

Mary Mary

SWAIN, MIRIA; UNTITLED , SPRING 2005

'Karla Black and Babak Ghazi'

Untitled, Spring 2005

Miria Swain

Karla Black and Babak Ghazi may both be artists that manipulate or transform found materials, but apart from that, their approach to making art could not be more different. Strange then, that their work should be presented together as it was at Sl Artspace, Sheffield. To be fair, their work was not really presented together, in as much as shown side by side. No attempt was made to mix the work and there did not seem to be any obvious curatorial effort to force juxtaposition. Hinted at in the graphics of the private view card, the exhibition was pretty much divided down the middle, with Karla Black occupying half of the space, and Babak Ghazi the other. It could very easily have been two solo shows and in a way that is what was good about it.

Black's contribution consisted of six shelf-like plinths in descending heights and a low-level dais all acting as stages for various objects. The objects ranged from what looked like a block of earth in the shape of a broken brick to a small curl of aluminium (presumably cut from an old tube of ointment) only a couple of centimetres high. Other objects included a miniscule shaving of indiscernible blue material, perforated and as fragile as a layer of skin and a corrugated cardboard palette containing soil, among which, a delicate fragment of orange material (maybe a flake of painting glimmered in such a way that it was impossible for it not to register.)

Playing with textures, Black appeals to a fetish-like delight in the physical feel of materials, and yet the fragility of the objects that she produces seem to hold you at arm's length. Fearful that my breath, if too close, might blow the delicately crafted objects off their perches, I viewed the work with caution, gradually realising that the real distancing factor of Black's work is that it is clearly rooted in her own subjective experience. Ghazi's work on the other hand is utterly inclusive, not just encouraging a direct relationship between the viewer and the work, but often making it impossible for you to escape even the most basic form of interaction.

This is particularly evident in his series of work with mirrors, three of which were presented in the exhibition. The most intriguing of these was a mirror that had been drawn over with a thin line articulating the profile of a face, and a test swatch of colours. This offered two possibilities in contemplating your reflection: that you are free to determine, or 'colour' that way that you see yourself, or conversely that the way that you perceive yourself is 'coloured' by influences outside of yourself.

Another mirror work drew on the optical illusion of the skull in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1531). In Ghazi's piece, a streak of black and white acetate, vaguely resembling a head, is fixed to a mirror. With Holbein in mind you assume that this shape will optically correct itself when viewed from the side, but the perspective remains ever evasive within the multi-faceted space of the mirror plane. While Holbein's perspectival game serves to remind the viewer of their mortality, in Ghazi's hands it seems to make reference to the multiple perspective of 'self' made possible by the post-modern condition.

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These ideas are taken up again in other works presented by Ghazi, such as a double spread Armani advert torn from a magazine, in which the model wears a pair of sunglasses made from the shards of a broken compact disc; or the two almost identical photocopy portraits of Bill Gates, in which the slightest change in the copying process creates a shadow that transforms Gates from icon of the information age holding up a Microsoft manual to a desperate suicidal with a gun held to his head. In another work, David Bowie, the master of reinvention is presented in three states of distortion, his face disfigured through careful manipulation of the photocopy machine. I found myself trying to remember the lyrics of Changes, a Bowie classic that seems to resonate in much of Ghazi's work.

Ghazi is clearly interested in the freedom of the creative individual to construct his or her won identity or multiple identities, and in drawing our attention to the obstacles that exist when the possibilities for self-determination are boundless. Black too deals with aspects of the 'self' in her work, but rather than thinking about what the 'self' might be within the context of a wider cultural discourse, her project begins from a very personal, female orientated position, operates within a fixed parameter, and in the end seems to resist being lost in the plurality of which Ghazi so compellingly warns.