

THE ETHICAL OBSERVER

Western artists have long explored the everyday for its opposite. Whether it be the Flemish Renaissance Masters or eighteenth century devotees of the picturesque, Baudelaire's aristocratic flaneur or Breton's subversive peripatetics - the everyday has long served as a pretext for something more than what immediately meets the eye.

The compulsion for the everyday in Western art is sometimes considered evidence of its democratic and realist tenor. Here is an eminently anthropological art for and of the people. The art of Derek Kreckler, however, seeks the sacred in the secular - the invisible in the visible. As Baudelaire recognised, the poet of the everyday is in but not of the crowd. He is in the crowd because only there does infinity, or to use that more fashionable term, the other, reveal itself. If the marvellous is at its most powerful and disturbing when it is most ordinary, few recognise it as such,

Kreckler delineates wonder where others barely notice it; he does not make visible the invisible, but reflects its invisibility in our own performative space. He wants to acknowledge this invisibility without betraying its invisible form - for this would destroy its wonder. Like the Flemish Masters [Breughel for instance], Kreckler allows the other to substantiate itself in the unspectacular everyday.

This wondrous other is found in the normative everyday - suburban road workers and sites of contemporary consumption - supermarkets, hair salons and bookstores. Normative also because it is a type of ideal which affirms social conventions; a world in which men dig holes and fight, and women read and consume. In the *Roadside, Nature Strip* and interiors series Kreckler photographs with an all-seeing and uncritical lens. Like a snapshot or surveillance camera, he catches a look before it is arranged for the gaze of a fully specular world. This is not to say that Kreckler has not staged and carefully composed these scenes, but that his theatre is anti-theatrical. And when it seems less so, as in *Bookshop 1* and *Bookshop 2*, the effect is performative rather than dramatic.

The performative is a particular type of performance: it centres the performance in the viewer's actions rather than in the objects being viewed. These photographs might be beautiful, discrete and substantial objects, but they remain open rather than closed sites. Whether set inside or outside, a crisp clear light reveals an almost shadowless world without moods, secrets or focus. This anti-romantic aesthetic is radically anti-anthropomorphic; instead things have their own meanings which we can't quite fathom or colonise. Two road workers quizzically look at something we can't see. A young woman gets her hair straightened in a salon of mirrors. Kreckler's organisation of these images seems to follow a storyboard or a script in which something is not quite right with the world. But the story remains unrealised. We, the viewers, must perform it.

White Pointer is a new performance of an older script. We approach a darkened room lit with five evenly spaced beams of light directing us to short texts on the wall. A sombre sacral atmosphere, like a wake in a morgue, simultaneously stills our expectations and draws us in. In the room we hear several low-level conversations. Soon we realise they are talking about fish, and that the conversations reference the texts on the wall. Each text is a taxonomy of a particular fish. The taxonomies were taken verbatim from an aquarium display, and the conversations taped in the aquarium near the taxonomies. If *White Pointer* is slightly more theatrical and less absolute in its purity than the recent photographs, it is even more performative - it requires the participation of an active and embodied phenomenological encounter. Here, in a

darkened room, the viewer/listener moves freely but apprehensively between texts and voices. The apprehension, even slight anxiety, is not just due to the atmospherics of the darkened room, but to both the wilful performative and apparent moral purposelessness of the work. We are made an essential component of it, but there is no grand revelation, no allegory or clear message; just a shadowy mood that gnaws at our being. For if the work is not moralistic it is ethical; it is about the ethics of the observer in a world reduced to the specular. We might imaginatively reconstruct the look of the aquarium from the taxonomies and the taped conversations, as if mirroring a scene we can't see. But this is to miss its minimal aesthetic. We are emphatically in Art World, not Sea World. Kreckler's works inhabit the space of this difference. This difference, be it between Sea World and Art World, or between the mirrored hair salon and the crystalline surface of its mirrored image in *Sa/on*, is a mystery unarticulated but dimly felt. Like a goose bump on the skin, or like a faint echo barely heard, a certain structure seems to ripple through our lives.

Kreckler does not have a baroque sensibility. He only gives us what is absolutely necessary, and even less than this if possible. There is never an excess of meaning or gesture, but an excess of nothing. To ask how nothing is exceeded is to ask what the everyday might mean. In showing this nothing of the everyday Kreckler hints at certain patterns or structures that organise it. But at the same time he guards their invisibility and mystery against the corrosive gaze of our uninhibited specular desires. Herein lies his ethical mission. The art of extracting meaning from not much at all is not to be underestimated. Kreckler makes a rich performative space because it is unencumbered by implied meaning, and limited only by our own desires and histories. Like the art of the Flemish Masters, we see ourselves and the universe reflected in the everyday; nothing more and nothing less.

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