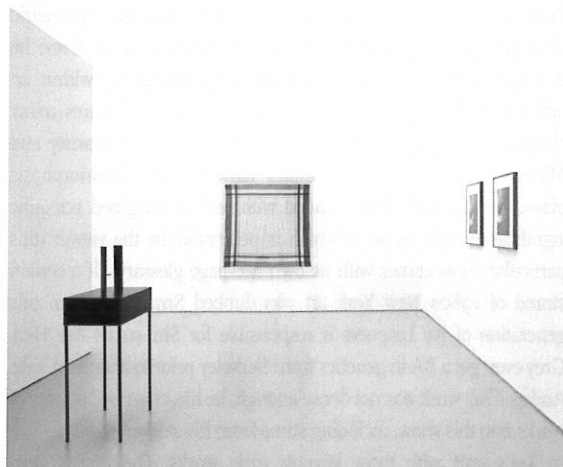


Becky Beasley
installation view



Silvia Bächli/Eric Hattan: What About Sunday?

MK Gallery Milton Keynes 18 January to 31 March

There is a well-known scene from Sam Mendes's *American Beauty*, 1999, where Ricky Fitts, the young man next door, shows his video of a plastic bag eddying around in the wind to the unhappy daughter of the main protagonist. In the film, seeing beauty in the ordinary, for which 'the plastic bag scene' is the crucial plot device, is played out against the mundane nature of human crises. Visual parallels with Eric Hattan's video of plastic bags chasing each other in a spiral are obvious, but Silvia Bächli and Hattan's collaborative exhibition takes ideas of the beauty in ordinariness in a far different direction to Mendes's film. Hattan made this video about a year before *American Beauty* reached European audiences and he points out that beyond synchronicity his work is simply recording a common occurrence, whereas the scene in the film, according to internet accounts, involved careful construction, using artificial air blowers and studio lights.

What is most immediately apparent in 'What about Sunday?' is that underlying Hattan's video and sculpture and Bächli's understated, almost abstract drawing is a commitment to considering marginal material things and spaces, deliberately chosen for their lack of status. How we look at the results of their visual experimentation is then carefully mediated through a highly structured use of the exhibition space as a specific location for attention in which both artists have unequivocal belief. Even the audio work Hattan made of various voices doing Tarzan cries, which plays outside the gallery, consists of the recorded voices of three senior figures from a French art museum (the directeur, conservateur and commissaire) acting out of character but still attached to 'the gallery'.

Mendes's film gives glimpses of transcendence in ordinariness but expressed through self-consciously theatrical plot devices. The initial parallel with Bächli and Hattan's celebration of the mundane breaks down at this point. Their shared sensibility seems focused on things other than the human body, qualities that merge to form an evanescent and subtly sensual reframing of the exterior world. The exhibition space is the public realm which best generates the attentiveness this work demands; the art within exists for itself and for its audience, needing no introductory narrative. Within such a precise formal sense of how things might be placed in an exhibition space, individual drawings, videos and photographs lead, tangentially, towards different kinds of speculation: street lamps become the moon and flower heads (possibly dandelion seed heads on a giant scale) become street lamps, while Hattan's multiple video projections on walls, which vary in height and focal intensity, have a clear equivalence to Bächli's evanescent watercolour images.

The latter are often mounted in flush-fitted shallow perspex trays, making the protective frame as sheer as possible within the gallery context. Drawings are also presented in long perspex-covered tables, so that the sense of a pause, in the sort of deliberation on layout that might

last summer. These appear to fall like knobbly, awkward little dancing raindrops, while surrounding these are photographs of pairs of 'male' and 'female' wooden blocks – one with a hole and one with a little phallic post – which are based on the spatial volume of *Étant Donnés* split into two. They never connect in the images, either missing one another in angle, or hovering, as if tentatively, away from one another.

Beasley continues to speak through the works of others and to open up new elements of their work to viewers – it is one of the great pleasures that I take in her work and her close reading. Here she has included the works of two other artists: Charles Jones's photographs of vegetables famously which were found in a suitcase in a flea market, like strange silver jewels (a secret revealed), and several Richard Hamilton prints of interiors, which use multiple viewpoints or elements to depict motels and lobbies so that they appear to be falling open (like legs or waterfalls). Like Beasley, Hamilton opened up particular aspects in the work of an admired predecessor – Duchamp – with his care and attentiveness to the older artist's work, not to mention Hamilton's actual recreation in 1965-66 of Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*), 1915-23.

Bernard Malamud's short story *Spring Rain*, 1942, is a delicate, masculine narrative which, included as a handout, provides this exhibition's musical key – small moments of growing lightness. A man who has an inability to communicate, to say how he feels, is granted a glimpse of connection with another person while on a walk in the spring rain with his daughter's suitor. The emotional climax, beautifully underplayed, comes when he returns home alone and watches the rain continue to fall, like droplets of possibility washing and transforming his interior landscape. We understand the deep interior transformation taking place in the protagonist's soul when Malamud writes: 'The spring rain was falling everywhere.' In the final act of this exhibition, two tiny versions of Beasley's Duchampian wooden block couples, *Eclipse (I)* (*Pearwoods No. 1 & 2*), 2013, spin slowly, squeakily on a small table like a melancholic music box, their connective peg and hole elements missing one another as they turn. Very occasionally, however, once in the spring rain, they manage to meet. ■

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**Moving
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Eric Hattan
Instant Sculpture
2009/13

Silvia Bächli
and Eric Hattan
Snowhau 2003
video



occur in a studio, is kept alive as much as the couplings and groupings of drawings on wall and table seem very carefully considered. A video by Hattan of a polystyrene cup, chased this way and that by the camera, sits at the end of a long MDF box in the centre of the gallery principally given over to Bächli's watercolour drawings. Here the foiled attempt to capture the shot, constantly disrupted by the wind, gives a lyrical equivalent to the pale but insistent framing of image and gesture in Bächli's drawings. The grain of watercolour on paper is also the grain of relatively low-resolution video; low-fi uses of MDF boxes, tabletops and plasterboard are all part of a carefully orchestrated world.

Distinctions between the two artists' practices can also offer a way of understanding what makes their collaboration here engaging. Apart from deploying materials in direct and simple ways, Hattan also seems to be a reactive artist, performing, improvising and using the simplest means to create dynamism out of contingency. A favoured trope is the sculptural *trompe l'oeil*, suggesting a desire for strangeness in an ordinary world. Bächli, in contrast, seems to reorder disorder. By removing all but the slightest of local colour from her drawing and relying on the emptiness of blank paper and carefully considered spaces between drawings to create abstract interstitial rhythms, she builds a complex world that is both real and unreal. Hers is in essence a contemplative approach to being in the world; in counterpart Hattan plays the holy fool, the knowing clown. Both seem to revel in how mysterious the ordinary can be. ■

ANDREW BICK is an artist and curator.

Michael Joaquin Grey: *Orange between orange and Orange*

Carroll / Fletcher London 11 January to 16 February

LA-born Michael Joaquin Grey is not well known in the UK, it being 21 years since his only solo show. This is partly because, in the mid 1990s, his work led him outside the art world when he created the

Zoob play system – think Lego for organic rather than geometric structures. But that is also what is so energising about Grey; he is a garage inventor whose artworks are experiments within an open-ended personal investigation. Grey's work also shares many characteristics with his Yale contemporaries, Matthew Barney and Michael Joo: each creates complex narratives of metamorphosis played out through media loaded with real or imagined scientific significance, only some of which is penetrable by the viewer (this particular show comes with its own two-page glossary). If a certain strand of 1980s New York art was dubbed Smart Art, then this generation of Ivy Leaguers is responsible for Shit-smart Art. Hell, Grey even got a BA in genetics from Berkeley prior to attending Yale. And as if his work was not dense enough, he has crammed dozens of works into this show, including some from his student days.

Let's start with those keynote early works. The first, *Orange between Orange and Orange*, 1989, the show's eponymous opener, is a mysterious pale photograph featuring a white orange. A white orange? Grey pared the zest from the rind to leave a sphere of pith, the layer between the orange skin and the orange flesh. An orange between states of essential existence, as it were. The second early work, also an object between states, is *The Drip*, 1988, a plaster block whose upper surface is a frozen ripple as if it were a body of liquid that a drip had just hit. This is the transformative instant when an individual object is absorbed into a greater whole. The surface flexes here are so subtle that elsewhere in the show, as in the silver and gold *Au/Ag Flip (Diaphram)*, 2012, the same form is used to describe the skin of an orange flattened out like a Mercator projection, the nub of the drip now representing the stalk stub. Associations with mapping are reinforced in these newer 3D-printed objects as banding – resulting from the limits of the printer's resolution – suggests contour lines and hence shift the reading of the scale from fruit to vast landscape. Elsewhere, scale is further muddled when *The Drip* is repeatedly 3D-printed at ever-decreasing sizes.

Another repeating motif is a collection of rectangles that describe the common aspect ratios of screens: square, 4:3 TV, 1.2:2.5 CinemaScope etc all the way through to 360° panoramas. Grey uses 26 of these shapes – an alphabet of frames – in wall drawings, in a generative video (*Panoptic Asymptomatic*, 2012, where Spirograph-like rotating oblongs gradually describe filled circles) and as a set of wooden blocks in a sandpit where they act as primary structures for visitors to interact with in the spirit of kindergarten pioneer Friedrich Fröbel's theories of free play (*Sandbox 1.1*, 2013). The screens hint at the evolution of technology and this is made explicit in four examples from the 'Morphology' series, where common consumer objects – old-fashioned radios, vintage CRT TVs, Brownie box cameras and SLR cameras – are neatly encased in clay, the genericised forms revealing decades of design and technology advances. Similar objects are to be found in one of the show's two large-scale examples of so-called computational cinema: *Umwelt Belt*, 2012, depicts 100 different 3D computer models rotating in an orbital ring, like an asteroid belt, the objects tumbling through each other, weightless ghosts of mostly technological and scientific significance – in Grey's words, 'a primary cultural record from the prosthetic fossil array'. The second large-scale generative film is *Flipside 2012 (SoWhat Orrery, 2012)*, 2005-13, a two-screen projection that immerses the viewer between fore and aft views of a journey from the centre of the sun out to the farthest reaches of the universe and back again, the visuals pulsing wildly to a soundtrack consisting of seminal moments in media and computing history, from Miles Davis to Steve Jobs's Stanford commencement speech. Here, our planet's noise literally distorts our vision of the