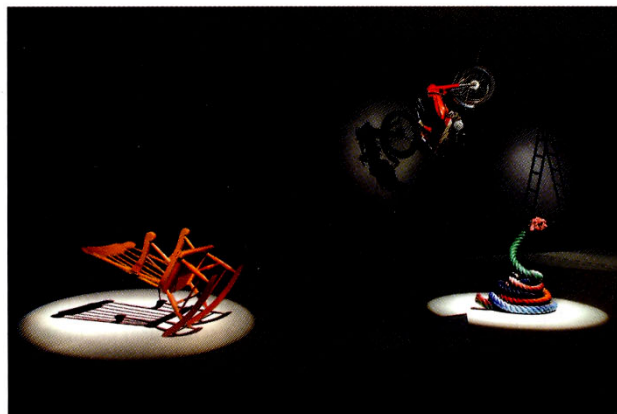


“The Freak Show”

MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE LYON

With a title like “The Freak Show,” we might have expected to see Damien Hirst’s creatures in formaldehyde, Ron Mueck’s giants, or even Maurizio Cattelan’s Pope John Paul II crushed by a meteorite. Yet the exhibition, curated by art critic Vincent Pécoil and architect/designer Olivier Vadrot, two of the codirectors of Lyon’s nonprofit art center La Salle des Bains, contains no such figurative works. Rather, the exhibition transposes the concept behind sideshows—those spectacles that featured dwarfs, giants, Siamese twins, bearded women, contortionists, and the like—into the realm of art itself, presenting recent works that play with size and form in ways that might appear “monstrous” or strange. In the exhibition catalogue, Pécoil refers to what he calls the first “freak show of modern art,” the “*Entartete Kunst*” (Degenerate Art) exhibition organized by the Nazi regime in Munich in 1937. “The absence of the representation of the human body in the MAC exhibition,” he writes, “is a way to question, from a distance and negatively, the principle and the success of that historic exhibition.”

Calling on the imagery of the circus, the music hall, and cabinets of curiosities, the show had three sections: The first room served as a warm-up, presenting Claude Lévêque’s *Normalement Vôtre* (Normally Yours), 2000—a neon sign reading ANORMAL (abnormal)—and Kendell Geers’s wall piece *Post Pop Fuck*, 2002, in which the expletive of the title has become nearly illegible through patterning. The second room referred directly to the fairground podiums on which freaks were exhibited, inviting the spectator at the center of the room to scrutinize the more or less comical anomalies arrayed along the walls against a background of wallpaper—Henrik Plenge Jacobsen’s *Anarchist Knight*, 2007—and accompanied by panels carrying François Moriceau and Petra Mrzyck’s “Untitled (Freak Show Drawings),” 2007, which served as whimsical “labels” for the other works, including their title, year, materials, and courtesy line. Among the aberrations on display were Jaime Pitarch’s *Untitled*, 2000–2004, a tautological hairbrush (that is, one made out of hair), and *Cyclops*, 2002 (not a pair of eyeglasses but an eyeglass, singular); Lilian Bourgeat’s *Invendus, bottes* (Unsold, Boots), 2006–2007, a pair of galoshes nearly ten feet tall; the conjoined cups and saucers of Mona Hatoum’s *T42*, 1993–98; and equally disquieting works by Sylvie Fleury (a furry square mounted on the wall, titled *Cuddly Painting*, 1993) and Olaf Nicolai’s fun-house mirrors—*Psyche I, II, and III*, 2007—that turned visitors into freaks as well.



View of “The Freak Show.” Left to right: James Hopkins, *Rocking Chair*, 2003; Mark Handforth, *Rope Snake*, 2005; Bertrand Lavier, *MBK*, 1995.

Finally, in the last room, spotlighted in darkness, were several sculptures that seemed to move on their own: such as a crashed moped suspended in the air (Bertrand Lavier’s *MBK*, 1995), floating cubes (Jeppe Hein’s *Corner Cubes*, 2007), and a coiled rope, rising like a cobra (Mark Handforth’s *Rope Snake*, 2005). But beyond the ostentatious presentation, the exhibition offered a new point of view on contemporary creativity, examining the status of the artist as another kind of marginal figure while tackling the history of museums. “The fact that we’ve been inspired by the structure of spectacles in order to show art, suggesting an affinity between the two, will no doubt seem heretical to some,” Pécoil predicts, just as some “may consider it regrettable that one can’t walk around the sculptures, that the captions are illegible, the lighting dramatic, and the carpeting too invasive.” Be that as it may, I was delighted to be offered a salutary escape from the normal format of art exhibitions.

—Claire Moulène

Translated from French by Jeanine Herman.

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