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Flutter

The Approach, London, UK

Tom Morton

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'Sex,' claimed Andy Warhol, 'is the biggest nothing of all time.' Looking at Geerten Verheus' Lengths (By and Large), (2006) – a kinetic sculpture that formed the centrepiece of the group show 'Flutter', curated by the painter Michael Raedecker – it's hard not to hear the Pop artist's words whispering in your ear. A motor hummed on the gallery ceiling, winding up a long brass chain from which were suspended several dark lengths of beechwood. As the mechanism turned, the sculpture tensed, and you got to thinking about arched backs, curled toes and gristly erectile tissue. Finally, unable to take any more, Verheus' piece shuddered in grateful release and momentarily slackened, only for the whole Sisyphean process to begin once more. Call it a wheel of desire. Call it an automaton suffering from some pornographic strain of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Call it what you like, frankly, because it's too busy to listen, caught up as it is with chasing the big 'O', the big zero, the big, Warholian nothing.

'Flutter' – which also featured works by Nobuyoshi Araki, Hans Bellmer, Peter Dreher, Johannes Kahr, Christina Mackie, Robert Mapplethorpe, Graham Sutherland, Kara Walker and Rebecca Warren – wasn't so much a show about sex as a show about the possibility of a show about sex. As its title suggested, it was a thing of flickering lashes and fluctuating pulse-rates, of strange attractions and sudden rushes of blood to the head, heart or loins. There were explicit works here, sure, but these were juxtaposed with others that possessed an odder, less obvious charge. Take Bellmer's drawing A Sade (1960) – originally a plate for a book on the writer and libertine the Marquis de Sade – in which a woman fellates a gnarly set of male genitals, seemingly unaware that her hat is fashioned from a penis, her weepy eyes are composed of crumpled, slippery labia and her every pore and aperture invite a curious finger, tongue or cock. Next to this piece hung Araki's Untitled (Red Flower) (1992), an innocuous image of tightly bunched petals that nevertheless recalled the first lines of Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine's Sonnet du Trou du Cul (Sonnet of the Asshole, 1871): 'Dark and wrinkled like a violet carnation / It sighs, humbly nesting in the moss still moist from love.' By pairing these works, Raedecker pointed to how matter is animated and even transformed by desire, and the way in which one erotic imagination may pollinate another. Sigmund Freud's contention that 'sometimes a cigar is just a cigar' has rarely seemed so wrong-headed.

While flowers have long been associated with sex, the humble glass of water has to work pretty hard if it is to function as an erotic metaphor. However, Dreher's two nearly identical paintings of this object, Tag um Tag guter Tag I (das Gas bei Nacht) No. 2176 and 2177 (Day by Good Day I (The Gas at Night), 2005) – taken from a series which numbers several thousand works – were a study in naked obsession, and perhaps sublimation. What fascinated here wasn't just the banality of their subject matter but the ambiguity with which Dreher addresses the intensity of his own gaze: is it a purifying filter, or is it something that muddies the waters? Hanging side by side, differentiated only by their shadowing and the volume of water in the glasses, the two paintings selected by Raedecker might be read as 'before' and 'after' shots of some moist, consuming act, or else as objects resting on the nightstands of a couple whose identities have begun to blur under a canopy of torrid sheets.

If Dreher's glasses suggested a pair of lovers, another notional couple was also offered up by the show. Mapplethorpe's silvery photograph Untitled (Milton Moore) (1980) depicted a man's semi-erect penis in profile, craning like the neck of a bellowing mastodon. Across the gallery its priapic warbles were greeted by the wary glare of the woman in Kahr's silk screen Untitled (Origine du monde) (1997). Knickerless, her fulsome bush of pubic hair recalled Gustave Courbet's The Origin of the World (1866). I wonder if Raedecker is aware that Jacques Lacan once owned Courbet's crotch-shot painting? If so, the mirrorings in his show take on a deeper, darkly kinky aspect.

Sex informed not only 'Flutter's content but also its curatorial approach. Raedecker's exhibition created a perceptual space in which the eye and mind glided and penetrated,

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were teased and engulfed, and in which each of the exhibits resembled a jumbled limb of a single, polymorphously perverse body. It's one thing to curate a show 'about' sex. It's quite another to curate one that feels (in all its heat and occasional sadness) like sex itself.

Tom Morton

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