

Miranda Housden's malicious metaphor

The young British sculptor Miranda Housden (1965) was fortunate when she was granted the Nová Síň Gallery for the Prague premiere of her work. She has confirmed that this non-commercial gallery has managed in recent years to devise an exhibitions programme that can be seen as a cohesive body of work. Also here I imagine the radiating charisma compels exhibiting artists (without exhibitions tailored for specific sites) to exercise restraint, reserve and respect for the clearly demarcated geometric area of such a rigorous space.

Miranda Housden does not betray such constraints. On the facing wall as you enter she has placed the dominant hanging structure - a sort of gigantic politico-erotic monster, which combines a wealth of women's underwear, tights, stockings, suspender-belts and bras pierced by sand and plaster. After that she held the space in the palm of her hand. This cogent centrally commanding installation seizes and pre-occupies you with its disparate collection of drab materials and ironical and mystifying everyday objects, but with sparkling accomplishment.

I do not intend the deconstruction of the scenario of this artistic metaphor in either a crude or more finely argued manner - both are possible; I don't wish to become entangled in the web of fabricated theory. The evidence is here. Indeed there is an anxiety to find an equilibrium between universally accepted contradictions in perception - these, often ungracious, and the realities of life and persecution, by affected delusion. The sculptor knowingly implicates the visitor in her absurd world of dissimulation, to a laborious pervading allegory, and the visitor alone must decide whether this is something which upsets or at the very least amuses. For example I 'got through' the exhibition of young visitors from New York in the Mánes Gallery a couple of times and did penance for their ignorance - the show neither upset nor amused me at all. If these artists represent allegedly prestigious galleries in New York I ask myself the question in whom is this kudos actually embodied? More importantly, who decides on them and by what criteria. In vain I have had to satisfy myself with the bewitching magic spell that they, these people and no others, represent our current times both here (in the Czech Republic) and around the world. So be it. Fundamental is that Miranda Housden is their contemporary and in her sparsely executed show I didn't for a second feel inner emptiness, but instead an unsettling uncliché atmosphere. Neither does it interest me whether this British visual artist represents any renowned London gallery or not. I visited her installation in Nová Síň again - of course I had no reason to doubt what I had seen.

Jiří Tichý

Photo L: 'Zhirinovsky twirling an expensive brassiere upon his finger proclaims "Vote for me and I shall provide cheap underwear for each and every one of my constituents."'

Photo R: 'A savage set of sweet teeth.'

Photography Hana Hamplová

are rolled into a seductively smooth and soft satin roll. A photocopy of MH's mouth on a paper doily is attached to the roll suggesting the possibility of the mouth swallowing the shattered glass.

'Sow's Ear' (1990) is described by MH as a completely spontaneous piece, involved with her desire to cut away once more from slickness and neatness. MH wanted to begin with "something like shoving nails into a wall and to take it from there....." White bags (pouch like) bound with lead rope are suspended from the wall filled with wet plaster. MH interfered with the forms just before the plaster went off. Their forms and various states suggested different things: dead fruit, sandbags, defence, punch bags, money bags, udders, fertility. The work as a whole leaves a strong impression of the absence of a human presence. That they did belong to various people, but now they have left them, they have gone. For MH this ties in with her interest in power and the loss of power, with what people do and the results of their actions.

The most recent piece 'Balze (Story of the Eye)' (1990) confirms an important part of the continuous process involved in MH's work. This is the accretion of meaning. Drawn by potentially explosive situations, materials loaded with connotations, it is only during the period of putting her work together that meanings begin to emerge, that MH works out her own conclusions from confrontation with numerous issues which, until the work is underway, remain in the realm of the instinctual.

Conversations, dialogues, are the unspecified elements which emerge not only in the making of the piece but also in considering it in the gallery.

The first thing MH wanted to do in connection with this piece was to go out and buy fur tails. This has been for her a highly disturbing factor in the production of the work: "because I've used it, because I bought them". From this point, and with the burden of thought and feeling becoming more acute, they were tuned into circles and subsequently joined with reliquaries (false/ironic) the blind, redundant symbol of spirituality. The reliquaries form the pupil of the eye from a distance, on closer inspection one sees their crudeness or their beauty. This insistence on dual perception, distant and near and on switches between beauty and repulsion, are repeated in the piece. Again there is a sense of the degradation of the human condition, misuse of power: impressions achieved purely through aesthetic confrontation and conjunction. Set onto baroque swags, with a texture reminiscent of parchment one is reminded of control again, the visual dynamism of the baroque, the artist controlling vision, guiding and manipulating it towards a specific end. Our eyes are one of our ways of understanding; when we use them we are, in one sense, looking for 'truth', seeking information for ourselves. MH's art puts difficult truths before our eyes.