

THE HANDLER OF GRAVITY

Essex Street, New York

'The Handler of Gravity', an impressionistic exhibition of seven works, alludes to an expansive Duchampian premise – the 'infrathin' relationship between the second, third and fourth dimensions, as represented by photography, sculpture and time. A poetic, if opaque, hypnosis script-cum-press release by Angie Keefer prefaced the show by sketching the relationships between the elements in Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23). The text concludes with emphasis on the four-dimensional Bride's 'eluding the Handler of Gravity, the trivet, the rod, the weight, the horizon beneath' to reach the Nine Shots in the third dimension – a cluster of shots created by matches fired from a toy gun into the glass, and conceived as metaphorical ejaculations by the Bachelor machines. Following theories popularized by scientists at the time, Duchamp believed that the third dimension was merely a shadow of the fourth. In preparatory notes, he indicated that he wanted to render this four-dimensional Bride through a photographic printing process – a forward-thinking attitude about time and authorship that obliquely informed 'The Handler of Gravity'.

In this show, shifts between reproducible mediums trace the alchemical effects of time, and the transubstantiation from everyday object to high art work. Two multiples by Duchamp wryly addressed shifting notions of value: a 1937 print of *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912) is signed, dated with a postage stamp, and bears the artist's thumbprint. Duchamp's presence is registered three times through authorial signature, bodily imprint and image, raising the value of the work to unique status. This important work also represented the artist's increasing fascination in perception and optical effects, which he parsed in his kinetic works and theories on the fourth dimension.

Bouche-Évier (Sink-Stopper, 1964), a silver cast of a sink stopper, was created as a practical object with a wink and nod to Duchamp's infamous *Fountain* (1917). Three years later, the artist would re-edition the work as a set of coins (titled *Art Medals*) in a blatant acknowledgment of its art commodity status.

Works by Nina Könemann and Juliette Blightman echoed Duchamp's aesthetics. Unfortunately, their placement came off as rather too coy. Blightman's sculpture of a tree in a latrine (*all those, too, who are sustained by the alternative hopes*, 2013) read as unsubtle toilet humour – shit turned back to life and to (art) gold. Könemann's vertiginous video *Holzminen* (2004) uses choppy mystical sound effects and shifting camera angles whilst documenting a stilt-walking figure performing in a public space near a river in the titular small town. The camera finally focuses on its subject moments before the video concludes. Though perceptually disorientating, it is unconvincing as a contemporary take on Duchamp's motion studies.

An intergenerational dialogue between conceptual photography and sculpture proved more successful. Marcel Broodthaers' *La Soupe de Daguerre* (Daguerre's Soup, 1974), a taxonomical collage of 12 pictures of vegetables and fish, presents cuisine iconography as cultural history. His simple captioning conflates the alchemical processes of cooking and the science of photography. Valerie Snobeck and Lucie Stahl use digital photographic processes to achieve unique objects. Snobeck's *Après* (After, 2010–13), a sculptural 'relief' resembling a cracked iPhone, consists of an abraded mirror and peeled print on crumpled plastic mounted to the wall behind a plastic 'screen'. Stahl's *Brewer's Blackbird with Scrap Metal* (2013) departs from her typical process of flatbed scanning that reduce funny assemblages of objects to two-dimensional plasticized 'posters'. Instead, a photographic image of a shopping cart sandwiched between two cars is coated with resin and affixed with bits of cast-off metal, a nod to the Cubist play between real life materials and pictorial illusion.

These objects attest that the interplay between physical reality and reproducible images continues to be fertile territory for contemporary artists. And yet, in this fourth dimension (after the exhibition has closed) I imagine a coda to the show that would include a social, specific and transitory work: Duchamp's *Unhappy Readymade* (1919). This set of instructions, a wedding gift for his sister Suzanne and Jean Crotti, directed the couple to hang a standard geometry textbook from a clothesline, where the wind would choose selected pages and tear them out. The resulting photograph of the textbook's tattered pages suggested the fragility of our intellectual foundations. Although 'The Handler of Gravity' emphasized the economic and symbolic value of things, its selections did little to challenge established formal conventions or received scientific ideas – a threshold that Duchamp's Handler of Gravity policed, but ultimately conceded to new ideas and methods.

WENDY VOGEL

