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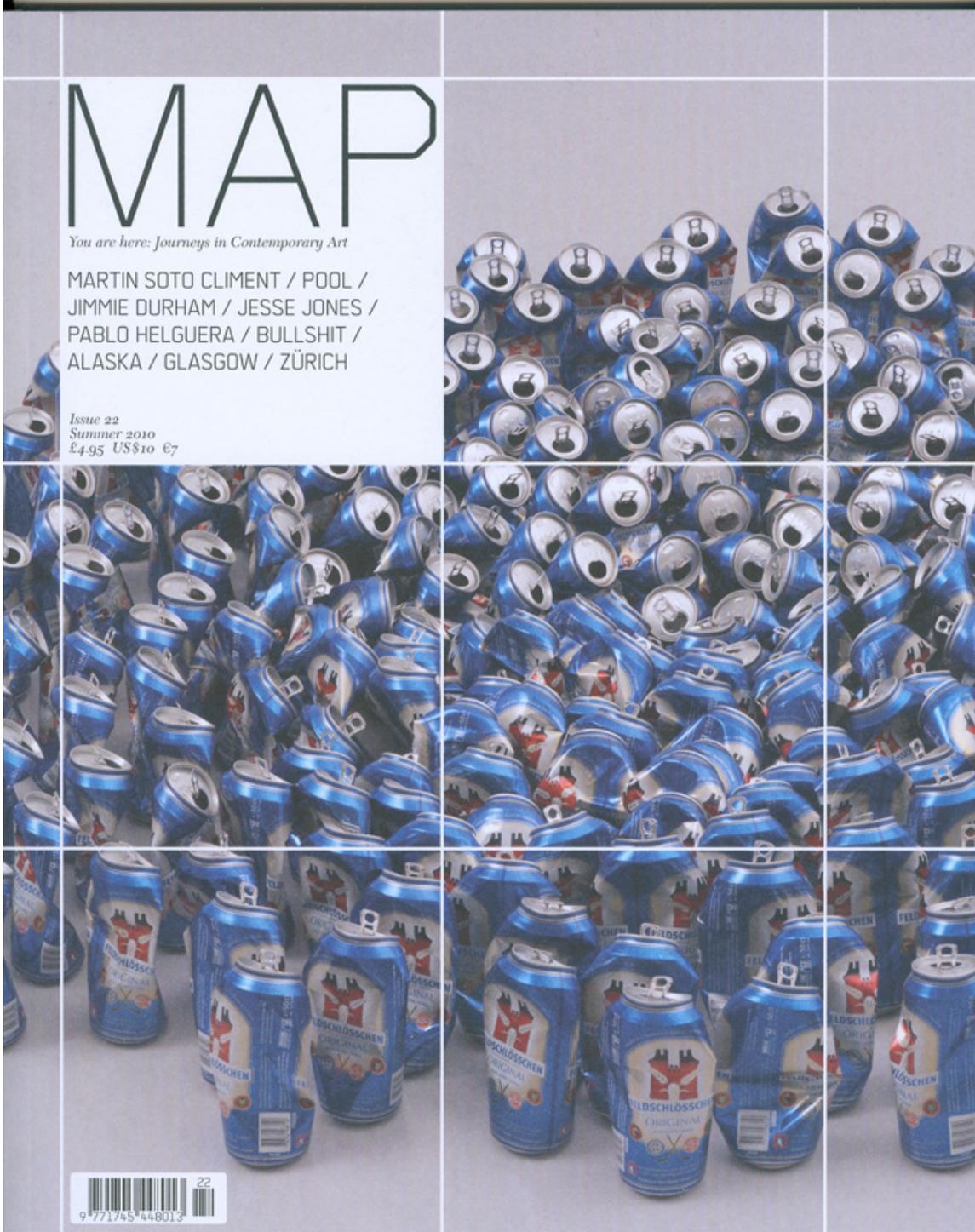
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CHAPTER ONE

Dominic Paterson investigates the work of Mexican artist Martin Soto Climent as he begins a year-long international project

A Long Chapter One, Martin Soto Climent's recent exhibition at Sorcha Dallas, Glasgow marks the beginning of an ongoing project in which the artist uses photographic source material to explore questions of temporality and desire. Over the past decade Soto Climent has collected photographic yearbooks published between 1959 and 1972. Folding the pages of these books to produce new juxtapositions, overlaps and segues, Soto Climent re-photographs them and then arranges the resulting images to form idiosyncratic calendars of his own devising.

Combined into constellations which represent months, and also life stages from infancy to death, these images make up the work, 'The Equation of Desire'. Among a preponderance of artfully lit female nudes, other images are folded into view, from iconic photographs by Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa, which capture 'decisive moments', to recognisable faces like that of Alfred Hitchcock. Running around the gallery walls in a continuum (suggesting cyclical time), these images present photography in a state of flux; the rush of photographic prints are only lightly secured to the wall making palpable the contingent and temporary nature of their arrangement. One of the sculptural works shown alongside 'The Equation of Desire' also references models of time. 'Sugar Skull' features an hourglass set on a reflective tray, implying a (narcissistic) mirroring of time, or time folding back into itself.

Though it functions as a proposal or test-run for future elaborations, *A Long Chapter One* is an estimable achievement in its own right – assured in its use of space, its relation of objects and images, and in its subtle staging of vital questions about art, history, and the present. It's timely, then, to take the measure of Soto Climent's practice at this point.

Martin Soto Climent was born in Mexico City, (where he still lives and works) and, as with several Mexican artists who have come to prominence in recent years, there is a quality in his work which indicates a sensitivity to the destructive and abstracting forces of late modernity, and to the poetics which might be salvaged in the wake of those forces. He also has a light touch and a real wit. Take, for example, 'Impulsive Chorus', 2009. Empty beer cans are arranged in a cosy circle, their open 'mouths' inevitably bringing to mind the communal singing which their contents might have fuelled. Or 'Dandy Inside the Dandy', 2009, in which three empty, silk-lined cutlery boxes are arranged one inside the





other, in diminishing order of size. 'Tights on Canvas', 2007, meanwhile, functions as a visually concise desublimation of 'drip' painting and its legacy, using only the materials given in its title.

Soto Climent's use of found objects can also be more directly affecting, as in 'M.ü. Meer', 2009 (wigs attached to broomsticks) and more directly libidinous, for example in 'Desire N/A', 2009, in which the insides of purses are pushed out to give them the unmistakable appearance of tongues. The equation of desire might, then, be an apt descriptor for the artist's objects as well as his new photographic work.

In a group show at Sorcha Dallas in 2007, he presented 'Detained Chain', a couple of bottles linked by a pair of underpants, and pinned 'Parachute', a pair of shoes dangling from the handles of a plastic bag, to the wall. Since then, he has been refining this object-language, finding ways to bring together the ephemera of everyday life with the poetics and erotics of subjective experience. Cans, bottles, cutlery boxes, purses, bags, wigs, underwear, tights, shoes: the things to which Soto Climent is attracted tend to be objects of consumption, items of clothing or accessories. Perhaps, most significantly, these objects all lead back to the body, as proxies or as metonymic figures. Soto Climent's recurrent use of underwear suggests an interest in the veiling and unveiling of the body, and in the reversibility of inner and outer layers. Psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron writes of underwear and its relationship to clothing as, 'silky materials [that] can be arranged between the body and the rough materials directed outwards, or the opposite. In the end, the volume of outer fabrics can overlay clothes tightly like a secret wrapping. The dynamic of the outer garments – more "sociable" – and of the undergarments – more intimate – tells of the emotional and affective state of everyone at every

moment.'¹ Soto Climent's work engages this dynamic in a variety of ways, folding the inner over the outer, precisely to reveal the inner subjective dimension latent in the social world of things.

In his interest in subjectivity and material culture, Soto Climent has an affinity with those contemporary artists engaged in an exploration of the legacies of surrealism. His bottles joined with feminine clothing might read as an updating – mindful of the many critiques of surrealist gender politics – of Magritte's painted women in bottles, while his use of shoes (and most particularly his tying together of pairs of shoes), cannot help but recall Meret Oppenheim's 1936 'My Nurse'. Oppenheim's piece characteristically introduces a radical heterogeneity into an ostensibly ordinary found object. A pair of high heeled shoes trussed like poultry on a silver dish, 'My Nurse' manages to confuse food with dirt (the soles are obviously worn) and to make the shoes themselves stand in for an erotic coupling, or for a bound body. Later works like 'Das Paar', 1956, a pair of brown boots attached at the toe, or 'Pair of Gloves', 1985, in which goatskin gloves are silkscreened to have the appearance of veins, carry on Oppenheim's interest in making the materials in which we are clad as though they were a second skin; materials like fur and leather, which were once skins themselves, reveal bodily or subjective interiority. As Edward Powers suggests, 'these media we know as perhaps nothing else, even as we do the integument of our own bodies.'² Likewise, Soto Climent's familiarity with the materials he uses lends a kind of intimacy to our encounter with his work, one entirely appropriate to the intimacies they often connote. Appropriately, in recent correspondence, he has termed his objects 'moments of climax.'

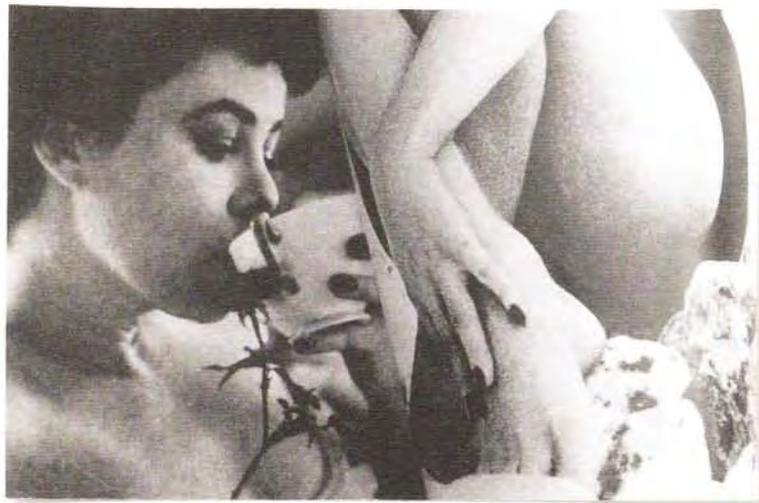
There is an unmistakable evocation of the fetishistic investment in objects to be found in this artist's work, just as in Oppenheim's. In *A Long Chapter One* this fetishism operates as the point of intersection between his sculptures (which evoke the bodily more quietly, but no less insistently, than his shoes and underwear pieces), and the photographs. Many of the photographs and especially the nudes, testify to the popular dissemination of surrealist effects in post-war mass media photography, so much so that they seemed to constitute a kind of found surrealism. If the yearbooks indicate the domestication of the unruly desire supposedly released in surrealist work, Soto Climent's foldings and juxtapositions recapitulate both the original premises of surrealist photography and acknowledged its subsequent replication, reproduction and taming.

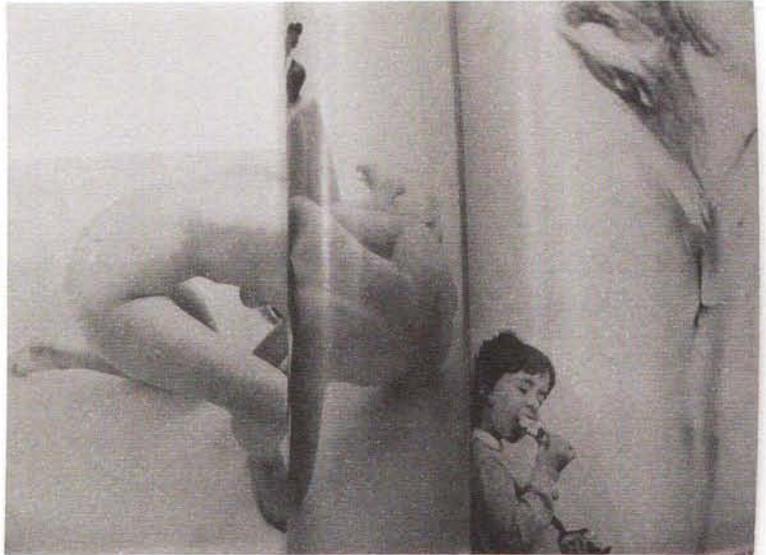
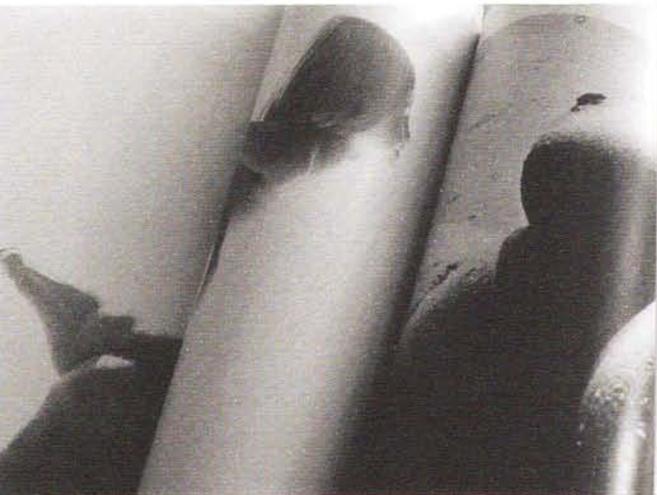
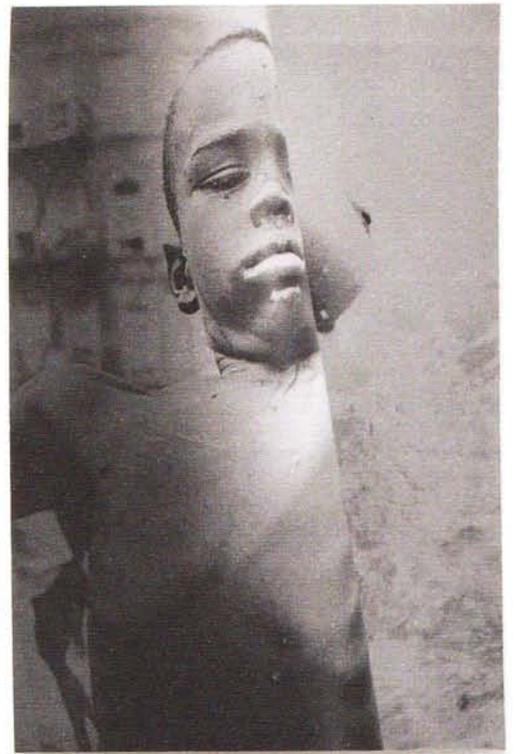
Fittingly, Duchamp's 'L.H.O.O.Q.', 1919, peers out from amid the folds of the 'Equation of Desire' – the moustache and goatee he added to the Mona Lisa playing with gender, iconicity and iconoclasm, and with the artwork as a photographically reproduced readymade. A Duchampian echo resonates too in 'My Heart', a sculpture consisting of Soto Climent's coat hangers and a glass Klein bottle (a mathematical figure which appears to be a container but is in fact all surface, the insides and outsides of which thus run together, confounding the very notion of inside and outside). This delicate hanging glass object recalls Duchamp's ampoule of 'Paris Air', 1920 – associated

Previous page: 'Sugar Skull', 2007, mirrored cabinet and hourglass

Left: 'Secret', 2009, shoes and leather band

Right and over: 'The Equation of Desire', detail, 2010, 365 photographs from 2001–2010





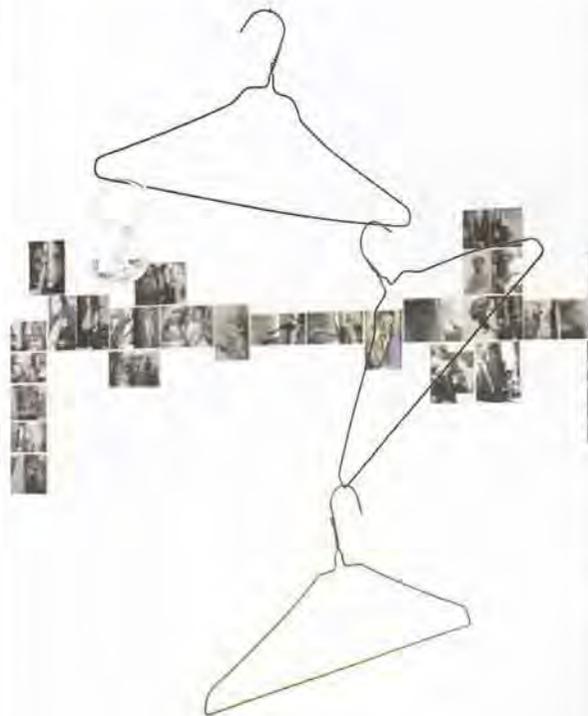
Right: 'My Heart', 2010, coathangers, Klein bottle and string

in the 'Boites-en-Valises', 1936-41, with 'The Large Glass', 1915-23, as another 'hanged female thing' (*pendu femelle*).

Given these resonances, *A Long Chapter One* might read as a systematic mixing up of the paradigms of the Duchampian readymade, the surrealist found object and the photograph. Writing on precisely the relationships between these paradigms, Margaret Iverson states that 'every object implies a certain kind of subject. Psychoanalysis is, of course, dedicated to uncovering this kind of relation. The fetish object, for example, implies a subject that is split along the lines of acknowledgement and denial of castration. The glossy perfection of objects in fashion magazines, for another example, implies a narcissistic subject who fears and defends against the ravages of the body in pieces.'³ If the original sources of Soto Climent's 'Equation of Desire' had precisely such a glossy perfection and thus disavowed the uncanny doublings and unsettling fragmentation revelled in by the surrealist imaginary, his folding of them retraces both the castrating cut and the fetishistic salve attributable to the photograph.

Walter Benjamin's dialectical meditations on photography's relationship to 'aura' led him to reflect on the dangers inherent in photography's aestheticisation, which he saw precisely as fetishising. 'The creative in photography is its capitulation to fashion. The world is beautiful – that is its watchword. It is unmasked in the posture of a photography that can endow any soup can with cosmic significance but cannot grasp a single one of the human connections in which it exists.' This was Benjamin's ultimate verdict on surrealism too, a verdict perhaps reinforced by the amenability of surrealist visual rhetoric to advertising. Against such a visual order Benjamin called for 'its logical counterpart [...] the act of unmasking or construction.' Soto Climent's work does not engage in this politicised task directly. Again, it is the figure of the fold which is most relevant here: just as the Klein bottle suggests a topology of the subject in which outer and inner are confused, so his delicate, intimate folding of the yearbooks suggests a photography in which there is nothing to reveal behind the mask.

'The Equation of Desire', which condenses several temporalities into one sequence of images, could be read via specifically Mexican ideas of time, but really it is the interaction with the time of fetishism, photography and the readymade, or found object, that he most compellingly explores. Because the work claims to represent birth, life and death, it might seem to propose a universal humanism. As Roland Barthes objected apropos Edward Steichen's photographic exhibition *The Family of Man*, themes like birth and death can become empty, ahistorical platitudes.⁴ But Soto Climent's work is far from such universalising. 'The photographic take,' Christian Metz writes, 'is immediate and definitive, like death and like the constitution of the fetish in the unconscious, fixed by a glance in childhood, unchanged and always active later.'⁵ This is the temporality in which Soto Climent's work deals – the historically specific time of the photographic era, which is also the time of mass production, advertising, and of the aesthetic avant-



garde. The strength of the work is to figure all these aspects, while delivering an aesthetic (perhaps even fetishistic) kick of its own.

Early writers on photography, including Balzac, saw the photographic image as a skin, as indeed did Barthes – to be more specific, as the skin of a desired or loved body. Photography, then, has an intimacy of its own: it fits our subjectivity like a glove, it publicises the interior as surface. Likewise, the outer and the inner run into, over and through each other in Soto Climent's work; and in it we see a topography of our material landscape which is also a topology of desire. Readymade, found object, photograph, all are equally on the side of Eros in this equation.

Returning again to the work of *A Long Chapter One*, 'A Sweet Silly Idea', 2010, comprises a globe in a field of sugar into which the artist has drawn concentric circles. If desire and money are what make the world go round, Soto Climent's practice seems particularly well attuned to the commodity fetishism that mobilises the global trade in good, objects, and images. 'We invent our desires', he suggests. Finding the traces of this inventiveness and using the most delicate of means, Soto Climent draws our attention to the way our desires are folded into the material and aesthetic culture we inhabit.

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Martin Soto Climent's exhibition *A Long Chapter One* marks the beginning of a solo project to be staged across a series of international venues until mid 2011

1 Serge Tisseron, *Comment l'esprit vient aux objets*, 1999, in Tim Dant, *Materiality and Society*, (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), p63

2 Edward D Powers, 'Meret Oppenheim – or, These Boots Ain't Made For Walking,' *Art History*, Vol 24, No 3, June, 2001, p359

3 Margaret Iverson, 'Readymade, Found Object, Photograph,' *Art Journal*, Vol 63, No 2, p45

4 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, London: Vintage, 1993, 101

5 Christian Metz, 'Photography and Fetish,' *October*, Vol 34, Autumn, 1985, 84