



Docu-art Dilemmas

Francis Frascina

Viral Images

Sophie J Williamson

Border Control

Marcus Verhagen

James Richards

Profile by Omar Kholeif



Ana Mendieta
*Untitled (Self Portrait
 with Blood)* 1973



Period, 1991, made when Wilke was 51 and approaching menopause, she takes four postcards of an Ed Ruscha print which uses the word PERIOD and draws little winged seedlings and the words 'and more to come', 'and me to grow'. Linking the word 'period' more explicitly with menstruation and her loss of fertility, she interjects playfully and poignantly into the male canon. In *What Does this Represent*, 1978, one of the most confrontational pieces in the show, Wilke reworks Ad Reinhardt's cartoon of the same title of 1945 in which he drew a man pointing to an abstract painting and jeering, 'What does this represent?' Below, the painting is redrawn as an angry face asking the man, 'What do you represent?' This photograph shows Wilke seated naked (apart from a pair of white high heels) on a gallery floor, amid an array of toy guns and Mickey Mouse figures, holding a whistle in her hand. The text reads 'What does this represent/ What do you represent'. Wilke's face is glum, resigned. Her vagina is centrally placed, with one plastic gun directed at it.

The battlefield of art and gender is sharply staged and still needs to be staged over 30 years later, as galleries and museums abandon gender parity and young male artists recycle feminist tropes without giving any credit where it is due or reiterate violent misogyny without any attempt to deconstruct it.

In another more subdued vein, Wilke's terracotta pussy sculptures (all untitled and from the 1970s) dance delightfully between sexual explicitness and abstract formalism. Some are neat as putty-pink purses, while others make roomy yellow handbags. The female sexual object is powerfully embodied as the erotic, or possibly quite everyday, subject.

While there are many more thematic links among these artists than could possibly appear in such a small show, it does provide a cogent appeal for a more thorough and expansive survey of this significant work. ■

CHERRY SMYTH is a critic and poet.

Becky Beasley: Spring Rain

Spike Island Bristol 26 January to 31 March

Over the past few years Becky Beasley's work has creaked open a little in the manner in which it addresses the viewer. Early sculptures and photographs were brooding, mute and darkly glowering, communicating their inability or refusal to speak. A screen from Herman Melville's 1853 novella *Bartleby the Scrivener* (he of the famous 'I would prefer not to'), featured as a sculptural reference, as did Glenn Gould's piano, which the musician famously stopped playing in public.

These works, closely bound to a personally edited canon of (primarily male) writers and artists, often emphasised the incommensurable or unfathomable qualities of objects. A book might be aligned with a coffin because the size and scale of neither can really communicate the vastness of their impact.

Lately, however, Beasley has taken an interest in private passions, the way that lightness might leak in or out of a closed space, and the personal energies that might be diverted into cultivating or decorating. The artist took series of gleaming photographs of gems, glass and jewels, taken in architect Carlo Mollino's apartment, which he decorated secretly towards the end of his life. Eadward Muybridge's ambition to create a miniaturised landscape of the Great Lakes in the back garden of his Kingston home was realised by the artist in lino flooring.

'Spring Rain', Beasley's winter exhibition in the large bright space of Bristol's Spike Island, was positioned between states of interiority and openness. The exact area taken up by the interior of Marcel Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*, 1946-66, the epitome of a space that is both secret and yet incommensurable in art-historical impact, was marked out in the exhibition in the first space in black lino on a floor which was otherwise covered by a lino in a colour described as 'wellness green'. Stand on this space and stare straight ahead and you would see, not a hole in a brick wall and a naked, splay-legged woman lying in the grass before a waterfall, but a large gelatin silverprint of a tablecloth with a large hole right at the centre of it, *Would I had seen a white bear! (North-west passage, AUX I)*, 2013. The hole was apparently made by Beasley's mother so that the tablecloth could be used on a garden table which had a parasol at the centre. In turning this punctured fabric into a photograph, Beasley not only brings Roland Barthes's 'punctum' to the garden table (which the philosopher identified after seeing a photograph of his mother, one remembers) but also succeeds in recasting the protective actions of her mother, shielding the family from the sun, as a rather tender act of penetration. Another monochrome photograph, smaller in scale, depicting a hand holding a cucumber – *Cucumber Hand (I)*, 2013 – is positioned on the adjacent wall, creating a phallic gag in relation to the tablecloth but also rather straightforwardly conveying the pride felt in nurturing a growing vegetable.

Cucumbers proliferate throughout the exhibition, as do lighthearted gestures towards intercourse. A series of five handpainted silverprints of the vegetable, *Family Cucurbitaceae (I, II, III, IV, V)*, 2012, are visible in the next room, each oddly curved and imperfect. Shot on a white background and positioned in various parts of the frame, they resemble swooping letters or pieces of genetic code. The exhibition's centrepiece is a motorised mobile, *Spring Rain (Family)*, 2013, from which hang on strings tiny brass casts of gherkins that the artist grew in her garden

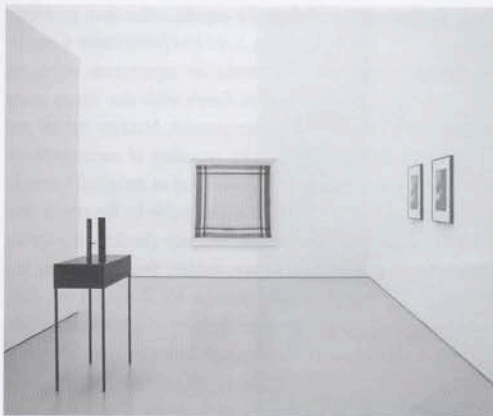
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last summer. These appear to fall like knobbly, awkward little dancing raindrops, while surrounding these are photographs of pairs of 'male' and 'female' wooden blocks – one with a hole and one with a little phallic post – which are based on the spatial volume of *Étant Donnés* split into two. They never connect in the images, either missing one another in angle, or hovering, as if tentatively, away from one another.

Beasley continues to speak through the works of others and to open up new elements of their work to viewers – it is one of the great pleasures that I take in her work and her close reading. Here she has included the works of two other artists: Charles Jones's photographs of vegetables famously which were found in a suitcase in a flea market, like strange silver jewels (a secret revealed), and several Richard Hamilton prints of interiors, which use multiple viewpoints or elements to depict motels and lobbies so that they appear to be falling open (like legs or waterfalls). Like Beasley, Hamilton opened up particular aspects in the work of an admired predecessor – Duchamp – with his care and attentiveness to the older artist's work, not to mention Hamilton's actual recreation in 1965-66 of Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915-23.

Bernard Malamud's short story *Spring Rain*, 1942, is a delicate, masculine narrative which, included as a handout, provides this exhibition's musical key – small moments of growing lightness. A man who has an inability to communicate, to say how he feels, is granted a glimpse of connection with another person while on a walk in the spring rain with his daughter's suitor. The emotional climax, beautifully underplayed, comes when he returns home alone and watches the rain continue to fall, like droplets of possibility washing and transforming his interior landscape. We understand the deep interior transformation taking place in the protagonist's soul when Malamud writes: 'The spring rain was falling everywhere.' In the final act of this exhibition, two tiny versions of Beasley's Duchampian wooden block couples, *Eclipse (I) (Pearwoods No. 1 & 2)*, 2013, spin slowly, squeakily on a small table like a melancholic music box, their connective peg and hole elements missing one another as they turn. Very occasionally, however, once in the spring rain, they manage to meet. ■

LAURA MCLEAN-FERRIS is a writer and curator based in London.

Silvia Bächli/Eric Hattan: What About Sunday?

MK Gallery Milton Keynes 18 January to 31 March

Becky Beasley
installation view

There is a well-known scene from Sam Mendes's *American Beauty*, 1999, where Ricky Fitts, the young man next door, shows his video of a plastic bag eddying around in the wind to the unhappy daughter of the main protagonist. In the film, seeing beauty in the ordinary, for which 'the plastic bag scene' is the crucial plot device, is played out against the mundane nature of human crises. Visual parallels with Eric Hattan's video of plastic bags chasing each other in a spiral are obvious, but Silvia Bächli and Hattan's collaborative exhibition takes ideas of the beauty in ordinariness in a far different direction to Mendes's film. Hattan made this video about a year before *American Beauty* reached European audiences and he points out that beyond synchronicity his work is simply recording a common occurrence, whereas the scene in the film, according to internet accounts, involved careful construction, using artificial air blowers and studio lights.

What is most immediately apparent in 'What about Sunday?' is that underlying Hattan's video and sculpture and Bächli's understated, almost abstract drawing is a commitment to considering marginal material things and spaces, deliberately chosen for their lack of status. How we look at the results of their visual experimentation is then carefully mediated through a highly structured use of the exhibition space as a specific location for attention in which both artists have unequivocal belief. Even the audio work Hattan made of various voices doing Tarzan cries, which plays outside the gallery, consists of the recorded voices of three senior figures from a French art museum (the directeur, conservateur and commissaire) acting out of character but still attached to 'the gallery'.

Mendes's film gives glimpses of transcendence in ordinariness but expressed through self-consciously theatrical plot devices. The initial parallel with Bächli and Hattan's celebration of the mundane breaks down at this point. Their shared sensibility seems focused on things other than the human body, qualities that merge to form an evanescent and subtly sensual reframing of the exterior world. The exhibition space is the public realm which best generates the attentiveness this work demands; the art within exists for itself and for its audience, needing no introductory narrative. Within such a precise formal sense of how things might be placed in an exhibition space, individual drawings, videos and photographs lead, tangentially, towards different kinds of speculation: street lamps become the moon and flower heads (possibly dandelion seed heads on a giant scale) become street lamps, while Hattan's multiple video projections on walls, which vary in height and focal intensity, have a clear equivalence to Bächli's evanescent watercolour images.

The latter are often mounted in flush-fitted shallow perspex trays, making the protective frame as sheer as possible within the gallery context. Drawings are also presented in long perspex-covered tables, so that the sense of a pause, in the sort of deliberation on layout that might

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