

Slippery Woman - An Apparition in the Business District

This exhibition is haunted by apparitions. The photograph on the invite for the show was taken on a family trip to Clearwater, Florida when Lauren Hall was a teenager. Enticed by a radio announcement about a local curiosity, the appearance of a rainbow hued silhouette in the shape of the Virgin Mary on a local office building, Hall's family made a nonreligious pilgrimage. The Catholic Ministry Organisation went on to buy the site and turned it into an officially holy location. Eventually the apparition was decapitated when vandals threw a rock at it, smashing the glass and leaving the female figure without a head. Some skeptics speculated that 'The Virgin Mary of Clearwater' could have been caused by a recurrent over-shooting of the building's sprinkler system and reflections of the sun, but there was no material proof to corroborate these theories. And anyway, this kind of explanation is of little value to anyone viewing the image. Aware of the phenomena of apparitions, everything is coloured by the belief of a few, casting a hard to define outline as the shape of a miracle. The mystery surrounding its genesis leaves us with a slippery female outline with an iconic charge, attracting both adoration and violence.

When writing a character study, you must first define the type of character you are dealing with and fix their key attributes in language. Are they a protagonist, an antagonist, a static character with no agency or a dynamic individual with a quick temper? Perhaps they are an anti-social extravert, or a

minor character playing a supporting role. In the process of casting a person as a recognizable type, you are reducing a personality down to a finite set of traits. You pare back complexity to enable the character and their actions to be clearly identified within the context of the story, thus creating a familiar outline that can be easily articulated to a mass audience. We can find examples of rigid types and over simplified figures populating literary genres like crime fiction.

Lauren Hall told me about *Murder Yet to Come*, a murder mystery novel by Isabel Briggs Myers, who was one of the co-creators of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator test. The purpose of the MBTI questionnaire is to help the user define their key personality type (made up of 4 categories, based on Carl Jung's theories of Psychological Types), thus enabling them to better understand themselves in relation to others. The temptation to calcify the moving parts of a personality into fixed types is understandable, but how do you define a constantly changing bundle of flesh, chemicals, perceptions and experiences? The mother-daughter team who created MBTI had no experience of psychometric testing but instead adopted statistical methods used by their contacts in the banking industry as a means of crunching psychological data. MBTI has stayed true to its economic roots and is still used by some business management strategies as a way of ensuring an efficient balance of personalities within a team. Murder mystery novels also use an efficient formula to balance strictly defined roles within an unfolding narrative, presenting characters, objects and locations to the reader as they are

simultaneously revealed to the novel's central protagonist – the sleuth. This narrative device allows the reader to follow the trail of clues in real time, giving them the opportunity to solve the crime and identify themselves as the hero. As a result, even the most gruesome examples from this literary genre are comforting to their readership due to their familiar structure. But what is so comforting about fixed types? The slippage from logical deduction into reductivist psychology is a terrifying prospect, yet identifying and maintaining personality types might be crucial to our ability to negotiate one another in our social relationships.

Encountering an exhibition – a set of relationships between objects – may prove to be a mystery of sorts, and looking for clues could be one way to attempt an understanding of what confronts you in the gallery. Moving through the space, every material, date and dimension becomes a point from which to deduce meaning or to affirm categorization of the work. This hermeneutic approach reminds me of Nancy Holt's 1966 piece *Crossword Work*, which was produced in response to Eva Hesse's *Metronomic Irregularity* from the exhibition *Eccentric Abstractions*. It consists of a two-grid crossword puzzle hand drawn on graph paper, within which the artist has given herself clues to solve her own puzzle. Holt commented that she didn't classify *Crossword Work* as an artwork, but more a piece of criticism that offered an 'edge against a Lewittian way of being in the world'. The answers in the crossword tease out art historical relationships to modernism and concrete poetry, but show the beginnings of Holt's

interest in abstraction. In the process of abstraction in art, the reduction of information and the stripping away of visual references to the world can make meaning slippery, but that uncertainty has potency. Could we view the loss of information in the process of casting types as a condensing of than a repressing? Familiar characters and universal forms gain their attractiveness through their legibility, without losing vitality.

In some of Hall's previous work she has appropriated and re-imagined the visible signs and abstract geometries that lie behind the mechanics of social relations. In her 2014 exhibition *Girls Names*, Hall recapitulated a series of monochromatic shapes that are used in early infant development tools. These simple black and white forms are found in flash cards, toys and mobiles, which are said to visually stimulate babies and encourage faster brain development. Such universal forms become carriers for parents' aspirations for their children and an early socializing of perception. In *Early Communication, Strong Bonds & Secure Attachment*, Hall suspended these simple shapes from a clothes-drying pulley, placing bold signifiers of the parent-child relationship into an incongruous domestic location (where underwear is normally left to dry). Whilst Hall's previous works also addressed the legibility of the shared signifiers that socialize us, in this exhibition those forms of categorization are held in a tensile grip. Disturbed wool shaped into forms of Roscharch ink blots are clasped onto gold air vents edged with hair grips. Their agitated texture and random outlines resemble growths of yeast

or moss. Fungal infections in the body (strains such as *Candida Albicans*, *Candida Glabrata*, *Candida Krusei*) can flourish in a stressed individual, whose adrenal reactions suppress the immune system and feed the fungi through blood sugar spikes. The personality types that are identified through psychological tests, such as the Roscharch inkblot or the MBTI, could also be recursive phenomena – infections that return to their host in times of extreme stress. These chronic fungal caricatures have the potential to suffocate and terminally block the development of an individual's system, but they may also be something familiar to hold on to. Hall's materials and assemblages sit somewhere between supports and supported, container and contained. Although not all their parts are moving, everything feels like it is in flux or caught on loop. The blurring of those boundary conditions and the collapsing of hierarchies between form and subject, meaning and material, creates a perpetual unresolved tension. This produces more than just an intellectual reading but an opportunity for a physical somatic experience. The philosopher Karen Barad's concept of Agential Realism seems relevant here. Although Barad acknowledges the importance of boundaries for creating meaning in the world (the necessity of shared names and categories), Agential Realism proposes that in order to understand reality we have to see that all things are entangled in complex relations. In Barad's concept, things only come into being and are able to act through interactions with other things. To approach Hall's exhibition in Baradian terms then, reveals messy connections between objects that disrupt clear-cut

cases of cause-and- effect.

Fountain is a case in point: x marks the spot, watery self-care with a dangerous bottom, a neck support suggestive of the guillotine offers a precarious place to lay a female head. The title inevitably recalls Dada's poster-boy artwork *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp, a work that is itself haunted by an elusive slippery female presence. The Baroness Elsa Von Frytag-Loringhoven was a performance artist, sculptor and poet working in the early 20th century New York art scene. Written off as a minor character in most historical accounts of the time, Von Frytag has recently been recognized as a key figure in the Dada movement. It has also been proposed that the Baroness may have been the real author of Duchamp's *Fountain*. The case is made as such; Von Frytag was respected amongst her peers and became close friends with Duchamp, often writing to him and sending him pieces of her work. These works included assemblages of everyday objects, some involving plumbing. Many descriptions of *Fountain* refer to the vaginal form that is revealed in the upturned urinal, and under forensic analysis the Fountain did not possess attributes typical to Duchamp's preceding works. This version of events is also corroborated by a letter written by Duchamp to his sister, which suggests that *Fountain* was sent to him by a female friend who used the pseudonym Richard Mutt.

Written accounts of Von Frytag cast her in mythic stereotypes; the lost genius artist or the archetypal mad woman. She made wearable sculpture such as tomato can bras, spoons, earrings

and used postage stamps as blusher. These acts could be post-rationalised today as a condemnation of capitalism's commodification of femininity, or read – as they were likely viewed in the Baroness' own time – as the bizarre acts of a mad woman. But the stereotypes don't fit, her prolific output and ability for spontaneous movement contradict these definitions. Von Frytag's poetry collection *Body Sweats* and her visceral performance works were immediate, they shortcut the social conventions of language, form and etiquette. Von Frytag was arrested on multiple occasions for public exposure during poetry performances on the street, as well as for instances of petty theft. Descriptions of her given by her male peers in the Dada movement are caught somewhere between admiration and disgust, detailing her abject physicality and dominant sexual presence. Her irrepressibility makes her hard to pin down. She is hard for history to digest, a slippery woman trying to orientate herself amongst agitated social materials.

Text by Kimberley O'Neill commissioned for Private Secretaries, Lauren Hall, David Dale Gallery, 2017

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