

Jimmy DeSana and the Sex Appeal of the Inorganic

Private view: 30 October 2019, 6-8 pm

Exhibition dates: 31 October 2019 - 1 February 2019

The bodies in Jimmy DeSana's photographs are posed with objects. These objects are not simply props for human eroticism: rather, it seems as if the object is using the body for its own satisfaction, as if the bodies are not there for the sake of our enjoyment as viewers but rather for the things that are the agents of their poses.

Sometimes the poses suggest the arched body of the hysteric in the photographs that were taken at the hospital of La Salpêtrière in Paris towards the end of the 19th century. What is uncertain and perhaps unknowable is the extent to which the supposed hysterics who were the subjects of these photographs staged their attacks for an audience, a master, or the camera. Who exactly is manipulating whom? DeSana's photographs don't quite equate to pornography or glamour shoots, nor to Warhol's passive-aggressive manipulation of his subjects. It feels more as if the photographer has been invited in to commemorate some phantasy of the one who is posing or is working with a friend to do something a bit bad together. Rather than publicity or glamour, there is a sense of collusion in the privacy of the home or the apartment, with the effect that an imagined domestic ideal is disrupted.

In the classic Freudian account, the fetish is supposed to put a stop to the anxiety of castration, the eye halts on something adjacent to the lack, like hair or a shoe. This is to inscribe fetishism within a gender binary on the basis of having or not having. But what of a fetishism that doesn't fit this model? A fetishism not predicated on lack but on the production of enjoyment in sameness? The objects in DeSana's photographs are not occlusions of lack, not metaphorical but rather metonymic, together with bodies one thing beside another, one thing touching another. Caught, by the photograph, *in flagrante*.

DeSana's photographs have tended to be seen in relation to the American archive of low grade 70s pornography, suburban self-portrayals, punk imagery and so on. But we could also place his work in the context of European surrealism, the tableau drawings of Pierre Klossowski, and above all the photographic scenes of Hans Bellmer's doll. A moment involving some kind of perverse pleasure is frozen. What is the significance of this 'freeze'? It is, surely, the moment of fascination when time becomes timeless. In traditional art the transformation of the temporal into the timeless is achieved through form. This idea is sometimes applied to sanctify the pornographic as art. However, this does not seem to be DeSana's way. Rather, what we see is a frozen moment in a performance shared between bodies, clothes, prosthetics and objects.

What justifies halting that moment rather than any other? It is, surely, fascination. It is the viewer who is bewitched and brought to a standstill by what is given to be seen. We realise that in such moments it is not so much information or knowledge that we want of the image, but that moment of fascination that interrupts the flow of the performance and rivets us.

Think of the body of the sexually ambivalent young male florist in Rachilde's novel *Monsieur Venus* (1884) that is initially draped with artificial flowers that he has made so skilfully. The eroticism is displaced to the inorganic object that mimics the organic. So when Raoule de Venerande touches the 'golden floss' of the 'real' hair on Jacques' chest, it excites her just as if it were artificial.

Some of DeSana's photographs show scenarios with connotations of masochism. For Mario Perniola, writing on the novels of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch in his book *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* (2000, trans. 2004), 'What masochism and neutral sexuality have in common is the will to give oneself absolutely as a thing that feels, the irresistible drive to establish a relation in which it is always possible to arouse and maintain sexual excitement.' (p. 41) 'Organic' sex comes to an end, whereas 'inorganic' sex goes on forever. This is why DeSana's photographs are not strictly speaking pornographic: they are not means to a masturbatory end. Their 'timelessness' is the forever of inorganic sex. This is the basis of the relation of bodies to things in the photographs. Perniola goes on: 'In the look, in fact, the experience of clothing as body is prolonged, extended and radicalized in that of the body as clothing.' (p. 46) Rather than the body coming to life in sex, it is sentient clothing that feels; rather than the things attached being extensions of the body, it is the body that is their extension, and that does their bidding — further, the body becomes thing in its desire to transcend the momentary in the very moment that is the photograph.

Text by Michael Newman