

"Why is there something so uncanny about animals like shellfish, snails and tortoises? The true object of horror is not the shell without the slimy body in it, but the "naked" body without the shell. That is to say: do we not always tend to perceive the shell as too large, too heavy, too thick, in relation to the living body it houses? There is never a body which fully fits its shell; furthermore, it is as if this body also lacks any inner skeleton which would confer it on a minimal stability and firmness: deprived of its shell the body is an almost formless spongy entity. It is as if, in these cases, the fundamental vulnerability, the need for a safe haven of a home specific to humans, is projected back into nature, into the animal kingdom – in other words, it is as if these animals are in fact humans who carry their houses around with them. ... Is not this squashy body the perfect figure for The Real?" 1

As Slavoj Žižek states, snails are strangely uncanny things; little slimy creatures who carry their home on their back, where interior is also exterior as their "squishy" and "naked" bodies are revealed, made vulnerable to the world. In its most simple terms, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's notion of "The Real" proposes that the oppositions of presence and absence do not exist and the snail could be presented as a metaphor for this. This is particularly apt in relation to Nicolas Deshayes' exhibition entitled "Snails" as his work is a continual paradox: minimal, industrial, man-made materials are reformed – or perhaps deformed – into palpably organic shapes, as if born from the land.

The exhibition comprises three new bodies of work: *Sour Fruits* (2013) is an installation of eight wall-mounted sculptures, the aesthetic of which is extremely contemporary. Made from anodized aluminum, vacuum-formed plastic, and powder-coated aluminum these could not sound less organic, or more industrial, in their materiality. However, like the mollusc animals Žižek discusses above, they gesture towards a paradoxical combination of hard exterior shell and interior bodily matter that may emerge. The anodized aluminum glows with washes of purple, pale blue and yellow – colours that occur during the anodization process – yet initially look like close up digital photography of a fruit or flower, or the natural oxidization of copper that occurs over time.

*Sour Fruits* can also be considered as a form of architectural décor, fixed to wall mounted horizontal rails, giving the illusion that the panels are moving across the walls, and alluding to Deshayes' continued interest in the mass-produced public and functional architectures. As humans, we begin decaying the moment we are born, producing excrement of multiple varieties – shit, piss, dead skin, hair, vomit, snot, saliva, sperm, blood – and our bodies play host to numerous forms of bacteria, fungus and disease. Yet, for the most part, we are conditioned to be disgusted and repelled by these excrements and are sanitized from birth, taught to purchase things that clean, suck or soak up our

bodily output. We live in a world that is wipe-down, splash-proof and wrapped in plastic. What is below the surface, physically and psychologically is to be controlled and packaged, and the architecture we inhabit, in particular our public amenities, is formed to be easily sanitised. Sour Fruits point towards this repressed matter and its control: transparent lumpy, swirling hummocks – created from plastic using a vacuum-forming machine and plaster casts – appear as a skin across the surface. Invisible bacteria erupting like molten lava oozing from a volcano.

Shimmering horizons in tantalizing tans (2013) comprises five floor-based sculptures made from vacuum-formed yams. Painted varying shades of muddy browns and tans, these lumpy creatures, emerge though the surface of the plastic; their organic shapes creating swampy, knobbly, sometimes phallic, but more often – albeit more shiny – shit- like mounds. Yams are readily sold all over London and Deshayes bought his from Ridley Road market in Dalston, much to the bemusement of the stall holder – as they are mostly eaten by the black afro-Caribbean communities in the city. The Yam is from the tuber family of fleshy vegetables grown underground – here the yams rise up from the ground as if trying to escape, screaming “let me out of here!” On the contrary to their physicality, the title Shimmering horizons in tantalizing tans, conjures the image of a mirage in the desert – something that is there, but not real. Just as the plastic skin enables the yam to be present, it is also absent underneath.

Deshayes has recently begun to experiment using cast aluminum, creating a number of sculptural or architectural reliefs such as Botanique Pudique (1), (2) and (3), Grip (2013) and Snails (2013), that have a distinctly more hand- made, naïve feel. Deshayes was inspired to create these works during recent research into a range of sculptural and relief based work from the 19th and 20th centuries. This – coupled with earlier work he made with self-staged stock photography, which often deals with simplified, or exaggerated, versions of nature and form – led to an interest in making the cropped (as if they have been cut-out) reliefs in the Botanique Pudique series. These represent crudely made, yet highly romantic or clichéd natural forms – such as the apple tree, leaves, artichokes and figs – natural forms typically used to symbolize desire or sexuality. The title, loosely translated from the French, means “Modest Botany” alluding to vanity screens, or venetian blinds – surfaces that can be peered through. Grip, however, is more sexually overt and less romantic, as, quite simply put, is a bunch of figs bolted to the wall at crotch height – as if testicles ready to be grabbed. In contrast Snails – cast aluminium cropped work boots – are installed at the top of the wall, as if fragments of a frieze, waiting to stomp on the visitors head.

The exhibition Snails positions the organic, supposedly natural world, against the industrial man-made one. Yet Deshayes work would also not exist in the same way had he not come of age with

the Internet. In a text Mark Leckey wrote recently to contextualize the exhibition he curated, *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things*, he described his interest in how “digital technology disappears real world objects by dematerializing them; or dispossessing them of their shadow ...”. Contrary to the “dematerialization” of art by conceptualism, art made by a generation of artists who grew up alongside the Internet and the digital revolution – in some respects – has become more ‘material’ than ever. Deshayes’ yams summon the irreverent qualities of floor sculptures by Minimalists such as Carl Andre, the material malleability of Post-minimalists such as Lynda Benglis, yet the empty hollow ‘skins’ that he creates are – as Leckey described – objects without shadow. They are present via the plastic surface, but there is no weight, or solid matter, beneath – embracing a kind of Baroque version of Post-Modernity, perhaps akin to a Las Vegas hotel. These surreal places could be described as architecture ‘in drag’, where the facades of cities such as Paris and Venice, are recreated using man-made materials – existing purely as a surface to hide whatever does, or does not, exist beneath.

Kathy Noble

1 Slavoj Žižek, *For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a political factor*, Second Edition, Verso, 2002, p.xvii

*(This document was automatically generated by Contemporary Art Library.)*