

CRAWL SPACE

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...here, the consciousness does not result from the absence of something, but consists of the presence of a nothingness. Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding and, like Rousseau's longing, it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming is what we call literature.

Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*

In Thomas Bernhard's novels *Wittgenstein's Nephew* and *The Loser*, each narrator survives persecution, failure, and the lure of suicide, through the death of a surrogate – a close friend, whose trials in life parallel his own, and whose suicide exempts the narrator from undertaking that destiny himself. Through a blurred identification, which has been described as redemptive, these characters distance each book's narrator from a "direct confrontation with death" through their own demise. That confrontation is, in turn, displaced onto another surrogate, the novel itself, which takes both its form and vitality from this avenue of escape.

Adam McEwen's works, with their funereal subjects and leaden coloring, their functioning objects that make a mockery of service, their graphically blunt and endlessly appropriative humor, speak collectively of a similar bargain to be struck between elision and confrontation. Most clearly read in his funeral notices for the not-yet-dead, McEwen's use of the decoy provides an illusion which shifts and splinters at close range, yet, like Hitchcock's MacGuffin, retains an ability to redirect suspicion. Laden with chewed gum and bombsites or meticulously hand-rendered late night text messages, McEwen's project, like Bern-

hard's, crawls forward, freighted with intimacy, failure, the hope and burden of escape.

Jeff Koons, Kate Moss, Richard Prince, Bret Easton Ellis, Marilyn Chambers, Malcom McLaren - taken together the names of McEwen's subjects reconstitute a moment when the linked forces of art and intellect, decadence, sex and deconstructive critique created a sense of invincibility. Now, a generation removed from Koons' Ushering in of Banality, Ellis has gone on to write *Lunar Park* and *Imperial Bedrooms*, and the triumph of the banal must be seen in retrospect. As "original" appropriations, many artworks of the 80's were already recognized as a palimpsest for the inauthenticity of their era. A confident irony bristled through their borrowed languages, buoyed by the recent extension of postmodern discourse into visual art.

Although literary criticism had consistently engaged with allegorical strategies throughout the 20th century, especially through the work of authors such as Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man, the allegorical distance effected by reading "one text through another" appeared in direct opposition to the medium-specific concerns, immersive scale and directness of expression that had characterized modern abstract painting and sculpture at mid-century. Allegorical interpretation reemerged as a postmodern visual strategy in Craig Owens' 1980 essay *The Allegorical Impulse*, identified as a doubled reading which enabled viewers to account for the unexpected richness of experience provided by encounters with works composed of apparently simple images such as re-presented advertisements, texts, or common objects. That allegory appeared as a model for artistic practice at this historical juncture, a point at which the culture of commodification had decisively laid to rest the worker and student rebellions of the 60s, as well as the purity of abstract expression, reinforces Benjamin's vision of the allegory as ruin. Even more than Smithson's earthworks, Marlboro

Men, Conran's home décor and lines of Futura bold italic type became the artistic signifiers of a loss, which defined the semiotic gap between sign and myth at the core of an era.

Adam McEwen extends this legacy of allegorical appropriation by adding new layers of ruined meaning, as epitaphs, to the lives of those who have been the purveyors of ruined meaning themselves. Lifting the form and language of "real" newspaper obituaries, for artworks that will dispatch and memorialize his predecessors, McEwen's meticulously researched obituaries for these still-living figures (footnote: two subjects have since died) eschew allegory's potential for moralizing and judgment. The texts veer between the gravity of factual reportage, satisfyingly replete in the conclusion of a life, and the graceful inclusion of small details which would pass unnoticed but for their retrospective context. Like Bernhard, McEwen often describes elements of his own project when writing about others. The artist, whose works include store window signs declaring 'Sorry We're Dead' and 'Come In We're Cunts', would write about Kate Moss, "Her allure lay in a combination of reticence and recklessness. To audiences from 14 to 40, she acted as a screen onto which fantasies of desire and rebellion could be safely projected"; or "Prince's work was suffused with pathos and loss. A tragedean, he understood the point where the tragic and the comic meld. As he observed of a group of his canvases, 'The jokes are funny, but the paintings are not.' "

In his serial-killer accumulation of death notices, McEwen echoes not only Bernhard's mechanisms of displacement, but also the author's use of repetition as form. Bernhard's language repeats doubled and redoubled phrases many times, creating a rhythmic cadence and sense of forward movement which is often described as musical. This sensation of passion acts as a counterpoint to the unrelentingly grim content of the novels themselves. Similarly, as each of McEwen's memorials

seems to lead to the next, his body of work lends a sense of rightness and inevitability to the deaths he announces.

The presence of Jeff Koons and Richard Prince within McEwen's pantheon of obituaries points to the legacy of neo-geo-era replication in his machined graphite sculptures. While Prince's car hoods and Koon's combinatory basketballs required no real intervention by the artists, the objects' physical remove from the natural context (a basketball court, the remainder of the car etc...) renders them useless. Koons' bronze casts of floatation devices, including a lifeboat and aqualung, go further, reversing their functional purpose - you can have your lifesaving device, but it will not save you. McEwen's graphite sculptures are faithful replications of exceedingly banal (with one exception) objects, intended to be helpful - not in the dramatic helpfulness of a lifeboat but in the everyday manner of a utilitarian object: a plunger, an air conditioner, an ATM. These stand-ins, whose shape and form went previously unnoticed, are mute, without echo like Serra's cubes of solid steel. Materialist in this sense, they give no clue of an interior dimension, but silently withhold functionality, as a workman who stubbornly refuses to complete a task. Alienated from use, they congeal into eerily flawless pencil-grey forms that might be recalled from a dream or a nightmare.

McEwen's energy saving bulb, yoga mat, and stepstool, remade as sculptures, contribute to the critique and value of institutions, rather than to the comfort of households. The genealogy of minimal sculpture becomes newly apparent in his pristine basement doors, and *Font. Fountain* now reminds us of Duchamp, and Nauman. Yet something of the past remains, a trace which is reminiscent of Lacan's story of the sardine can floating in the ocean, about which a fisherman points out to him, "You see that sardine can? You see it? Well it doesn't see you!" While the fisherman finds this observation riotously amusing,

Lacan senses that the joke is at his expense. Among the working-class fisherman supplying the canneries, Lacan is out of place, his desire to be seen and recognized, in the Hegelian sense, merely cause for amusement. By selecting utilitarian subjects for his sculptures, McEwen opens a precipitous gap between servitude and mastery, which is not entirely closed by the work's elegance. Like the sardine can, his sculptures' functional heritage renders their self-possessed obliviousness *unheimlich*.

In his graphite framed pencil drawings of text messages McEwen becomes his own surrogate. The humor in these carefully rendered texts is distilled from the blend of obliviousness and sacrifice which runs throughout a practice which navigates the range of postures between submission and disdain with agility. As the presumed recipient of messages like, "Hey happy new year. Do u know anyone I can buy vicodin from?" or "Can't. Dad's shooting a porno in ohio, mom's flying to seattle", McEwen plays the role of untrustworthy confidant. The pleasure of this language hinges on betrayal, as does the survival of Bernhard's narrators. Through a body of work that presents itself as a storehouse of obituaries, funeral steles, epitaphs, foreclosures and apologies, the presence of nothingness has itself become an allegory.