The Dross of Humanity: Justin Matherly at Marginal Utility

The future of the world is not my future. ‘Show me a mousehole and I’ll fuck the world.’ (Railworker at the coal-strip-mine Klettwitz, GDR) – Heiner Müller

You are the excrement which fell on the earth through the Devil’s anus. – Martin Luther

Justin Matherly’s recent exhibition at Marginal Utility Gallery—Would That You Were The Last Of The Filth Which You Had To Remove / Why Does Your Flesh Shit?—centers around the sculpture, knowing even the grass We must tear it up so it will stay green. The fragmentary title of the sculpture alludes to the last lines of the opening choral ode of Heiner Müller’s Mauser, whereas the title of the show stages a collision between passages from Brecht’s Die Maßnahme and Müller’s Hercules 5. Matherly’s idiom highlights what Sade lies perhaps in his literally depiction of characters forced to consume, to devour, everything—even the undevourable: SHIT. Matherly, like Müller, remains committed, beyond all belief, to an art that cannot exist, to a being whose flesh shits, to a being who is contingent. By translating the sculptural form into his own idiomatic use of materials (cement, the use of tree-gators to create a mold, the adoption of medical prostheses to create a pedestal), he foregrounds the structural fragility of the sculptural body and the inaccessibility of the Winckelmannian ideal. Rather than contemplate the torso with ‘a quiet eye’ in order to discern the ‘mysteries of art,’ Matherly’s idiom highlights what Winckelmann referred to as the sculpture’s ‘mangled and mutilated’ quality. This effect is heightened not only by literalizing its crippled character, but also by hollowing the sculpture out. The torso is less a ruin as a carcass. The density of references (to the Lehrstück, to Winckelmann and German Romanticism, to Sade, Artaud and Eisenstein, if we include the three ink-jet transfer prints) may seduce the spectator in an attempt to fully contextualize the sculpture but in reality serve the purpose of interrupting any tendency to approach the work formally. Already at this level, we see the subversive logic that operates on multiple levels of Matherly’s project.

Most immediately the sculpture reads as a grotesque and even comic parody of a neo-classical gesture: the literal attempt to imitate the Greeks could not proceed literally through the appropriation of the Greek style. As he wrote in Reflections on the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Ancient Greeks (1755): “the only way for us [Moderns] to become great and even, if possible, inimitable, is through the imitation of the ancients.” As is well known, Winckelmann’s concept of imitation (mimesis) does not suggest that we ‘copy’ the ancients literally, for they themselves are inimitable. Yet, at the same time, he establishes the Greeks as an insuperable ideal.

For Winckelmann the torso is the perfect embodiment of the ideal unity of sensible and intelligible, nature and artifice. For Matherly, it is not ideal unity that is to be imitated, but its inimitability. His appropriation of the sculpture does not seek to retrieve its ideality, but rather foregrounds that—in Müller’s idiom—could be altgierig (greedy for the old). Matherly’s interest in Sade lies perhaps in his literally depiction of characters forced to consume, to devour, everything—even the undevourable: SHIT. Matherly, like Müller, remains committed, beyond all belief, to an art that cannot exist, to a being whose flesh shits, to a being who is contingent. By translating the sculptural form into his own idiomatic use of materials (cement, the use of tree-gators to create a mold, the adoption of medical prostheses to create a pedestal), he foregrounds the structural fragility of the sculptural body and the inaccessibility of the Winckelmannian ideal. Rather than contemplate the torso with ‘a quiet eye’ in order to discern the ‘mysteries of art.’ Matherly’s idiom highlights what Winckelmann referred to as the sculpture’s ‘mangled and mutilated’ quality. This effect is heightened not only by literalizing its crippled character, but also by hollowing the sculpture out. The torso is less a ruin as a carcass.

Yet, the purpose of the subversion of the Greek ideal is not merely to debase art’s pretension to spiritual elevation. The sculpture is to function, as the title suggests, as a Lehrstück (quite literally, a learning piece). For although the title of the sculpture alludes to play Mauser, the reference to Hercules 5 in the title suggests

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