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Songs of the Self: Slightly Unbalanced

Matthew Ryan Smith, University of Western Ontario
GOLIATH VS. GOLIATH

Impersonating Captains of Industry, The Yes Men rock Big Business boats.

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SOMGS OF THE SELF: Slightly Unbalanced

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REVIEW BY Matthew Ryan Smith

Upon entering the expansive second floor of Museum London, I am confronted by an audible host of stifled cries and one brazen proclamation of the self — “I Sean Landers exist … I have great love for you.” The exhibition space contains a mix of mediums from painting and video, to sculpture and installation. Immediately to the left of the entrance sits the compulsive, diaristic itinerary of Danica Phelps’ Artist Collector Curator Spy, a document of the banality of the everyday, with entries ranging from “CRAMPS” to “watching X-Files.” Photographed panels of tattered bears and ambiguous insects from Mike Kelley’s After ... Youth! are visible beyond a dividing wall — a teenage photograph of the artist, acne and all, rests in fitting proximity on the fifth of eight panels, between a pink bunny rabbit and an asexual, homemade plush toy. At eye level to the right, David Shrigley’s photographed fragment of a studio space sports the inscription “ANTI-DEPRESSANTS” on a large white bucket, reinforcing the stereotypical perception of the tragic artist figure. Immersed in this climate of emotional fragility, it seems rather fitting and ironic that the watchful eye of a security guard looms behind.

Slightly Unbalanced explores neurosis and other psychological states of being. Splintered into four categories — Progenitors, Performance Video, Inner Monologues, and The House as Metaphor for the Mind — the artists confront, challenge and articulate the nuances of emotional disorder(s) through autobiographical, confessional and diaristic modes of communication. Besides inflating the common presumption of the artist as someone who compromiss psychological stability for their work, the artists in this exhibition draw attention to the vulnerability of the artist’s psyche and neurotic tendencies that are so readily assumed to accompany artistic production and creativity.

Works by Bruce Nauman, Sophie Calle, Mike Kelley, Louise Bourgeois and Cindy Sherman headline Progenitors. Sophie Calle’s poignant (and only) contribution to the exhibition, a three-part piece entitled Autobiographies, is composed of three large panels separated by didactic text. The second, rather disconcerting segment, The Razor Blade, is an idealized sketch of a standing nude female slashed repeatedly from head to toe with the cuts concentrated in the genital area. Calle reports that, after posing for a life drawing class, a male student charged at his drawings upon completion, submitting the paper to the swipes of the blade. It is here that Calle reveals the precariousness not only of her own being but also of another’s, suggesting neurotic tendencies that accompany even the “weekend” artist. Opposite Calle, one finds Bruce Nauman’s installation Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room from 1968. Eerie sepia-toned light from a single low-watt light bulb floods the space while Nauman repeatedly murmurs, “get-out-of-this-room.” Centering oneself in the space, the viewer is inducted by a breadth of voices streaming from embedded speakers in the walls; the experience is akin to a schizophrenic state, one which deceives the senses, stretches reality and cultivates the seeds of paranoia.

In an era of reality television, blogging, social networking websites and tabloid magazines, it is not surprising that artists have adapted and responded to a cultural condition of autobiography. Slightly Unbalanced embodies these frameworks while complicating the notion of the artist as afflicted genius. But, considering the proliferation of anti-depressants and the popularity of rehab, not to mention the various outlets available to broadcast one’s errors and follies (Facebook, myspace.com and PostSecret immediately come to mind), the stereotype of the idiosyncratic, tragic artist is being co-opted from all sides by an angst-ridden public, delinquent celebrities and cyberspace. One can make the case that Slightly Unbalanced
offers neuroticism to a neurotically rich public while begging the question: Is the artist the raconteur for a society enthralled with neuroses?

The stifled cries I meet upon entering the exhibition space are coming from the Performance Video section and Tony Oursler’s Isn’t There Someone Else You Could Be? Here lies a small, childlike cloth figure ensnared beneath an overturned chair, its face illuminated by an LED projector. But this is hardly a child; its face is that of an adult, as is its language. Somewhere between its maniacal laughs and hysterical cries, the figure begs “let me go!” with the promise of “I won’t kill you,” eliciting a puzzling bath of mat/paternalism and reputational. A similar sensation is evoked in Oursler’s I’m Pretty Nice (from Life). In a monotone drawl, the artist croons, “I’m pretty nice, until you get to know me . . .” while squashing a housefly and other bugs between his fingers then later parading a child’s doll atop set mousetraps and shards of broken glass; Oursler’s song about himself appears to ring true.

Sarah Hobbs, framed by The House as Metaphor for the Mind, contributes several pieces to the exhibition, the strongest being her Periodic Table of the Traits, expounding pathological conditions and neurotic behaviour in a take-off of the traditional chemical chart for example, “Me” for “selfish,” and “By” for “bitchy.” Nearby, her large photograph, Untitled (Perfectionist) shows a room teeming with crumpled paper laying siege to a small desk where a stack of paper sits next to a pen. The work marks a point of reflection where the mind impinges on creative production and personal space, saturating the private sphere with the refuse of the psychosomatic.

Particular artists in the Inner Monologues group tend to frame their work as a parade of “I’y” and “My’s”; that isn’t to say that such expression becomes an exercise in narcissism, but it treads awfully close. For instance, Cary Leibowitz’s painted pie graphs making known his general malaise and suicidal dreams — “I plan my death every day”— denote an unabashedly literal personal drama verging on piteous. Contrary to such unconvincing melodrama, AA Bronson, Tracey Emin and Bas Jan Ader side with an air of vulnerability, the poetic over the prosaic, and the empathetic over the sympathetic. At present, neuroticism is commonplace, its channels, plentiful, but looking beyond the exhibition for a moment, one identifies an almost universal desire to communicate something of the self, from the deepest recesses of the soul to its surface; such gestures unite artists and non-artists alike in a culture of disclosure.

Matthew Ryan Smith is a Ph.D. candidate in Art and Visual Culture at the University of Western Ontario.

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