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“A Disagreeable Object”

SCULPTURECENTER

“A Disagreeable Object” had a simple premise: Surrealism’s afoot. More difficult was the proof. Arguing for an avant-garde’s renewed relevance first entails defining the original movement—no easy task when that avant-garde was exceptionally long-lived and riven by factionalism from the start. Instead of honing a signature style, Surrealism stockpiled strategies, aesthetic techniques devised to trigger that exhilarating condition known alternately as the marvelous or uncanny. Curator Ruba Katrib resolved this preliminary dilemma by borrowing her exhibition title from a 1931 work by Alberto Giacometti. It’s an astute, even politic, choice, since Surrealism’s orthodox and dissident factions both laid claim to the wood, metal, and plaster premonitions Giacometti produced during his brief but fevered Surrealist phase.

An approach that “A Disagreeable Object” invites, then, is to read the work through Giacometti’s articulation of various Surrealist tropes. For the orthodox side of Surrealism, Giacometti’s quotation of knick-knacks and tribal artifacts accords to the doctrine of Surrealist “pope” André Breton, for whom flea-market finds were keys for reading and releasing unconscious impulses. Ergo, in *Objets Augmentés*, 2012, Camille Henrot encrusts assorted tools and equipment—a radio, a drill, mugs, a bicycle seat—in a thick cake of earth and tar, rendering them black and grossly bulbous; for *2700 M.ü. Meer*, 2009, Martin Soto Climent weds a broomstick to a tangled blond wig, a consummately Surrealist coupling that swaps function for frisson. For the dissident side, Giacometti gave inspired plastic expression to Georges Bataille’s

Alisa Baremboym,
Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit, 2012,
gelled emollient,
unglazed ceramic,
USB cable with gender
changers, flash drive,
floor flange, threaded
pipe, screws, red
pipe caps, 40 x
32 x 48". From "A
Disagreeable Object."



concepts of *bassesse* and *informe*—terms glossed with stunning succinctness and force in Alisa Baremboym’s *Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit*, 2012. Like Giacometti, Baremboym enacts the lowering operation of *bassesse* by orienting her sculpture along the horizontal axis of the base—one consisting of gelatinous petroleum that seeps into the pieces of unfired ceramic clay laid over it. As if that toxic sweat weren’t sufficiently emblematic of the *informe*—a transgressive collapse and contamination of divisions and differences—*Leakage Industries* also incorporates a hardware variation: a flash drive and snaking USB cord outfitted with “gender changers,” supplements that alternate “male” and “female” ports.

Comparison and citation alone don’t make an argument, or answer the animating question: Why Surrealism now, and how does this recovery differ from those prior? It seems particularly important to distinguish this exhibition’s rationale from that of Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss’s 1996 show, “*L’Informe: mode d’emploi*” (Formless: A User’s Guide), which also privileged Giacometti. Katrib’s catalogue essay points to technological transformation, and the birth dates of her selected artists cluster around the Carter administration and Reagan’s first term—that is, the generation that came of age with control societies and are just old enough to recall a time before the information economy so thoroughly grafted itself onto the body. We could further bolster Katrib’s thesis by splicing it with one of Breton’s: In a 1935 lecture, he cast Surrealism as a departure from modernist abstraction’s “inner perception” and a return to the “visual residues” of external

reality. Abstraction and the Surrealist object are both now serving as precedents for artists giving material expression to technology's seemingly immaterial effects. (In the former category, consider the digital abstractions of Tauba Auerbach or Wade Guyton.) A crucial difference between these two precedents, however, is that abstract painting extends a humanist tradition that Surrealism aggressively troubles. For Breton, Surrealism's task was liberation, a romanticism he failed to reconcile with the darker insight of Bataille, that a subject unbound might also come undone. Whereas pixelated variants of modernist abstraction risk presuming and preserving an autonomous subject, the split subject of Surrealism is ripe for various post- and anti-humanist takes on technology's effects, embodied here in Pamela Rosenkranz's skin-toned silicone poured into Asics sneakers, the spindly blue golem that emerges from Michael E. Smith's melting of Bic plastic pens, and the pupil-enlarging contact lenses floating in Anicka Yi's bubbling perfume bottles. Today's "visual residues" are synthetic, carcinogenic, branded—disagreeable objects indeed.

—Colby Chamberlain