

Demonstration

Nina Beier's exhibition at Charlottenborg features a new body of work, and one with which the artist undertakes a daring expedition into the wilderness of representation. The project touches on subjects such as – in no particular order – exoticism, trophies, portraits, trade, power and fashion. On a more fundamental level it also reflects on what is arguably Beier's core subject: the exploration of display; and in particular the slippery relationship between the sign and what it signifies, between the messenger and the message. Beier's artworks are always shifting between statement and sculpture, and between these two positions a wide range of arguments unfolds – at once surprising, personal and political.

Walking into the exhibition one heads straight towards a large triptych featuring vivid dots and stripes. This mural size artwork, entitled *Portrait Mode* (all works 2011), is made from secondhand clothes featuring animal prints of all kinds – leopard spot jackets, zebra stripe trousers or snakeskin skirts – that are spread out and pressed within three glass frames. This lush, colourful work initially suggests the vibrant patterns of an Op Art piece, or the bravado of an AbEx painting. Moreover, the late 19th-century gallery at Charlottenborg is staged to suggest a collector's exotic home or the grandiose environment of a rich American museum. This showcase setting is mirrored in the triptych's animal print textiles: clothes made to dress for success but which are here employed as the dressing for the room.

It should also be pointed out that the garments in *Portrait Mode* operate as status symbols in the so-called first world, while employing a phoney symbolism of hunting that we associate with the so-called third world. This traffic between developed and developing nations is relevant to the circulation of the clothes themselves, many of which are likely to have been produced in poorer countries for export to the first world, before ending up in charity shops that are intended to aid the developing world from which they came. In this piece the various secondhand clothes – which Beier considers 'portraits', with each representing a personal history of production and use – are gathered into a group, together forming an overwhelming image of the common or everyday and its relation to the exotic.

Beier's interest in the potential of everyday commodities is explored further in a large series of works entitled *The Demonstrators*, examples of which are spread over the three rooms of the exhibition. This series employs posters, featuring stock photographic images, which the artist has glued onto a number of everyday objects. In the first room of the exhibition a large 1980s conference table is placed in front of the triptych and dressed with an oversized poster bearing the

image of a humble potato. In this work the table – the site of high-level meetings and negotiations – is interlocked with the symbol of a simple meal. While pointing to biased power relations (someone is at the table and someone is not) the object also becomes a poster stand – with the table ‘holding up’ its simple message in the same way that someone might hold up a sign for world peace.

The stock images in this series – in which naked motifs are suspended against monochrome backgrounds – are derived from image banks and were all originally created to symbolise common sentiments. Such studio-created images, which are bought from these image banks in their thousands, are not made for a single purpose or destination but in response to a generic need. They wait to be bought and employed by anonymous users, often never taking a physical form but existing instead in the digital realm of, for instance, PowerPoint demonstrations. In Beier’s installation however they cling desperately to a physical support, finding an absurd foothold on a mass produced item and creating a merger of illustration and object.

Other examples of *The Demonstrators* are made by draping posters onto radiators, as one might casually throw a bath towel onto a heated towel rail to dry. These works feature images of ropes about to snap, and the simple gesture of pairing these commonplace heating elements – detached from the house’s body of tubes, pipes and water flow – with broken ropes, creates a poignant metaphor of dissociation. The posters become a new skin upon the radiator (known as *varmelegemer* in Danish or *Heizkörper* in German – ‘heating bodies’) and point back to the questioning of surfaces that is part of *Portrait Mode*.

A further group of works employs posters that are pasted over picture frames – the poster covers the object that it would normally be contained within, reversing the roles of the image and object and questioning the status of the framing device. Other pieces in the exhibition return to the motifs of furs and skins, including a group of works that feature wigs – made from real human hair – that are pressed behind glass and which carry titles corresponding to the fashionable haircuts of various times. A work in the last gallery concludes this sequence, as it features a Persian carpet (like the animal print fabrics, another exotic field of patterns) that is scattered with dog hair. This piece, entitled *Tragedy*, involves a performance in which different dog owners visit the exhibition at unannounced times and ask their animals to ‘play dead’ on the rug. The result is an absurd, theatrical gesture in which, for a moment, the pet becomes a still life. This curious piece is a striking example of Beier’s exploration of display, as in this case the animal is both itself and – like an animal skin or trophy – its own indexical image.

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