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Brian Moran

KYNASTONMCSHINE, LONDON, UK



It is only too fitting that Brian Moran's exhibition, 'Engineering Consent 5 – The Soap Carving Contest', be displayed at Kynastonmcschine. This project space opened in May inside the interview room of an old police station in Deptford; the architecture is detectably at the service of the administration of surveillance (for one thing, the toilets are still inside the cells). The American artist is not directly concerned with the physical conditions of policing, but since the inception of his ongoing project 'Engineering Consent', in 2005, he has been preoccupied with that subtle dynamic where coercion is achieved by means of psychological manipulation.

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by *Giulia Smith*

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Part five of 'Engineering Consent', Moran's Kynastonmcshine show sets out to investigate the wicked marriage of marketing and psychoanalysis, taking as a case study the soap-carving contests sponsored in the 1920s by Proctor & Gamble. His method is primarily that of an amateur researcher and, as is often the case with contemporary romances between art and the archive, facts are here fated to fiction: the exhibition simulates the aftermath of an imaginary contest, with artefacts and props arranged by the artist-storyteller to recount the tale of P&G's advertising campaign for Ivory Soap.



On one side of the space, black banners proclaim the key adjectives 'CLEAN', 'FUN' and 'GOOD', while on the opposite wall the word 'SUBMISSIONS' looms ambiguously overhead. From the outset, it is clear that darkness is intended to contaminate the voice of a cheerful capitalism – Moran uses a puffy graffiti font, yet another layer of distortion to the 'clean' rhetoric of the industry. If the hanging placards provide the scenography, the three vitrines in the centre of the gallery are the stage. Inside, elegantly laid out on black, are dozens of translucent white statuettes that could be held comfortably in the palm of the hand. All of them were carved by Moran, who 'submitted' replicas of original entries from the Ivory era, as well as traditional folk

carving tropes (the chain for example, an old favourite of wood whittlers), alongside more contemporary icons, such as a figurine of SpongeBob SquarePants. The arrangement mimics some of the original shows staged by P&G across the US, but more generally it refers to the format of educational displays, such as the ethnographic cabinet, with its spellbinding mixture of awe and horror. Not unlike ethnic specimens, Moran's mini 'Ivory' soap totems are scarred by a history where power, subjugation and desire overlap to the advantage of the colonizer.

In 1923, P&G hired Edward Bernays to devise a strategy for the promotion of Ivory Soap. As many will know from Adam Curtis's documentary *The Century of the Self* (2002), Bernays was the nephew of Sigmund Freud (Moran included a miniature bust of the father of psychoanalysis inside one of the vitrines). To his uncle's dismay, Bernays pioneered the redirection of psychoanalysis to commercial ends and introduced the advertising industry to the idea of an irrational consumer subject, whose unconscious desires could be manipulated to increase profits. P&G approached Bernays, lamenting that children hated soap. 'And obviously,' they said to him, 'if they detest it as children, they'll detest it when they grow up.' From there, Bernays developed the idea for a school competition involving Ivory Soap, with the hidden objective of moulding the unconscious of the masses at its infantile crux.

Bernays' scheme proved so successful that the carving contests became a phenomenon in their own right. Yet, inside the exhibition the participatory element that was part and parcel of the original contests is altogether absent. What we see are only the commodified symbols of folk cheerfulness, with Moran left as the only contestant. Weary of selling participation to the audience, he points to a history of participatory activities in symbiosis with the logic of profit. With this exhibition-exemplum the artist also demonstrates how capitalism is itself 'creative' in its relentless assimilation of all spaces, starting with that of fantasy, existing outside it.

It is hard to judge whether 'Engineering Consent 5 – The Soap Carving Contest' is noteworthy *per se*, or whether it is mostly its source material to catalyze the interest. This dilemma is premeditated though and has an alibi, at least insofar as Moran wants Kynastonmeshine to perform a function akin to that of a local museum, where the objects are first of all indexes of the stories of their making. Moran's dedication to the index is an enduring one – for example, earlier episodes of 'Engineering Consent' presented series of pencil rubbings derived from the symbolism of corporate logos – and in its repetition betrays the artist's commitment to investigative fieldwork. Let's not forget, however, that the exhibition is a fictional remake and contains no authentic historical evidence. This does not automatically undermine its validity, but leaves us with the question of what it does for (or to) history by aestheticizing its documents and moving them inside an art gallery.

Giulia Smith

Responses

Added by **Rebecca Bligh**, 2 days, 8 hours ago

It's BUBBLE writing... (CLEAN FUN GOOD); the soap carvings are actually really beautiful, funny and cool in themselves (as no doubt they would have been), and immediately made me want to have a go at soap carving myself; the show is a far more sensual and immediate way to encounter the incommensurable "thisness" of the whole undertaking - i.e., to encounter these objects of

apparently non-alienated labour, these “amateur” art objects in person, and consider the strange, then-new ways in which they were and are nonetheless harnessed to, and instrumentalised by, capital - than to read about it in a book. Highly recommended.

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