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Pae White by David Pagel

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Interviews
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Pae White, *Hello Tokyo, Flower Bowl* , 1992, installation view. Courtesy Shoshana Wayne Gallery.

Pae White uses spider webs and hairnets, dead flies and cat whiskers to construct nearly invisible sculptures whose fragility is belied by their menacing undercurrents. Her list of co-lovers, among a lot of cheap jewelry on the gallery wall, and a series of home-made, plastic dipped dildoes suggests a preoccupation with sexuality that is at once playful and ambidextrous. Active and empowered, she uses her hands to create models of projects, eliciting from their viewers extreme, sometimes violent reactions.

David Pagel
I Could you say something about the implicit cruelty in some of your nearly invisible works?

Pae White
These pieces contain elements that refer to cruelty, some more overtly than others. One level of response seems to be to the materials themselves, in cat whiskers, flies, and spider webs. *LUMMBER11* which consists solely of cat whiskers, was interpreted as being the residue or trace of a cat who had been exterminated. Although I didn't exterminate a cat, but on an even more cowardly level. Making a piece of lace, however, involved a contrived kind of activity. Whatever drop out of cats naturally, and requires a great deal of close watching and careful searching to collect. When I decided to make *CLUMMBER11* I waited very patiently for my cats to release new crop of whiskers. The references to cruelty in that piece are interesting derive from the delicate quality of the materials I use. These materials are very fragile and require a lot of care and attention. Although the room initially appears to be empty, finding that it actually contains work seems to generate hostility. It is almost as if the pieces had been watching viewers, or making jokes at their expense. The frailty of my pieces suggests that they require careful handling, or careful viewing. I think that this causes them to elicit frustration, a resentment-filled reaction that often incites violence, as if they were asking for it.

DP
Like at Window on L.A., where your work got graffitied.

PW
Yes, maybe that was an attempt to give my pieces more weight.

DP
What about your piece, *Princess Pae*, where you strung flies, beads, and sequins together to spell out "Princess Pae"? It seemed that violence had taken place if only toward flies.

PW
This piece embodies an interesting dilemma. On one hand, you have the sequins and beads that are very decorative, and the flies are very delicate. On the other hand, the piece becomes a sort of crime management project. The sentiments of something being just a fly actually become more complicated. Especially since these flies, even though they are strung on a thread, aspire toward something beautiful in their attempt to mimic jewelry. Where the net cruelty can be found in the ambivalence value of me being only interested in flies for their ability to accommodate a needle and the potential for their bodies to make a line on the wall.

DP
But didn't you set traps to execute flies en masse?

PW
I used the very simple two-piece Tupperware trapping system designed by Steve Kochler, an entomology consultant I met in the process of my research. It's a very passive aggressive technique, in which flies, attracted to rotten meat, fly into small holes in Tupperware units, feed but are too drunk to escape. The mechanism allows you to watch this process as well, a fly death camp of sorts. Yet the flies were very meaningless to me. In fact, the most interesting aspect of this project was the relationship I developed with Steve Kochler. He is a friend of Mike Kuchar. He's an incredible bug specialist who has hundreds of chirping bugs in his living room, a maggot farm in his refrigerator, and many close friends that happen to be exotic spiders. I suddenly found myself becoming this amateur fly connoisseur. For *Princess Pae* I couldn't use just any flies, but only those of quality. Unexpectedly, this piece became a negotiation of what determines quality in a fly. And the very fact that I'm using the word "quality" in one about flies, and actually feeling them with the subject, I think what interests me about that piece.

DP
What makes for quality in a fly?

PW
Their niceness and metallic sheen. About one in twenty had the right stuff. In fact, I have thousands of nylon flies in storage.

DP
Do you feel that your works cause viewers to feel violated or cheated?

PW
Very expansive. "Is that art?" is not unconscious. Part of what interests me is my works' production value, or lack of production value. I've never equated labor intensity to value. Often, the process of making for me is the process of waiting—waiting for cats to lose a few whiskers, waiting for sunflowers to dry out, for flies to get hungry, and for spiders to build webs. There is not an aesthetic of advance in my work, but the labor is always present. It's simply carried out by others. Maybe this is another way of dealing with violence. Although I'm very interested in violence and or something I still find it interesting that so much empathy can be projected onto a dead fly, or the strange possibility that it might, for whatever reason, be unfair for me to remove some spiders from my home, or prematurely end the already short life of a fly. It's like projecting the tragic onto a used cotton ball.

DP
Is this related to the way you established value in *Rejecta/Lovers*, a piece in which you created four categories and assigned objects and prices to them?

PW
Yes, the labor issue really comes into play here. That piece concerned a proposal about my ability to receive pleasure, and the designs which spread this and best.

DP
What were some of those designs?

PW
Pairs of sex shells wrapped with hair ties; a grouping of dog toys; a pie bone from a seal, fake brick and candy; dried tobacco; fabric and toilet paper tubes; pretty much anything I had around my house.

DP
Did you spend a lot time crafting them?

PW
Just enough to do the job.

DP
And these make-shift cold-shaped "dildoes" were rubber coated?

PW
I dipped all the configurations into liquid plastic tool dip. It gave everything a smooth surface. This plastic dip also had the potential to be very sensuous, but I didn't emphasize that in these pieces. I felt this alluision to sculpture was appropriate since the majority of the objects were placed in bins divided in terms of their degrees of rejectedness or failure. Since the objects were supposedly useless to me, I thought that maybe they could perform better as sculptures.

Pae White, Lovers, 1991, plastic dipped objects in case.

DP
What about the successes, the "lovers?"

PW
Those objects were separated from the "rejects" and placed in a glass display case. They were no different from the "rejects" at the time, except that they had been anointed in a case and labeled "lovers." This is all that it took to facilitate an erotic proposition onto a field or an irregularity.

DP
What about the wear and tear of the encased "lovers"?

PW
This was completely artificial. I dragged them through a parking lot to get the effect. I was interested in the implication that the value of the object was determined by the amount of use it had received. I wanted to transform the object into a kind of fetish object with a job, like a can opener. The only traces on the "lovers" were those left behind, as if they were physically antiqued through overuse.

DP
Did people believe you actually masturbated, or tried to masturbate with these objects?

PW
Another interesting part of *Rejecta/Lovers* was the possibility of me actually using them. For me, the piece was about the freedom necessary to suggest a model of queer/heuristic quality control. I was interested in the possibility of applying this oppressive system to my own sex life.

DP
The "rejects" time were each accompanied by a stack of picture books. How did they function in this system?

PW
The books were meant to provide information about who is playing good here, who is distinguishing between rejects and lovers. Each image represented an ideal that in the presence of the "Lovers" and "Rejects" was to have erotic potential.

DP
What were some of the images selected?

PW
It was pretty much all over; there was a picture of barley sticks from a candy recipe, Mayan Vaimam's *Zen Garden*, an image of a tomato, Barry Le Va's *Six Brown Lines*, a sapphire from a Sotheby's catalogue, a color combination from a design book, a George Nelson lamp, etc. I guess I was interested in the possibility that the objects could be read as a kind of aesthetic, yet a matrix through which one could discuss other forms of value, form, sequence, quantity, etc. The books were separated in terms of the degrees for my erotic desire of each image. What would it be like to experience a color combination sexually?

DP
And how did your viewers respond to your categorization?

PW
People reacted interestly to the separation among *the Rejecta/Stone*, *Rejecta/More*, and *Rejecta/The Rest*. Some viewers projected a lot of empathy onto objects in "The Most" rejected category. I felt that I was being empathy for the failed objects. Some stronger were the sentiments that I was a bitch to be so cruel to these plastic objects that I, after all, had made.

DP
Rejecta/Lovers was shown with two visible pieces like *CLUMMBER11* What are some of the relationships between them?

PW
I actually see them as elements of a larger piece, the installation itself. I like the idea that there may be no immediate relationships among some cat whiskers and a row of bins and a book. I never ever cared to be prescriptive of another, that's why I get uncomfortable when I find myself being prescriptive. I want to be open to the possibility of relationships. Besides, I'm not really interested in tight relationships. Eight in the sense of them being completely autonomous units where all the meaning is accounted for, but that makes sense is boring for me. I'm much more interested in contingencies rather than autonomies.

DP
Your works often expose or reveal one kind of intimacy while concealing or diverting another. How does autobiography fit into your art-making?

PW
For me there's no difference between sharing something with the art world or not. Because since something enters the world of art everything changes, the terms are different. I agree that my work begins with a framework of exposure—sometimes even exhibitionism. For me, this just means something is being put out. I'm very, very, very, very exhibitionistic when I start processing information through my "experimental" situation. The focus on myself invariably shifts at some point, or at least hopefully it does. My computer piece, *Wet Nurse*, is a really good example of this.

DP
How so?

PW
This piece went through many transformations. Initially I wanted to make a video or a photograph that illustrated a stranger's sexual fantasy. I wanted to work as a production designer who would translate a script. It was a very sexual process because I wanted to treat it as a job. I wasn't interested in my own fantasies, I was interested in the fantasies of strangers—deals—subtle differences among colors, the light filtered, the type of carpeting, or if there was carpeting at all. I placed an ad in a "swingers" magazine, requesting very detailed scripts. I got over 70 responses, but nobody really understood what was looking for. This turned out to be fess, because the point I was losing interest in the original project. I had just purchased a computer and was beginning to familiarize myself with it. I was fascinated by the possibilities of computer graphics and created a huge file. I ran them through all the different grammar checks—Business, Advertising, Fiction, Basic, Academic—and tried to change the tone of the fantasies. Then I exercise them, mixed them up, and distorted them graphically. I was never interested in showing the letters. That would be too literal. I'm more interested in the relation of a computer-couple who's awake into. In a way, this was my way of using these people, but in many ways they had used me too. The best part of the project, however, was discovering the snapshot option on the computer. You hit three buttons and the computer takes a snapshot of whatever is on the screen. Essentially the computer takes a snapshot of itself from inside itself which can then be processed from the cartridge as Kodak color output. So my piece ended up being photographs of snapshots.

DP
Do your own fantasies or desires usually enter your work this obliquely?

PW
Well, once, when I was working on a commercial for a German brandy, we were trying to capture the look of an old Bleu Ivan. As a consequence, I had to spend a lot of time looking at Bleu Ivan. I wasn't sure that I had ever seen some of these atavisms, but they are very difficult to find. I was only interested in the albums for their covers. I didn't believe the music inside would help me appreciate the graphics. In fact, I have no relationship to the music at all. I really don't care for blues and jazz. At any rate, at that time I was very interested in photographs of the nineteenth-century people who embalmed loving perfection. I was only to find a few by chance and discovered that I spent a lot of time just looking at them, or thinking about them, even when I wasn't around them. It was like having a form affair with the beauty of these objects. For some reason, I thought it was important that I merge my two love interests, Bleu Ivan albums and George Nelson. So I substituted an image from an album with a photograph of a lamp I had made. The lamp was made from the top of a cluster of lamps with the text that read, "Ze Quest is over" or "Now Can I Be Like You?" referring to both the albums and the lamps. Another text referred to the spider plane on the floor, reading "I Would Never Hurt the Spider." It became an inappropriate confession or apology. The most beautiful album covers were even more reduced in the sense that they were simply shrink-wrapped piece of colored foam core. In the presence of the "Lovers" and "Rejects" these objects were transformed into something more elaborate. I think these were my favorites.

David Pagel is an art critic and instructor who writer for the Los Angeles Times and is a contributing editor to Art issues. He is currently curating an exhibition about beauty for the Fallows of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and working on a book that examines the availability of art history for the present.

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Where on the spectrum of loyalty and betrayal does song begin? And where does it end? I think each writer has to decide this over and over.
— Sharon Olds

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