

Lynne Marsh

Taking Positions









History as Context

Rich and complex associations of cultural-political themes are present in Lynne Marsh's installation 'Taking Positions' at Tintype.¹ These include: art and propaganda under the Third Reich; the drama of the artist/model relation in the studio; the tensions between non-objective Modernist abstraction and figurative art; the idealisation of feminine form as the dominant prerogative of the masculine gaze. Marsh's installation, including sculpture, film and an architectural use of colour plays out the strains inherent in these different dualities drawing them together within the contemporary perspective of an installation.

The title 'Taking Positions' refers to the constrained readings attached to specific poses, taken from classical-fascist figurative sculptures by Arno Breker. Marsh worked with dancers to re-model these poses, filming them in their original context, the studio used by Breker in Berlin during the Second World War. In a more provocative sense the title of the exhibition suggests the viewer also takes a 'position' to these figures. There is an important question here about how contemporary art deals responsibly with historic forms, figures, and architectures that memorialise repressive regimes.

To address these questionable tropes underlying legacies for the Twentieth Century, Marsh contrasts references to Breker with references to another artist of the same period, Josef Albers. German political discourse during the prelude to the Second World War can be narrativised as split along very definite lines but, in the contemporary context of Marsh's exhibition at Tintype, it is worth taking into account that Breker, with

connections to the art-world in Paris, and Albers at the Bauhaus, were both engaged with modernist conceptions of socially progressive practice. Modernism itself remains tainted in the post Second World War period, as facilitator and witness of terrible events: Bauhaus aesthetics also supported styles of body and health, architecture and modular organisational structures whose logic runs in parallel with the development of National Socialism.

Marsh emphasises liaison rather than difference. This approach brings to mind the statement of Karl Marx: that in order to make meaningful criticism of social conditions that appear to be inert and oppressive 'you have to teach the petrified stones how to dance by singing them their own song'. David Riff explains that Marx is saying "The nebulous realm of ideology is easy to criticise... but the real conditions it obscures are petrified, frozen, motionless. That is, historically shaped, politically negotiable conditions appear as trans-historical non-negotiable truths".² The effect of petrification resists productive questioning. Marsh presents the historic stereotypes of Breker's sculpture through a series of collages, in which photographs of the different poses are isolated, cut out, and stuck firmly onto images of the studio during its recent renovation. The static postures hold specific ideological connotations whose meanings are intensified through the knowledge that Hitler appreciated them; Breker's studio was provided by the state in 1937 for the purpose of their production and display.

The use of film is significant. Marsh uses the camera critically; an element of real-time, the movement of the figures before and after the pose contrasts with the ideal moment of stasis. The slow panning of the camera over the figure and the desire





of the viewer to see the pose heightens the tension between sculptural stasis and the ordinary movements of the performers. Abstract configurations of rectilinear colour planes are used by Marsh to cut across both the moving figures and the ostensibly representational purpose of their recording in film. The planes hold references to colour samples schematised by Albers in 'The Interaction of Colour' made in post-war New York; Marsh then schematised the colours again using Pantone samples from 2000–2018. These colour schemes were effectively schematised again by the Munsell-like algorithms of colour adjustment underlying modern digital production values. These time-shifts in technologies hold very different associations from the traumatic origins of Breker's work, but Marsh is aware that colour definitions are in themselves the subject of 'regimes'.

The moving planes of colour act, says Marsh, as an 'antidote' to problematic aspects present in the twentieth century history of academic figuration in painting and sculpture. By displacing those traditions through the use of abstract montage and digital technology Marsh reflects on the potential to displace ideological residues underlying aesthetic regimes. The colour relations analysed by Albers connote unstable contingencies which, in Marsh's montage, are used to unsettle the meanings of petrification. The saturated qualities of colour in the abstract panels, but also the 'real' colours of the model's clothes, and the pink of the monitor's supports, are used to re-contextualise the readings of the movement of the models, personal or acculturated.

Other instabilities are created in the installation. The full-frontal array of moving images is presented on three flat-screen monitors



whose wide horizontal format is dizzyingly rotated to vertical. The monitors themselves are supported on strangely cubistic pink easels which contribute a different abstract dimension to the reproduced filmic colours of the videos. The gallery itself becomes a maze, through which the viewer is free to move from front to back. Looking from the back to the front of the gallery the viewer finds another disruption of ideal presentation, the blank, black back-screen of the monitor becomes included as part of the sculpture and a translucent layer of yellow plastic across the gallery window distorts or scotomises the vision of the Essex Road. Marsh's installation appropriates this view through the window as a real-time filmic intervention, as if residues of traumatic elements underlying the video images remain- in daily experience.

Layers of actual and phantasmagoric histories are interwoven. Albers' is an artist whose formalist paintings are now being re-evaluated for their sensitive, sensuous qualities while Breker's sculptures of the Berlin period survived the war but were then largely destroyed by the allies. The Berlin studio itself was closed for some years while a decision was taken about how to re-occupy the space, and Marsh's own occupation of that space becomes part of a programme for its cultural resentment, as studio and as show-place. The history of German sculpture during the Third Reich has also been subject to re-evaluation, and this, says Marsh, involves re-viewing the individual sculptures through an aesthetic rather than political lens. The installation title is taken from the name of an exhibition of 2001, 'Taking Positions, Figurative Sculpture and the Third Reich'.³ Believing that there was a large and important middle ground between the 'degenerate' and the 'Nazi', the curators of the exhibition set out to uncover how

sculptural representation of the single figure, notably in bronze, became a vehicle by which to express political views associated with fascist propaganda.⁴

The exhibition takes a more nuanced view of sculpture from this period, one of understanding the role of the individual artist under the impact of a set of social contingencies which have fed negatively into the subsequent reception of their work. 'Taking Positions' attempts to re-purpose the post-war rejection of the petrified forms of the past, not by avoiding their status as rejected, but including it within the contemporary situation. This involves a re-evaluation which brings historic certainty into modern question. Re-processing the images renders them less certain, differently focussed. The awareness of historic sweep in 'Taking Positions' is challenging; it emerges from a sensitive response to a personal history of being in Berlin. The outcome is intriguing: abstraction has not proved to be the final antidote to ideological representation, nor has scientific analysis of colour choice avoided political association. Marsh has carefully constructed an argument for the value of their contingency to subvert perceived regimes.

Joan Key, London, October 2018

REFERENCES

1. Tintype, London, 13th September to October 12th 2018. Quotations from Lynne Marsh were taken from notes published to accompany the Tintype Exhibition
2. David Riff, Was Marx a Dancer? in E-flux Journal #67, November 2015
3. This was a touring exhibition presented in association with the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds; the Gerhard Marks Haus, Bremen and the Georg Kolbe Museum, Berlin, 2001–02
4. See Taking Positions, Figurative Sculpture and the Third Reich' Henry Moore Institute, 26th May – 26th August 2010, <https://www.henry-moore.org/shop/books-and-publications/exhibition-catalogues/product/taking-positions> consulted 30th July 2019

LYNNE MARSH is a Canadian artist, currently living and working in Los Angeles. She received her BFA at Concordia University in Montreal and her MA at Goldsmiths, University of London. From 2001 – 2016 she lived and worked in both London and Berlin.

Solo exhibitions of her work have been presented by Berlinische Galerie, Berlin (2017); Opera North, Leeds (2016); fig-2 at ICA, London (2015); Scrap Metal, in association with the Toronto International Film Festival (2014); and Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (2008). Her work has also been featured at La Biennale de Montréal (2014); The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (2012); 53 Art Museum, Guangzhou (2011); Manif d'art–The Québec City Biennial (2010); and the 10th International Istanbul Biennial (2007).

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107 Essex Road,
London N1 2SL, UK
www.tintypegallery.com

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