

frieze

Shape Shifter

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November – December 2008

Ambiguity, concealment and eroticism lurk in the shadows of **Victor Man's** paintings and installations



Victor Man, *Untitled* (2007). Left: oil on canvas, 26x37cm; right: acetate, 27x39cm

Victor Man's recent painting *Untitled* (2007) depicts a drinking straw set into an unevenly plastered wall at an angle of 45 degrees and kept in place by a smudged wad of putty. Near the straw's tip hangs a ragged comma of smoke, bright grey against the gathering darkness. From these pictorial cues we might infer that this straw extends through the wall into another parallel space from which the smoke originates, and this seems to be supported by the painting's pendant piece, *Untitled* (2007), an image on acetate of a man's silhouetted lips pursed around a thin, tubular form. At first glance, then, this is a simple illustration of cause and effect – smoke is blown through a straw threaded through a party wall, like a transporting cloud of incense or a last, toxic breath – but look and think a little harder, and any assumptions we might make about it melt into air.

We cannot prove that the man is exhaling rather than inhaling the smoke – his cheeks are neither caved nor puffed, and the white cloud may be expanding or shrinking – nor even that the lengths of straw we see in the painting and the acetate are necessarily connected, either in space or in time. To some degree this is a problem inherent in all attempts to suggest causality through a sequence of still images, but I suspect that Man is less interested in convincing us that the events in these two works are contingent than in the fact that, as viewers, we will them to be so. In his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) the philosopher David Hume repudiated the idea that we could perceive causality through our senses and posited the notion of a 'medium, which may

enable the mind to draw such an inference [although] what that medium is, I must confess, passes my comprehension [...] I cannot find, I cannot imagine [it]'. This, of course, is grist to his sceptical mill. No such 'medium' exists, unless it is our unaccountable habit of seeking the reflection of one thing in another. For Hume this is philosophically inadmissible. For Man it is what makes his paintings' strange hearts sing. Often displayed in sparse installations that are variously composed of objects, photographs, sketches and texts, they are not hermetic realities that we are invited to enter and lose ourselves within. Rather, and for all their apparent opacity, they seek company in order that they may attain a kind of clarity, glimpsed through a darkling glass.

If Man's practice is about the unsteady 'what' of an event, it is also about the even more unsteady 'why'. Motives, in his work, are always oblique and are commonly characterized by an almost menacing erotic precision. In his painting *Leading by example* (2006) a man in shirtsleeves stoops to steady a woman lying on a raised platform, whose arms grip the platform's supports and whose stockinged legs are thrown up to form a misshapen 'V' that terminates at the crotch of her white panties. Both of their faces are hidden from view, but this is a functional occlusion – the centre of gravity here, after all, is the woman's fabric-upholstered vulva, framed by the Mickey Mouse ears of her stocking tops. This is not an act of exposure. A curtain goes up, only for another curtain to greet the viewer. The thing revealed is a thing concealed. The same cannot perhaps be said of *Untitled* (2007). Here a woman lies on her front, facing away from the picture plane, while a man slowly peels away her knickers, the folds and creases of the fabric echoing the flesh it moments ago encased. We might interpret this process of imprinting as an index of Man's practice as a painter – one that sees him take found imagery (from books, magazines, film, the Internet) and reproduce it in paint that's as pale and as freighted with half-forgotten histories as a worn-out piece of underwear. If this is so, it follows that the fingers tugging at the woman's waistband might be interpreted as belonging, symbolically at least, to the artist. His hands remake the image but also somehow unmake it. They show it – even stage it – as it is, but somehow it is transformed into something else.

For all that they seem to hum with memory, the precise origins of the images and objects Man employs in his paintings and installations remain unimportant. No specific personal or political history is being archived here; indeed the prevalence of shadows, masks and averted visages in his work suggests a turning away from the careful (re)collection of facts. (In a recent catalogue essay, the curator Alessandro Rabottini argued persuasively that Man, who was born and raised in Romania under the communist regime, places a special value on enigma because 'when the policy of relations, of the space – both public and private – of opinions and actions is marked by the perennial visibility, the daily transparency of motivations and faith, then ambiguity stops being grounds for moral confrontation and becomes a resource of individual creativity and freedom'.) If the notion of remembering is important to Man's work, it is as a process that belongs to today and whose comforts and disturbances are caught up as much with where one is, or even where one is

going, as with where one is from. The artist has described his work as 'stealing [the] soul' of a found image or object 'and taking it to a different place'. 'Soul' is a word that suggests something transcendent, but it also suggests something that must experience many different shapes and contexts before it understands itself. Man's art speaks to this second meaning. The motifs he employs are not new, and neither are they perfected. (What might that perfection consist of, anyway?). Instead, they have recurred in the here and now, and have the memories, amnesia and promise of all recurring things.

Man's installations, like the couple in *Leading by example*, are preoccupied with the careful choreographing of space. Like the woman's genitals in *Untitled*, they leave a trace that is seemingly parsimonious but also deeply compelling. For his work *On relative loneliness* (2008), shown at GAMeC, Bergamo, the artist brought together three elements in a long, dark room: a medicine cabinet with a single mirrored door; a dead tree, slung low across the gallery floor; and a painting of a crucifix glimpsed through a slatted screen, from which the head, torso and legs of Christ have been hacked free, leaving only the dangling arms, as though his apotheosis has been only partially completed. The separation depicted in the painting is echoed in the accompanying objects (the tree from the nutritious earth, our own heads from our bodies as we catch sight of ourselves in the mirror), but there are also hints here of amelioration, of tinctures and balms. If Christ is a sacrifice, so too is the lifeless bough – an organism transformed into a source of fuel or of raw materials for tools. Reflected in the medicine cabinet, they become part of a shared universe of meaning, one that gutters and flares as we move throughout the space and is eclipsed the moment we stand face to face with our own image. Perhaps Man is indicating that we need to give art a little distance if it is to work on us – get too close to the mirror, put ourselves too much in the picture, and Christ and the tree die a second, visual death. Better relative loneliness than a monadic existence. Better to live among the beneficent departed than in a world of one.

At times Man seems to be performing a kind of sympathetic magic. Composed of a pair of wall-mounted antlers and a ceramic tile bearing an image of a horned and prancing stag that's recessed into a partition and warmed by a hidden heating element, *Vestigial specialization on its way out* (2007) might be interpreted as an attempt to prolong a cooling moment. Stags, after all, shed their antlers following the mating season, a process that signals an ebbing away of a particular type of masculine energy, and by heating the stag's image Man appears to hold this in abeyance. Huddle close to the work, though, and you realize that the temperature of the tile is not that of hot, testosterone-flooded blood, but rather that of a mother's teat or a father's protective flank, and you get to thinking that *Vestigial specialization* ... is concerned less with springtime than with long winter nights. The stag, for medieval Christians, was a symbol of Christ, and perhaps this work, like *On relative loneliness*, is also concerned with sacrifice. The male deer sheds its markers of virility as a covenant of parenthood. A loss is experienced, the better to experience a gain.

A recent work, *Untitled (we die,)* (2008), not only seems to point to the ambiguities in Man's work surrounding loss and change but also serves as an existential status report on the images and objects he employs. The piece consists of the words 'we die,' (the punctuation is important), applied to the gallery wall in lower-case, black vinyl letters, over which hover two thin white neon bars, crossed at the juncture of the 'd' and the 'i'. Expiration is suggested, and then erased, although this erasure is only partial, and the universal fact of death is still legible, still something we cannot deny. Then there is that comma. A comma serves as a pause between two related ideas and has none of the black hole finality of the full stop. It betokens more information, more clauses yet to come. Hanging there like the smoke in *Untitled*, it speaks not of divisions, or of terminal points, but of the connectedness of all things.