

Art in America

On Relative Loneliness: Victor Man

by Raul Martinez

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On Relative Loneliness, 2008. Constructed room, light box, medicine cabinet and tree. 10' 4" x 27' 8" x 13' 6"; all images courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

As the 20th Century's most hideous episodes recede into the past, memory seems to play an increasingly important role in contemporary art. The same way the premonitions of the future inspired much of Modern Art, more and more artists turn towards the past to interpret the present. The widespread use of archives and appropriated photographs, along with sculptures and installations made with discarded furniture and clothes, public monuments and even the quiet comeback of historical painting are evidence of artists' attempts to protect past memories from our society of spectacle's amnesia. Romanian artist Victor Man, whose first solo exhibition recently closed at Barbara Gladstone gallery, is not alien to this discourse, though his obscure, subtly perverse works can hardly be considered homages.

Even though Man's visual vocabulary, which comprises several of these tactics, may signal towards his native Romania's recent past, he emphatically distances himself from Eastern Europe's profitable obsession with its Communist history. Often obscured by his signature dark grey palette and playful or altogether absent titles, the sources of his works are largely untraceable. Rather than clues to reconstruct any past events -- as if it were actually possible to excavate and find an intact version of them -- Man's works become misleading signs that invite the viewer to construct new narratives when not deliberately intended to disorient them. "I'm not so interested in preserving the memory of any events," says Man, but rather "in stripping the image of its initial significance in order to reconstruct a new one with it. It's a process of emptying." As he told Hans Ulrich Obrist in an interview published on the occasion of his solo exhibition at Galleria

d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Bergamo in Bergamo, Italy, "It's like stealing their soul and taking it to a different place."

If one thinks of how relics and many images of the past are revered, divesting them from their original significance serves as a form of desecration. A notion that seems to play an important role in Man's works. While works such as *Lazarus* (an irreverent sculpture made with an old fencing mask and a seashell), *The Deposition* (a stunning painting of what seems to be a funeral), or *Archival Luster* indeed combine religious references with disturbing puns and sometimes subtle erotic imaginary, the monumental *On Relative Loneliness* could have actually raised former New York City Mayor Giuliani's anger (provided the election calendar required some heretical interpretations). A massive grey cube occupies the main gallery; its dimly-lit interior resembles a crypt, wherein a dead tree lies. A medicine cabinet is affixed to the wall, while a light box replaces the altar. Although its backlit image depicts a crucifix, the body of Christ has been torn off; only his dismembered arms are left dangling from the cross.

Ambiguous and perversely seductive, Victor Man's works reject facile interpretations. Uninterested in historicist pedagogy, he prefers to confound the viewer with multiple narratives suggested by his works' fragmented figures, masked subjects and enigmatic titles. Even though he doesn't intend to remember anything in particular (at the most, he would prefer to provoke a sense of déjà vu) he is aware that neither iconoclasm nor desecration completely engender forgetfulness. Rather than effacing the memory of those who are memorialized, they often achieve the opposite effect: It is when images are whitewashed and concealed -- when objects and sites are defaced and desecrated -- that they become icons. As Man knows all too well, this is when they are most seductive.