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Claire Barclay: Flat Peach
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Claire Barclay: Flat Peach

Stephen Friedman Gallery London

3 September to 2 October

Claire Barclay
Flat Peach I 2010

Excuse me while I labour over some obvious points – I'll get round to reviewing the new Claire Barclay show in no time. Firstly, when art writers discuss art, we tend to drape poetical meaning over objects that are, more often than not, commercial products. This linguistic jiggery-pokery is not, I think, always as terrible as it sounds: we're usually attempting to tease out the aesthetic pleasure, wit and intellectual kicks of experiencing art. Secondly, despite the legacy of conceptualism, most artists avoid extreme forms of self-reflexivity in order to transcend the economic wilderness at the heart of their practice. This means that anyone – rich art collector or person-on-the-street – can get a buzz from the stuff without having to question every aspect of contemporary capitalism.

Barclay's work is acutely self-aware of its status as a high-end product: she makes sleek and beautiful objects that fit well with the general lust for designer living; but they also have a darker edge to them that suggests fetishistic desire. Previously, art writers have described her relationship with fashion as 'ambiguous'. Unfortunately, we art writers often get carried away. In a recent *Guardian* profile, Skye Sherwin wrote that Barclay's 'strange fusions of the earthy and the factory-produced point up the hokum in certain lifestyle ideologies'. Of course, what the reviewer missed is the tendency for irony within the high end of couture and design. To me, Barclay's work suggests instead that we might enjoy their embattled relationship with designed objects because we all, at heart, are avid shoppers with magpie eyes for shiny baubles.

At Stephen Friedman Gallery, Barclay plays the game with unruffled coolness. By partly obscuring the large glass front of the

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gallery with a swirling cloud of reflective silvery paint, the artist gives the gallery space a semblance of privacy from window-shopping pedestrians, as well as a degree of soft relationality (passers-by will see themselves reflected). In the first of two gallery spaces are two sculptural arrangements: *Flat Peach I* and *Flat Peach II* (all works 2010). These are constructed from a basic framework of stained wooden blocks that correspond in proportion and position to the parquet flooring of the gallery, out of which emerge frames of similarly coloured wood on which rest various soft, supple, hard or shiny objects. This is most wittily played out in the second gallery space in the assemblage *Clean Lean*, which features two quasi-phallic forms with cartoon legs cut out of sheets of aluminium and propped between gallery floor and wall; but it is present too in a nebulous form in the artist's trademark use of the colour peach, a knowingly ersatz skin-toned motif.

Barclay's work here is more anthropomorphic than it has ever been. For example, her solo exhibition at the Camden Arts Centre in 2008 and her current installation as part of the Bloomberg Commission at the Whitechapel Gallery ploughed a different line: while those exhibitions dally with the staged nature of installation and associations with performance, ritual and domesticity, the work at Stephen Friedman draws us towards the bespoke micro-industry of nearby Savile Row. *Flat Peach I*, for example, features four semi-spheres made of Sinamay, a starched-looking fabric normally used in millinery, while Barclay's highly finished cones of polished aluminium might be associated in this context with cufflinks or jewellery. The same work also features oversized finger-like forms stitched from pieces of peach-coloured leather that suggest the deluxe glove market; these shapes are echoed in a series of screenprints of vaguely post-punk pink/black lozenges hung on the gallery walls.

Barclay is part of a generation of British sculptors that was loosely defined in the exhibition 'Early One Morning' at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2002, which included a bevy of neo-formalist dazzlers: Eva Rothschild, Gary Webb, Jim Lambie, Shahin Afrassiabi and others, many of whom took a leaf from the New Generation artists of the 1960s. In a feature on this strident tendency (*AM259*), JJ Charlesworth described how these artists, while seeking to comment on the manipulation of desire, risk little more than an 'effect' of the art market. More sympathetically, we might say that such sculpture asks us to maintain a sort of consumer solidarity across a wide spectrum of buying power: so with Webb we might recall shopping at Argos, and with Lambie we might remember buying records or rags in a charity shop. And with Barclay's current show, we are asked to reflect on the super rich's sartorial choosiness. Unfortunately, I found it hard to glean much pleasure from the exercise. ■

COLIN PERRY is a writer and critic based in London.

Polytechnic

Raven Row London 9 September to 7 November

The exhibition title 'Polytechnic' refers to the educational structures which emerged in the UK under Thatcher in the 1970s whose specific work conditions allowed for a hybrid of technologies and practices that differed from those of traditional art schools. The open and pluralistic artworks produced in the polytechnics contaminated the allegedly 'pure' yet rhetorical strategies of

Conceptual Art, paving the way for new postmodern aesthetics. Focusing exclusively on works by British artists produced in the fragile transitional period from industrial post-war Britain to post-industrial Thatcherite conservatism (the show spans the crucial years 1978-82, with the exception of Ian Breakwell's 1974 work, *Diary*), 'Polytechnic' could be seen as a continuation of the exhibition 'Live in your Head', the Whitechapel Gallery's groundbreaking show on British conceptual art in 2000, and 'Shoot Shoot Shoot', Mark Webber's 2002 film programme dedicated to the work of the London Film-makers' Co-op. But the range of practices make it a challenging task to detect an overarching theme or 'feel' for this exhibition, which includes such diverse artists as Breakwell, Susan Hiller, Stuart Marshall and Cordelia Swann. 'Polytechnic' presents artistic practices that sought to break and extend late modernist paradigms and it is touching to see these works, many of which never found official recognition, shine in the excellent conditions of Raven Row's galleries. But are they all worth revisiting? And is there an urgency behind the curatorial concept which, according to the catalogue introduction, simply 'developed from a number of conversations' between the exhibition curator, Richard Grayson, and the director of Raven Row, Alex Sainsbury?

Language, its narrative constructive potential and its failure to represent reality accurately, is a key concern in this show. Like a symptom of the return of the repressed, the voice becomes a postmodern tool to narrate the relation between subjectivity, technology and politics in the late 1970s. The political realities of that decade were so urgent that they did not allow for conceptual abstraction. This is when the artwork becomes a direct speech act, as in the case of Roberta Graham's *Campo Santo*, 1981, a sombre reconstruction of the site where the victims of Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper who killed more than two dozen women between 1975 and 1980, were found. As I exit the room the soles of my shoes leave traces on the gallery's brown carpet; I carry the dirt of Graham's environment up the stairs into Ian Bourn's living room installation. In his video *Lenny's Documentary*, 1978, Bourn plays a drunken television presenter who insults his crew and is incapable of sustaining his authoritative position as public media figure. Bourn's video is shown on a new flat-screen monitor by a large fireplace in front of a sofa, echoing the domestic setting of Bourn's own television programme. For today's YouTube users, it might be difficult to imagine the effect of the collapse of public and private in the new and pervasive television culture of the 1970s. *Lenny's Documentary*, however, also speaks of the enthusiasm for new strategies for the mass distribution of video art, most importantly through Channel 4, which broadcast its first video programme in



Catherine Elwes
Kensington Core 1981
 video still