar approach in distributing the space of memory. A foot pushes its way out of a generalized lower body of a female giving birth. It steps out, fully formed, highly detailed and realistic looking, yet unnatural. In this piece, an event of social abstraction

seems to take place. None of the birth matter clings to this normotic limb, yet the role of the mother who facilitates this development is evident. This sloughing off of origins aligns with the rejection of the mother for greater independence in the early stages of life. It could be argued that the prevalent treatment of history has been one of a problematic return to these primary relations, that exclusionary and objectifying tendencies in historiography are an expression of immature identity building. The tendency towards this type of objectification through reduction to functional value often becomes part of the politics of limiting others, with gender and race being among the particular traits of a given individual who might be more easily marginalizable.

In *Drain*, Gober honours the common object by carefully reproducing it in pewter for the exhibition. The pervasive nature of functional experience makes itself known almost immediately. Pewter is often used for casting decorative objects; it's not a durable alloy. It is installed in the wall, so is it really a drain, is it doing something? There is such conciseness in the choice of a drainhole that this standard object could not be convincingly thought of as anything but functional; it would be easier to adapt to inventing functionality for it than to merely accept that it has none. As with the other pieces in this exhibition that use common domestic objects, once it is arrived at that it is no longer a casual object with finite and calculable value, it takes on other aspects of being and the capacity for relation, and it becomes equally impossible to see it otherwise.

The challenge to functional absolutism evident in Gober's piece is furthered in Clay Ketter's tableaux, *Eastham With Me* and *Goodbye Willoughby Ave*, where only traces are left of functioning interiors. His



Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 2000. Concrete, wood and steel, 95 x 44 x 47 cm. Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube², London.

wall surfaces underscore the undoing of previous construction, referencing not only the immediate stages of physical assemblage, but also alluding to the practices of neo-plasticism and, more broadly, creating a history painting in the post-modern sense. With reference to the abstraction of Modernist paintings, where resemblance to subject was set at a comparative remove from the process, Ketter literally removes the subject from the surface of his paintings as a step in the process of creating his images.

Miroslaw Balka's three pieces use non-functional arrangements of domestic items, managed and given a spatial dimension. The contextual leads are ambiguous and at times simultaneously complementary and contrary, with themes of transformation and purification running through the work.

The piece *1040 x 10 x 10*, placed at the main entryway to the gallery, reveals the process of its making in its many worn down soapbars threaded onto a cable. Mildly fragrant, the work immediately evokes tactile sense memory and the intimacy of the domestic environment. The work tells of the washing of hands, a daily detail in the world, a minor gesture of care and attention. Yet the more ironic expression... one hand washes the other... could perhaps apply here too.

Balka's work *190 x 190 x 47, 2 x (55 x 25 x 20)* features a roughly built set of objects which suggests a modular seating arrangement. There is a long bench intersected by a short one, clearly a reference to the

crucifix, with two small seats off to the side leaned against the wall, made of the same type of rough dark plank. Could these two seats be those of the crucified thieves, now assuming the positions of spectators? On the other hand, the use of the planks does not only build the link to humankind; the crucifix also stands as a symbolic link to the Trinity, representing God the father and the Holy Spirit obliged to stand apart at the moment of sacrifice, for the fulfillment of an independent identity... why hast thou forsaken me... as he suffered separation from all the world and from the possibility of divine intervention. One can't help noticing that there are some red wax spots on the plank... as final traces of this event? Then its nature as a possible seating convenience returns.

Luc Tuymans' canvas, *The Missus*, shows a standing female figure in faint contrast to a blanched background. This character doesn't distinguish herself immediately; initially it's easy to walk right past this work. With features dissolved and effaced, she nevertheless seems to be peering out at us with her head at an angle, clad in a knee-length coat and a handbag on the crook of her arm. She's vague, like a child's pleasant memory of mother, not well defined in her own right. Here, she's not called Mom, she's called the Missus; we are seeing her in her adult social role. The summarized version of the mother seems to preclude emotive projection more than some of the show's other works built with more fragmented elements,



Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1993-1994. Beeswax, human hair, sock, leather shoe; 30, 5 x 72, 39 x 85 cm. Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube², London.

which allow for undirected imaginative states. This canvas relates to Tuymans' three small monochrome panels across the room which feature a hanging rubber glove in front of bathroom tiles, a metal ice cube tray, and an old style fridge handle. The moist cool subjects in close-up view from a low level vantage point are made large by the singular focus of the composition. The work is dismissive of other things around and is without contextual leads, apart from the fact that they are objects in the family environment. They are among the first objects of fascination, transitional objects, to a young child who with its mother's help gains increasing independence from her.

It isn't a leap to say that the pattern based on women's early role as temporary facilitator of identity has translated into women's collective social role. Women's roles have traditionally been subject to melding with family identity and secondary positioning in the spheres of social potential and economic growth. The tendency towards functional objectification, when internalized and projected onto the self, affects the individual's perceived sense of responsibility for having a role in directing the course of larger historical processes.⁵

These challenges to equity typically appear in interdisciplinary situations as well. It is valuable to consider ideas relative to various models and disciplines of thinking, yet the tendency toward interdisciplinarity as a melding of disciplines sometimes encourages superficiality and homogeneity, an assumed universality

across the surface, merely providing the opportunity to further one's grasp. This tendency to mine other disciplines for a sense of background and depth could be thought of as a compensation for the functional absolutism that still confers doubt on creative processes.

Bollas points out that the main streams of psychoanalysis do not address the earliest patterns of development of the psyche – object relations and discovery in the wordless world before the time that thought patterns are so thoroughly constructed around the nuances of verbal communication.⁶ It seems that the visual arts, with the vast array of approaches that works may assume in relating all manner of human perceptions, certainly seem to have a special window on the “unthought known”. This idea is taken up from complementary angles in this carefully curated exhibition.

JOAN RZADKIEWICZ

NOTES

¹ Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object, Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1987, p. 3.

² From the White Cube² Gallery press release.

³ Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, preface by Wlad Godzich, p. ix.

⁶ C. Bollas, *op. cit.*, p. 3.