When the Crack Precedes the Vessel: Louis Osmosis's Recent Sculpture
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Early last year in a group show at Shoot the Lobster in Los Angeles, Louis Osmosis presented a free-standing satellite incised with the central figure from Henri Matisse's 1947 pochoir, *Icarus*. His cutout featured a truncated version of the earlier print with Icarus's right leg pruned above the would-be ankle, his fleshier left flank abbreviated just north of the knee. The amputated edges of both legs, along with Icarus's outstretched arms, were cropped in line with the contour of the satellite dish, emphasizing the latter as an idiosyncratic type of pictorial support. The silhouette, then, was not figured as the breakage from Icarus's plummet down to earth ("the imaged failure of a vertical ascent," as the artist writes elsewhere in these pages) but was instead a *figured* absence. Osmosis is not the first to harness the cut as a means of figuration—Jackson Pollock's voided figures from the 1950s come to mind here—let alone the more ambiguous evocations provided by slashes and amorphous voids. From Lucio Fontana's *tagli* to Lee Bontecou's relief sculpture, cuts yonic and ovular have been mined for their morphological, libidinal and [outer]spatial implications. Matisse himself, of course, is probably the artist most synonymous with the cutout; and it is in regard to this earlier artist's activity that Osmosis's work generates its clever calculation. To make a pochoir like *Icarus*, Matisse cut various shapes out of colored paper—creating absented doubles in their wake—arranging each into an ensemble that served as preparatory maquettes for the final print. If these maquettes depended on the positive form of the cutout, like the winsome depiction of Icarus's fateful fall, Osmosis opts instead for the cast-off negative, the scission, caesurae. At Shoot the Lobster, visitors found a cutout of a cutout, a type of double negation that, rather than void the original print in parricidal subversion, monumentalized its presence through the guise of a wound, a permanent yet spectral signified. In the shadow of Icarus, Henri jockeyed for position as a sort of representational subconscious. Ventriloquizing presence and absence, positive and negative in the style of a structural linguist, Osmosis created a closed loop of signification, one in which Matisse was summoned as an inescapable rection for the work's satellite signaling.

This almost kitschy use of citation is indicative of Osmosis's interest in the work of Rachel Harrison, whose flirtatious play with fine art materials—paintings, photographs, videos—as well as eccentric accoutrements—thermostats, wigs, vacuum cleaners—results in a "remediated" sculpture, three-dimensional environments whose medium-specificity becomes denatured by their dense referential matrices.[1] Harrison's 2010 work *Siren Serenade* is probably the most obvious counterpart to Osmosis's work, with its satellite fixed atop a jagged black base and small stool. Isa Genzken's *Weltempfänger* sculptures from the late 1980s—concrete blocks affixed with radio antennas—and later works like *Geschwister* (2004), characteristic in its strewn array of industrial

[1] See David Joselit, "Untranslatable," in *Rachel Harrison: Life Hack*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman and David Joselit (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2019), 251-258.

and dumb materials, make for similarly useful comparisons to *Satellite*. Both of these artists strategically orchestrate material dispersion, creating syntagmatic constructions in which meaning emerges through the disjuncture and unexpected alliances of their various inputs. Like Robert Rauschenberg's mid-century combines that led Leo Steinberg towards his theory of the "flatbed picture plane," these sculptures evoke "receptor surfaces on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received," yet arrayed across re-verticalized, often anthropomorphic supports.[2] If Rauschenberg's works translated "the ceaseless inflow of urban message, stimulus and impediment" into a postmodern pictorial strategy, and Harrison and Genzken embrace a similar sociocultural embeddedness that erodes sculptural autonomy, with Osmosis this sense of porosity weaves a different and altogether less hopeful affective charge.[3] Whereas the aforementioned artists seem to welcome fragmentation and its opaque poetics, in *Satellite* we see Osmosis framing citation as a brand, a burn, one in which Matisse appears as a site of incurable loss.

Satellite returns in the present exhibition at Kapp Kapp situated within a group of four near clones, each dish provided its own lacerated illustration taken from Matisse's visual lexicon (a second work, *Small Crate*, features another satellite singled out on its own pedestal). In preparing the exhibition design of "PLEASE IT IS MAKING THEM THANKS:)," Osmosis decided to arrange these satellites as a small chorus installed on a packing crate. The crate he eventually found for the job functions as a substantial plywood pedestal whose previous tenure as a vessel for packing and shipping furniture/art objects doubles down on the satellites' evocation of connectivity. Plucked from the loading dock of his studio, the box contains scars and stamps of its various peregrinations: "fragile" appears several times across its surface, arrows direct us towards its top, and various serial numbers seem to formulate a map of its transit. Most notably, upon closer inspection we discover a shipping label from DHL that reveals the box was most recently sent to artist Jenny Holzer. This is purely happenstance; however, Osmosis's *objet trouvé* provides another instance of the artist's confrontation with a manipulated field of creative possibility (this one more spontaneous than dutifully modeled) in which he is forced to work and speak through a looming interlocutor. At first glance, as with *Satellite*, this seems to result in a representational logic—as Rosalind Krauss writes in relation to the visual systems laid out by Jacques Lacan and Roger Caillois—defined by a "mastery from without, imposed on the subject who is trapped in a cat's cradle of representation, caught in a hall of mirrors, lost in a labyrinth."[4]

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[2] Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 84. Lisa Lee also relates Genzken's sculpture to Steinberg's flatbed picture plane but only in regard to the artist's work that also embraces a horizontal orientation, not the upright sculptural body that defines much of the artist's œuvre. See Lisa Lee, *Isa Genzken: Sculpture as World Receiver* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 28.

[3] Ibid., 88.

[4] Rosalind Krauss, "Corpus Delicti," *October* 33 (Summer 1985): 53.

If the shipping label and Holzer's name operate as an acknowledgement of the work's extra-aesthetic situation, however, it is a relatively benign one, a begrudging inclusion similar to the list of side effects sped through at the end of medical advertisements. It reads as a sort of provisio, a legally required admission of artwork's multi-voiced authorship. Regarding the work (titled *Big Crate*) in its entirety as it stands in the current exhibition, Holzer along with Icarus are ultimately subsumed by the broader scenographic ensemble in which they reside. Indeed, the work appears as if it were stripped from a film set or theatre stage where it occupied its own distinct role—prop-like—within a now-lost narrative. This marks a tonal shift from the type of platitudes we have become accustomed to in the field of contemporary art writing that manically emphasize the value of unfixity and polysemic reading. In place of these fatalistic attachments to deconstruction, Osmosis's work at Kapp Kapp appears oriented towards a sort of internal cohesion, one that allows the artist to approach, even if he can never reach, a sense of authorial control. Rather than succumbing to the "iron lung of representation"—a phrase that the artist uses to describe our forced precorporation into various regimes of signification—Osmosis offers a series of sculptural vignettes that attempt to move on from this paralyzing condition, that assert a certain claim over their own affective and narratological function.[5] This is a rather dry reading of sculpture that is so clearly suffused with humor, pathos and anecdote but is, nevertheless, a grasp to articulate the underlying logic through which those aspects emerge.

Surveying the exhibition, one is hard pressed to find an obvious thematic through line (as I am suggesting, the point of continuity is instead integral to Osmosis's approach to quotation). Rather, each work gradually unfurls to reveal its own psychodrama. *Articulated Heart (Dealing with a heart that I didn't break)*, for instance, is a model of the titular organ made out of epoxy clay, carefully cut apart and then re-attached with copper tubing, leaving it in a state of suspension. The work's title references a line from Drake's song "Take Care" while its exploded construction harkens back to the rapper's 2010 commercial for Sprite, in which the soda transforms him into an animatron, his splintered body plainly resembling Osmosis's sculpture. On a more intuitive level though, the sculpture is a broken heart, one that calls forth romantic distress through an almost cartoonish—i.e., immediately legible—visual language. Similarly poignant is Osmosis's *Companion (Hachikō)*, a large bug constructed out of insulation foam and paper-mache. The work is an adaptation of the Japanese dog Hachikō, who became famous in the 1930s for his loyal devotion to owner Hidesaburō Ueno. The story goes that Hachikō met his owner at the Shibuya railway station in Tokyo at the end of every workday, a pattern that the dog maintained for ten years even after Ueno's death in 1925, earning him an effigy just nearby the station. Re-interpreted as a bug—a cockroach, perhaps—*Companion (Hachikō)* adapts rather than mocks the earnest sincerity of the Hachikō legend, the (New York) city kid's answer to the now-mythic canine made lighter and downright adorable by its pointed tongue, spiked collar and Murakami-like paint job.

[5] Louis Osmosis, interview with the author, February 12, 2022.

The emotional resonance of these works does not spring forth spontaneously from the artist—like the myth of the abstract expressionist stroke—but are clearly mediated through various pop cultural lineages. Osmosis collaborates with but attempts to overcome this inevitable contingency, creating expressive surrogates that order the vast field of available references into compact, discrete chunks of reformulated information manipulated by the artist for his own endgames. If there are, as ever, the proverbial fissures in these works' claim to imminence and singularity, they are glossed over rather than reveled in.

Other works exhibit a more critical, or at least mocking accent. *Studio Visits*, for instance, is composed from a Judd-like relief, laid open to reveal a whiskey glass filled with amber resin in which the artist captured a series of bugs that flew into his studio, now dead. Collected while the artist prepared for the exhibition, the bugs in question were matched by the series of curators, writers and gallerists that also visited Osmosis's studio to see his newest body of work. With that in mind, the dead bugs and the half-empty drink archly point out the stale drudgery of the professional life of the artist, a cipher for the entertaining they are expected to take on, the endless iterations of small talk over drinks. Elsewhere in the exhibition one finds a towering mannequin constructed out of wood chewed by beavers, fixed together with metal bars. As if Umberto Boccioni's strutting futurist figures were made weak and pitiful, *Shtick Figure* steps forward with the timid caution of a neurasthenic dandy. With the most subtle means—the right wrist and ankle pronated at an angle that makes the sculpture appear, shall we say, "light in its loafers"—Osmosis constructs the affective register for his foppish personage, one equal parts lethargic and charged. Embracing the allegorical tendencies of figurative sculpture, *Shtick Figure* seems an appropriate mascot for the increasingly apocalyptic present: we encounter the work shattered, flimsy yet sauntering onward. *Jogger #2 (THE FUTURE IS EMALE)* appears similarly precarious, nearly falling apart. The shirt is a riff on a well-known relic of corporate feminism, the "f" removed to expose how the wheel of neoliberal incorporation continues to spin underneath the mask of inclusion campaigns and progressive branding schemes. This exploitation is punctuated by the blue, blood-like streaks cascading down the front of the shirt. Despite the work's almost painterly presentation in the gallery, shored up by its vertical orientation, it bears the residue of a debased horizontality, of the sorts of scrapes and cuts one might receive crawling on the ground. Indeed, the work brings to mind the crawl pieces of Pope.L. As Darby English writes in regard to *Tompkins Square Crawl*, Pope.L's slow, belabored movement around the park while dressed in a suit offered a collapse of representational categories in which the signs of respectability—obviously mediated by race and class—were simultaneously offered and negated. This "act of unrealized potential" indexed by the crawl is also catalogued by Osmosis's t-shirt, one in which the politics of identity are similarly given and ripped apart through a (implied rather than performed) disorientation, or de-verticalization, of the subject that "throws light on the deterring forces themselves."[6]

[6] Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007), 266.

Osmosis also includes work that appears ambiguously mythic: a ship in a bottle, a votive object made out of foam that was modeled on scholar's rocks, and a whalebone emitting a low din of indecipherable sounds (composed by Laszlo Horvath, the soundtrack consists of AM radio fragments that have been garbled to seem as if they are being transmitted underwater or compromised by a persistent gust of wind, littered throughout with the sound of 808 kickdrums). Once again, these works do not shy away from certain archetypal objects or cultural practices. Each sculpture hypothetically opens out onto a vast field of association. In Osmosis's hands, however, these and the appropriations carried out in the other work on view are not encouraged to rise to the surface but rather, like the audio emanating from *Subwoofer (W***e Noise)*, constitute a sort of peripheral white noise that we eventually adapt to or stop noticing altogether. Once again, the prop is a useful comparison for Osmosis's work. Presented as always and already prefabricated and externally authored, the prop nevertheless activates a scene, enables narrative flow and retains a sense of representational particularity or cohesion. These are the qualities that Osmosis himself seems oriented towards, no longer satisfied with the postmodern telos of disintegration and ontological wreckage, the artist appears to question what comes next. In his own words, if he was born into an intellectual landscape in which it is understood that "the crack precedes the vessel," with his work he attempts to "rematerialize what I've been deprived of."[7]

[7] Louis Osmosis, interview with the author, February 12, 2022.