



Gabriel Dubois
 (see *Synthetic Real*)
Untitled #2, 2011, acrylic,
 spraypaint, enamel and oil stick on
 wood, 110 x 92 cm. © the artist.
 Courtesy Edel Assanti, London

SYNTHETIC REAL

Synthetic Real
 Edel Assanti, London
 24 November - 14 January

The gallery notes accompanying *Synthetic Real* start by quoting the Russian abstract painter Kazimir Malevich: 'This is a new plastic realism, plastic precisely because the realism of hills, sky and water is missing. Every real form is a world.' It's a purist's declaration that nonrepresentational forms might stand for themselves. By contrast, the twenty-first-century artists gathered here are happy to let representation and form mix more promiscuously. While their works seem, at first glance, to be nonrepresentational, they operate precisely at the point of tension where materials trigger an intuition of presence - of something 'represented' - without necessarily producing an 'image'. So, Amy Stephens's three tall oak blocks, *This Urban Silence I-III* (2011), against which lean pairs of polished bronze beams, echo sculptures by Carl Andre and Constantin Brancusi. Against the matter-of-fact materialism of a minimalist like Andre, even the act of leaning one thing against another becomes the trace of a gesture or a human presence. It's a motif that reappears in a nearby photograph, *Empiricist* (2010), by Stuart Bailes, depicting a wall of logs, against which leans a strip of bark. Nothing 'empirical' about this bit of 'documentary' monochrome photography, though: logs, bark and grassy ground may be self-evident, but the tilting



Dara Birnbaum
Addendum: Autism from
Six Movements: Video Works
from 1975, 1975, single-channel
 b/w video, mono, 7 min 20 sec,
 edition of 10. Courtesy the artist
 and Marian Goodman Gallery,
 New York & Paris

composition harks back to all manner of constructivist geometries – image echoing abstraction.

So we're not talking about images or the lack of them but rather about the 'trace' of one thing in another, an index of presence – synthetic, but real. So Peter Macdonald's drawings *Littoral* and *How We Like It* (both 2008) could be called obsessive – the dense accumulation of an ongoing ink-pen stroke filling the paper to the edge. Though a potentially boring technique, Macdonald's pen produces areas of compactness and dilation, concentrated thickets and wide directional expanses that suggest plenty about the artist's shifting attention and wavering hand.

By contrast, Jodie Carey's ghostly plaster-cast panels, in which plaster is poured into a trash of scattered cigarette ash and lace mesh, rely on entropy rather than the artist's constant intervention to make the work. That the 'front' of these panels is the bottom of the smothering plaster that has accumulated at the bottom of the casting tray complicates them as image-surfaces to look at – their surfaces have a sort of exposed interiority, like a revealed fossil.

A similar dislocation occurs with Neal Rock's pastel-coloured membranes of silicone draped over oval wall-mounted metal armatures. Rock used to make huge, excessive agglutinations of squirted silicone, a riotous transgression of gloopy pigment into sculptural solidity. These new works ditch the big-budget theatrics for an altogether more lucid dissection of the moment minimalist painting turned into sculpture; here Rock reverses the transition, making barely stretched 'canvas' skins that almost begin to carry an image. His sculpture-stretchers sit awkwardly next to Gabriel Dubois's paint-on-plywood geometries, whose familiar gloss on Pop-Modernism underscores the problem of relying on the too-familiar genealogies of painting.

Instead it's the newest medium, video, that plays most vividly on the border of image and abstraction, between presence and reference: Nick Crowe & Ian Rawlinson's video *Die Brücke* (2010) takes a sequence of workmen welding girders on a bridge and folds and repeats it across the screen until it feels like you are watching it through a kaleidoscope. A pulsing drum solo accompanies what now appears as a throbbing, shifting pattern-grid of lights and movements. Yet if one concentrates on one small part, a fragment of the original scene can be momentarily rediscovered. Object and image are melded inseparably while revealing their difference. And in a world full of screens full of nothing but images of objects, that still has some kind of purpose.

J.J. CHARLESWORTH

DARA BIRNBAUM

Dara Birnbaum
South London Gallery
9 December – 17 February

It seems that every art-institutional seminar and Q&A session these days eventually dissolves into declarations on the irrevocable influence of the Internet on thought and practice in art and everyday life. While undeniable to an extent, this is a blunt truism that often snookers nuanced discussion; and yet it is impossible to avoid in relation to Dara Birnbaum's exhibition. The binary separation of the gallery's downstairs and upstairs spaces into 'now' and 'then' demands the comparison of image creation and distribution, and mediation within two different technological eras; but it also demonstrates Birnbaum's supplanting of urgent feminist advocacy with something more perplexed, expansive and intractable.

Upstairs, six performed video self-portraits enact psychological states: in *Addendum: Autism* (1975) Birnbaum rocks and pants, in *Chaired Anxieties: Abandoned* (1975) she sits splay-legged, like a man, and in *Bar (Red)* (1975) she walks ethereally past a door jamb, looking back towards the camera with what, in a certain sort of novel, would be termed a haunted expression. Historical exemplars are ready to hand – for the art-historically savvy – to contextualise what may at the time have been rather bamboozling: Bruce Nauman's videos featuring the body as medium; Judith Butler's texts on the performance of gender and subjectivity; feminism's demand for the visibility of the overlooked. With hindsight, we infer all this with relative ease; but the passing of time defuses impact twofold: through cultural normalisation and the aesthetic swoon evoked by a ruined technology.

Downstairs the process of capture is displaced by one of collection and construction, although the roughness of video still speaks of domestic technologies. *Arabesque* (2011), a four-channel projection, comprises clips of young pianists gleaned from YouTube, subtitled stills from the Hollywood film *Song of Love* (1947) and vignettted pages of a book. Gender politics is still on the boil, but whereas a staged antipathy is

formalised in two projections in face-off in *Attack Piece* (1975) – an intergender battle performed in a garden in Nova Scotia, where a number of the artist's male friends (including David Askevold, Dan Graham and Ian Murray) chase and film Birnbaum, who wields a stills camera – the later work metonymically relates more complexly sprawling and interdependent sociopolitical structures. Birnbaum's beef is that Clara Schumann, a proto have-it-all composer-pianist mother of eight, was displaced into the shadow of her husband, Robert Schumann – demonstrated empirically by the fact that a YouTube search for Clara's comparable masterpiece, *Romanze 1, Opus 11* (1840) produces just one performance, compared to the slew of performances of Robert's *Arabesque* (1839). Dialogue from *Song of Love*, which dramatises the emotional landscape of the couple's marriage and extracts from Clara's diaries, infuses the piece with breathless exegeses on love, genius and sacrifice, so that, in contrast to the analytical and declarative toughness upstairs, *Arabesque* entangles gender politics within a critique of amateurism, canonisation, family values and romantic love. It's tempting to say that the Internet has provided us with a new understanding of such overlapping, interconnected systems, and has sited the individual more tangibly within the multitude; but perhaps it's more reasonable to suggest that technology is now better configured to reflect the bewildering plenitude that has always buffeted the politicised subject.

SALLY O'REILLY