

REVIEW - 11 OCT 2013

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# O Chair O Flesh

BY CHRIS FITE-WASSILAK



'O Chair O  
Flesh',  
installation view,  
centre: Florian  
Roithmayr  
*Inhaler*, 2013,  
digital print,  
banner, stand,  
concrete, 210 ×  
90 × 11 cm

'Are we truly the crocodiles who look back into the abyss of time?' Werner Herzog asks at the end of his documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). His 3D exploration of the Chauvet Cave in southeastern France gives us a glimpse of the 30,000-year-old cave paintings. Of course, he can't help but add a Herzogian flourish, comparing the vulnerability of the nascent homo sapiens species who created these first paintings to a set of albino crocodiles spawned by a nearby nuclear power plant. Several hundred

kilometres west, in the valley of the Vézère River, the Lascaux Caves were previously thought to contain the oldest-known cave paintings, before the discovery of Chauvet in 1994. Georges Bataille, writing on Lascaux in 1955, saw the valley as the 'cradle of humanity' – not only where art was invented but where 'Lascaux Man' originated 'humanized life'.

In a former yarn factory just down the gurgling Vézère, the group exhibition 'O Chair O Flesh' posited an evolution gone awry, a parallel 'Lascaux Man' who is not a far cry from the cognizant mutant crocodiles evoked by Herzog. Here, Francis Upritchard's hybrid relic, *Sports Trophy* (2012), a golf club mounted on the wall with its end morphed into a bird's head, welcomed us into this being's otherworldly sitting room. Facing us was *Snake Man* (2012), a stuffed serpent body poised upright with a meekly serene human face poking out, its unsettling pairing only underscored by the quaintly domestic wooden stand it sat on. Around the corner, winding out from the wall was a wayward, thick ceramic pipe, coiled around itself on the floor before bending up toward us in an open hole. A breathy human-sounding hiss came from the darkness of its mouth: the opening and joints of *Bea McMahon's Utter Pipe* (2013) were encircled by red, lip-shaped rings.

The title of the show is a translational pun that is both a repetition ('chair' is French for 'flesh') and what sounds in English like a short ode to materiality. The group show of 13 artists marked a new phase for the artist-run Treignac Projet, under the direction of Matt Packer, former curator at the Lewis Glucksman Gallery in Cork, Ireland. Massive abandoned riverside buildings like the one that houses the Projet are common in the area, one of France's least populated regions, and Packer drew on this eerie sense of ruin, along with the region's largest remaining industry (beef), for the peculiarly meaty genesis of the exhibition.

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The show was patchy, sprawling and effusive, expanding in numerous directions at once to touch on evolution, maternity, labour, consumption and digitization. Several works marked some of the odd things homo sapiens have come to: Florian Roithmayr's Contact Lens and Inhaler (both 2013) were two tall, clear, pronouncedly bland advertising-style images mounted on concrete bases. Anne de Vries's Image Transfer (2012) was simply a still life of a pear, banana and apple on a white background, but small text overlaying the image disclosed its sources – from the fruit store to the digital camera to the ink on the printer paper. (The list didn't, however, include the frame that held the image.) It was at once too much and too little; at points it was as though Packer had included works that felt like stunted excerpts from larger projects and practices that in themselves add to the terrain proposed by the exhibition, but pared down here were simply fancy footnotes. The passing presentation of Xavier Ribas's Caliche (2010) – photographs of chunks of mined nitrate abstracted from his wider 'Traces of Nitrate' project – and Roithmayr's row of black and white photographs (Untitled [rock carvings], 2010) seemed like token nods to the nearby caves.

'O Chair O Flesh' was strongest when it gave in to its own weird logic. Huddled at the back of the gallery was what could be seen as this new Lascaux Man's study, a gathering of various portraits of 'humanized life'. Upritchard's Wanker (2012) was a thin, bow-legged

blue-grey man, concentrating intently on the act of his namesake. He faced the six detailed paintings Untitled I-VI (O Flesh) (2013) by Kaspar Oppen Samuelsen – surprising, carnivalesque scenes that were contemporary baroque filled with unsettling Lynchian moments: children in gremlin masks basking under pear trees, bearded truckers with bows and arrows. Alongside this was the running commentary of Allan Sekula’s video, *Performance Under Working Conditions* (1973), showing the artist and a friend gamely pretending to work in a kitchen, miming the movements while talking about dreams, unions and how crap their jobs are. Despite their disparate approaches, these works shared the tone of the best kind of caricature, which is an insistent realism. Humanity, it seems, is stagnant and not a little bit perverted. What ‘O Chair O Flesh’ gave us was an incomplete, fractured mirror of our own evolution: it’s odd, and sometimes funny, but it ain’t pretty. You might have to admit that Herzog was right.

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*frieze magazine*

First published in Issue 158

October 2013

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