

Mary Mary

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Only a foolish, excessive politeness (a bourgeois refusal to name what is staring you in the face) could allow the sculptures which form the basis of Nick Evans' *Use History Autonome* to be discussed (firstly, at least) as something other than corporeal, fleshly, base.

Yes, yes, we can nod, chatter, speak confidently of 'formalist values', references to Modernist sculpture, materiality, the immersive nature of *making* (etc. etc.) but ultimately, the immediate point to be acknowledged - surely! - is that we are looking at an orgy of breasts, phalluses, *bodies*.

While Evans' emphasis on this very specific aspect of figuration is just one element amidst an ambitious range of ideas in the exhibition, it is nonetheless central. On the part of the viewer, a focus on figurative or bodily imagery within the work could act as an access point or route of entry to other, perhaps less immediately tangible or evident concerns. This is not to say that the body acts as a metaphor here but, rather, that concepts surrounding abjection, fetishism, consumption and aesthetics are so intrinsically and historically linked to sexuality and the body that form and allusion become inextricable. In other words, these sculptures are models, signifying referents, for wider ideological systems.

Themes of sexuality, sacrifice and amorality are interrogated and explored through Evans handling of a catholic range of processes and materials; fibreglass, bronze, ceramic, rubber. The result is an aestheticisation of violence in which the sculptures might be read as various forms of dominance fighting against one another, both within a single work and between works. Figuration may be vestigial in works such as *Extravagant Flesh* but the potential for this imagery to flip between abstraction and figuration in an instant is deftly exploited, alluding to similar approaches in the post-war sculptural canon. These bodies, or body parts (limbs, phalluses, torsos, breasts) come out of the tradition of Bataille, de Sade or Pasolini's *Salo*; they are debased, craven, transgressive. In a literal sense they have been subject to damage, to cutting and reconfiguration. In *Post Rational Man* the colour of the flesh is mottled, blotchy, abused, a history belied by the smooth, shiny surface of the work.

The *Violent Femme* pieces (both black and white) take on the appearance of giant dildos, functional only in their totemic symbolism, or as weapons. It is hard to consider these particular works without recourse to Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, specifically the death of the 'cat lady' which occurs in surroundings dominated by her collection of erotic works of 'Modern' art. In a scene which teeters between the sublime and the farcical, the murder

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follows an orgiastic display of excessively mannered, highly stylised violence. At the close of the scene the woman is about to be bludgeoned to death by the psychopathic protagonist Alex, wielding Herman Makkink's phallic *Rocking Machine* sculpture. The artworks owned and displayed by the cat lady operate as status symbols, signifiers of both cultural and economic capital. Before the attack, Alex is warned not to touch the sculpture, as though it were a ceremonial artefact, the embodiment of magical power or desire. So too, the works in *Use History Autonome* acknowledge the status of object sculpture as perhaps the ultimate fetish in the context of contemporary consumerism. For Evans, artworks may strive to maintain their mask of autonomy, aloof from the systems of consumption but this aspiration is ultimately doomed. If art's role is sacred today it is also profane, exchange-value the only remaining deity. Evans work, then, negotiates the continuing possibilities and the meaning of making sculpture under such conditions. These works are not allegorical or narrative in terms of extrinsic reference points. Rather, through their 'coming into being' they become means for the artist to discover an immanent criticality through studio practice, a criticality that emerges out of the manipulation of materials. During these processes – mediation between hand and work - decision making operates on two levels, sometimes highly conscious, sometimes beyond authorial control. Long-limbed, serpentine works appear to morph and remould like bodies in Jan Svankmajer's animation, and for artist and viewer these objects might be subjects with lives of their own.

We might see within these material engagements the embodiment of an internal struggle for personal, political and aesthetic autonomy, a legacy of Rilke's discussion of Rodin, or a renegotiation of William Tucker's 'Language of Sculpture' in the 21st century. As a practitioner Evans is nothing if not critically self-reflexive, an approach that is mirrored in the forms of his work. The self-referential, waxy surface of *Extravagant Flesh*, for example, exposes the history and process of its own making. Elsewhere, edges are cut, cropped, ground-off and smoothed, while surface and skin vie with mass for dominance. There is an alternation between the deliberate removal of marks (erasing the mark of the maker) and a highly expressive application of marks.

'Authenticity' is not guaranteed through the rendering of these visceral, primitive forms. Instead, works such as *Mother Tongue*, a rubber altarpiece, hollow, backless and incomplete in space, mock the sacrosanct notion of 'creation'. The works concurrently suggest and deny their own place in a teleological art historical lineage, privileging a genealogical reading of sculptural history. In looking 'like' Modernist sculpture, these works both trace and repudiate their ancestry. In doing so, they perhaps critique or destabilise nostalgic references to formalism in recent British sculpture, and add another critical dimension to these densely layered, highly cerebral yet grounded works.