

We Detoxify The Inner Self

by
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Curatorial Brief

Beauty, like the roses it describes, is a thorny word. In contemporary society, it is a sensitive concept, much politicised and often associated with women, the media and the commercial world. In the world of contemporary art, the idea is equally if not more prickly. While the general public might easily relate beauty to art, beauty is however much disdained, derided, and dismissed in an art world where western ideals dominate. After conceptual art in the West had denounced sensory pleasures to extoll instead ideas and immateriality of the art object in the 1960s, one risks being superficial in speaking about beauty in their creative endeavours. As the preeminent American art critic Arthur Danto describes, "beauty had almost entirely disappeared from artistic reality in the twentieth century, as if attractiveness was a stigma, with its crass commercial implications". (Danto, 2003)

Nevertheless, despite the controversies, the pursuit for beauty in human history is intriguingly perpetual and relentless. Even the art world did not manage to cleanly sever ties with it.

With an intention to provoke thoughts surrounding the idea of "beauty", A Beauty Centre is constructed as a twofold world where the retail saloon industry and the art gallery as an institution overlaps and meets. On the one hand, there is the rather mischievous mimicry of a retail space; on the other there is the actuality of the art exhibition itself taking place within the gallery compound. The two worlds collapse into one as the system of the saloon as a site for the negotiation of beauty for vanity slips into the framework of a gallery where sensuous objects created by the artist are being consumed by the gallery goers. By juxtaposing the two, the artist poses questions and manifests the hidden affinity between the beauty business and the art world.

In Chinese philosophy "beauty" is associated with "truth" and "goodness". In Plato's Symposium,

"beauty" is further taken to be the ultimate object of "love"; the pursuit has its root in human's carnal wants, but concludes itself by embracing the remote "form" of things that are beautiful. In the art world, contemporary writers lament that this idea of beauty as the "object of love" has been significantly diminished in 20th century art (Nehamas, 2007). In A Beauty Centre, with a series of quirky forms situated within a staged environment, it is interesting to see the artist's apparent fascination with form, materiality, and space. In his own words, he wishes to "explore our primal desire for material and spiritual satisfaction within the absurd world of delusion." (Yeo, 2015)

Arthur Danto once proposed for "a detoxification of beauty in contemporary art", contending that works of art are capable of embodying "beauty" that operates from within its own conceptual framework (Danto, 2002). A Beauty Centre may be seen as an ambitious project with agenda comparable to this idea. Complete with a pseudo parlor, an online counterpart, and the operation of the entire scheme as an art show, the exhibition not only makes enquiries into the notions of beauty in various dimension, it also seeks to define the boundaries of materiality and non-materiality, and explores possibilities from which beauty and materiality could transform one's perceptual experiences.

Tan Yen Peng
Co-curator

References:
Danto, Arthur Coleman. The abuse of beauty: Aesthetics and the concept of art. Open Court Publishing, 2003.
Nehamas, Alexander. "Only a promise of happiness." Princeton: Princeton UP (2007).
Yeo, Chee Kiong. Artist's Statement, Exhibition Proposal - A Beauty Centre. (2015).

Room 1 & 2

The Dream Lady Series

'The Dream Lady' is a female figure formed by the myriad and fleeting bubbles. Under the reflection of the sleek stainless steel, what we see is fantasized sophistication while underneath the pink fresh lies real obesity.

In transforming the obese figure to a transcendental, beautiful body, I explore human being's primal desire within the absurd world of delusion. It is all about contemporary "human nature".

Room 3.1

I am crawling inside the body of a black serpent named 'Night'

"If you are going through hell, keep going."
- Winston Churchill

I do not know if hell exists, but every soul must have encountered some hellish moments and experienced spiritual purification. Based on Churchill's famous words, I created 'I am Crawling Inside the Body of a Black Serpent Named 'Night' to keep me moving forward.

Room 3.2

I am hibernating inside the body of a grey serpent named 'Medusa'

Through recycling the season sales fashion items collected from retail stores, this show is an assemblage of my residency experience in Paris and my practice as a sculptor in Singapore. It is an attempt to translate my Paris impressions by 'sewing' two or more pieces of the same fashion item into a new piece of work.

Room 4

Nine Shadows in A Meeting

is a set of nine photographic images presented on the plasma. Each screen represents a stop-motion shadow that turns gradually and intermittently left, front, to right every second. It imitates an online dialogue session.

In this cyber era, everyone uses a virtual identity for communication. The virtual identity is abstract and mysterious like a shadow, and hardly real. In this work, the shadows are each an avatar wearing various ceramic wigs that symbolise their personal status respectively. It also explores the state of sculpture within the virtual world in this new age.

The Six Overlapping Table

is placed with the nine shadows to allude to the classical painting of Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper.

Constructed to contain liquid with objects floating above, the stillness of the 'table surface' is frequently disturbed by the slowly moving things. The artist has allowed solid to permeate to liquid, and thus challenged the viewers' usual experience in perceiving the known.

Room 6

A Day Without A Tree

Are habit and anaesthesia two things of the same kind?
Is existence a logical consequence?

Here, the artist explores the certainty of preset positions and pre-determined results we face in our everyday life and environment.

‘A Day’ is meant to be an ambience.

‘Without’ is the non-existence of ‘existence’ in one’s conscious mind.

‘A Day without A Tree’ is an event happening and existing in broad daylight.

Perhaps you have not noticed, or maybe you have – but things may not be as you have imagined...

In the original version of the work exhibited at the National Museum of Singapore in 2007, the artist “melted” the rotunda area of the NMS building. The columns are subtly deformed and “spills” surrounded the floor area.

In the version for A Beauty Centre at NAFA, the artist “melts” the gallery’s wooden floor. The illusory spill is a visual play that puts the viewers’ perception in question as they each take time to encounter and negotiate with the perceivable change.

Room 7.1

Circle Work

by Ruth Barker

‘Circle Work’ is a new performance by Ruth Barker. Originally conceived as a séance, the work has evolved into a shamanic address to the artist’s own past, delivered from within an improvised paper landscape.

‘Circle Work’ extends Barker’s interest in autobiography, feminist writing practice, and unconscious associations, through a new work that is Barker’s most ambitious to date. Developed specifically for CCA’s Theatre, this complex and immersive experience features spoken word, installation and costume.

Metamorphosis 1. Descent.

Picture me:
Naked

On the Scarborough sand,
Pink spade in hand,
And a red sugar sweet on a string around my neck,
As I dig to the centre of the earth.

Aeons I dig.
Further and further
Until my palms ache
And the sunburn on my shoulders
Stings with sweat.
Then I dig deeper,
Past centuries of time,
Past sense and words
And cigarettes and continents.
Until I sit in a pit.
I shift my grip
On the pink plastic handle.
I carry on. Though there is

Sand in my spit,
There is sand in the corners of my eyes,
There is sand in the gap between my teeth.
And I squat in the sand hole,
And feel myself dissolving into sand.
My red sugar sweet is coated and inedible
Resting like a bloody wound against my breastbone.

And there is something here.
There is something.
I’ve found it. (The core!)
But this time it is only
A plastic bag filled yesterday
With someone else’s picnic lunch of orange peel,
stale crusts and, falling at my sandy feet, the
desiccated centre of an apple.

Metamorphosis 2. Animal.

At the age of eight
I chose to shed my human skin,
And so become an animal.

On my way to school
I wore my fetlocks and a blaze,
High withers, and clean pasterns.
The strap of my schoolbag
Cut awkward across my dun hocks.
My foot, on the kerb
As I waited for the lollipop lady,
Was hoofed along my distal phalanx.

In the playground, I whickered
At the tug of my invisible saddle,
And felt the weight of my girl self
Borne on my own horse back.
My hands were tight on my own reins
And my neck arched, chin brought in
By the pull of the bit.
The bars of my mouth
Rubbed on the steel of the snaffle.

This slippage was all of myself,
Inside and out.
And as familiar
As the briars of blonde horsehair
Caught in the teeth of my comb

Metamorphosis 3. Vegetable.

Couched between vehicular debris and cheese and
onion evidence,
Encircled by cow parsley and the seed ejaculations of
the purple balsam,
Is a thick and muddy pond.

On the surface of the water grows a net of vivid
duckweed.
Below this, clogging the transparent gills of
sticklebacks and minnows,
Is blanket algae, woven inches thick and finely
filamentous.
But in the silt below this scum grow the iron hard
roots of the world tree.
Immense, they draw down to centre of the earth.
Immense, they run up to the pythonic oak
That stands eternal at the stagnant basin’s edge.

As I stand on the bank, ankle deep in mud,
I look up to see a human figure
Nailed to the tree.
His black-wrapped coat flutters in the cold wind.
His arm is pinned to the living bough.
His blood and bone are bonded to the bark.
Outlined against the pale sky
He hangs, immobile,
Blown to emptiness by the wuthering.

I witness. But I am wrong. I look again.
The figure shifts within my optic nerve,
Resolves itself, and changes operation.
For a moment I can see two images at once,
But then the trick is blown

And the world reasserts its line,
Becoming, at last,
Only a black plastic bag
Caught in the branch of a tree.

Metamorphosis 4. Mineral.

Crystals grow five sided, in my dream.

And a diamond sits on a mirror,
Caught and watched.
They have both reflected everything
Too late.

Metamorphosis 5. Ascent.

In 1950 I lay on my back on the lawn.
It was late, and the summer night closed above me
Like a glittering dome.
Below me, the bones of the earth pressed into my
spine.

I close my own eyes now,
In séance at last: communing with the dead.

At the edge of my hearing is the low hoot
Of a barge turning on the distant canal.
There is a void of silence that moves
Around the garden. Blacker than black
A cat fits itself against the night as
Furred absence, weightless meat in motion.

In 1950 I wrote:
*Making her silken journeys in the dark the cat seems
as remote as the creatures that moved here before
there were people. By night all cats are ancient, and
move in ancient worlds. Perfectly formed while men
were still brutal, they are the continued presence of
the past.*

And then:

*Once in the spring I stood at the edge of some
Norfolk ploughland at midday, listening to the mating
calls of plovers. It seemed to me then that I had my
ear to a great spiral shell, and that these sounds
rose from it. The shell was a vortex of time, and the
birds themselves took shape, species after species,
with their songs spiralling upwards ever since. Now
that I stood at the lip of the shell, they had ascended
to reach my present ear.*

Today’s observation is only
That on the fly leaf of this book,
My mother has written her mother’s phone number,
in pencil.
Lower down the page, and much later, I have put my
name.

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