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Painted Veil

BRUCE HAINLEY ON THE ART OF MONICA MAJOLI



Monica Majoli, *Black Mirror (Amy)*, 2011, oil on panel, 15 7/8 x 19 7/8". From the diptych *Black Mirror (Amy)*, 2011–12.

FORGOING OUTRIGHT ATROCITY, of which there is so much—too much—right now, aren't the "life," "body," and "face" of Michael Jackson in the running for some of the most abstract events of the last century? (I use the tweezers of scare quotes to approach each of those precarious terms because I'm not certain I could handle them at all otherwise.) "His" face and its occlusion, in the final years, when any nose he had was entirely prosthetic (not to mention the permanent eyeliner and chemical bleaching), became a brutal inversion of all the solar joy he beamed as a young performer—that is, when his face appeared at all, since he was prone to wearing what appeared to be a niqab, "transgendering" his complicated presence as much as cloaking it. I'm not bringing up Jackson's "desire," every bit as abstract as it was intractable, because his "desire" strikes me as even more elusive and imponderable, although many during his lifetime supposed they understood what he repressed or compensated for, even if a fundamental component of whatever his desire might have been remained the sense that he seemed constitutionally uncoupled (and uncouplable).

In Monica Majoli's paintings, "life," "body," and "face" are studied and documented as they are tormented in the crucible of "desire" and its aftermath, when so much has burned away that all that's left is ashes and scars and solitude. Her figures appear ruthlessly naked or undressed or bound, at times entirely obscured in the getups, equipment, and rigging used in sexual communities who yoke leather, rubber, and/or latex for the kinds of s/m gamesmanship in which identity is attenuated almost to its shattering, with pain and pleasure blurred. Obviously this sex gear isn't the niqab or the balaclava. Nor are the practices necessitating it religious or even criminal. And yet both kinds of apparatuses demonstrate aspects of *beholderness* and *devotion* and *submission* and *desubjectivization*, all of which might be arranged to form a continuum that would include rather than exclude such apparent irreconcilables. Some might find such a continuum blasphemous, but my point in postulating it at all, even wishing to plot Jackson somewhere on it, while hyperbolic, is to highlight the ways in which habit has dulled almost any recognition of how unruly and

strange the basic components of interpersonal dynamics are: The habitual is mollified so that who is willing to become vulnerable to whom need never be confronted. Take Majoli's early oil on panel, *Untitled*, 1990, in which a central figure is put through his erotic paces by seven guys going at him all at once, while he's bound into a standing spread eagle, some of his acolytes in leather hoods, others face-deep in his ass or swallowing his cock so as to be beyond recognition; or her watercolor and gouache, *Rubberman Bound #2*, 2007, in which a figure hovers above the ground, gagged by the cords binding him to the tree "he" hangs from, "his" face obliterated by rubber gear, his legs dangling, heavy in boots, just above the unstable ground: Given these examples of the stations of desire or the passion of unrequitedness, I'm not saying one *must* consider her scenarios in relation to Caravaggio's *Incredulity of St. Thomas* or, perhaps more exactly, Rembrandt's crucifixion scenes and Goya's "Disasters of War," but, at the very least, flesh is being put to the test in order to work through something about human existence and that which might exceed it. Art is to be tested as well: Deftly stepping over the tiresome so-called issues of "abstraction" or "figuration," Majoli would seem to be asking whether art can still accommodate and organize such demands for personal and intimate meaning—and if that is no longer its *raison d'être*, where are we?

MAJOLI'S WORK takes up the not uncomplicated problem of fact in an age of truthiness and at a time when painting's engagement of the "theoretical" or "philosophical" is usually sluiced through the "abstract" or "nonrepresentational" ad nauseam, and in a manner that, contrary to the dominant critical modes, probes for "fact" while eschewing the photographic. Whether on Tumblr or Instagram, *Real Housewives* or *Hoarders*, "reality" or what stands in for it frequently seems to exist for the reason of being filmed. When we notice how *film* is no longer the issue in the dissemination of such images, something of what's freshly unnerving starts to come into focus: Reality now appears to be already elsewhere, existing only as a distraction, something just not that interesting or bright enough. Paradoxically, Majoli's "realism," even when "hyperrealistic," seems so by way of witnessing, or by the onslaught of involuntary memory, not by the So, to reconnoiter, the theoretical cul-de-sac that dotes on "abstraction" is obviously hilarious, after Robert Irwin referred to Giorgio Morandi as the only truly genuine Abstract Expressionist in Europe, or decades after Morandi himself reported that "for me nothing is abstract. In fact, I believe there is nothing more surreal, nothing more abstract than reality." Darkly hilarious after Philip Guston and his lumpy sacks, in or out of whatever anyone wishes to take their "gear" to be. Although the zeitgeist could be summed up as the age of Facebook, it is also the age of the face mask, of Abu Ghraib, Pussy Riot, and *Spring Breakers*. With Photoshop assaulting every countenance; with the exacerbation of faciality due to "cosmetic" surgery; and with the difficulty of knowing how a face should be and what a face is (its age, its origination, its difference from an object) and of what it is constructed, any thinking person might wonder what the art-critical-historical hand-wringing over "abstraction" or "nonrepresentation"—often as faceless as it has been formless—is hiding.

EARLY IN HER CAREER, Majoli wrote a letter to the gallerist Florence Bonnefous in order to express the parameters of her endeavor:

One of the most important aspects of the work is that it is nonfictional.

I only paint actual experiences, not fantasies. Within that I elaborate and alter things in the environment, but the activities and the rooms and objects in the interiors are "factual." So in this way I view the paintings as documentary, as a way for me to memorialize events and relationships. The male sex scenes began when a close friend of mine started to go to underground piss parties and became increasingly involved with s/m sex. I had always been fascinated by his anonymous encounters with men. I envied the nonverbal quality and the absolute sexual abandon of his experiences. AIDS confused all this—and I began to wonder about this decision to pursue this despite the consequences. I understood his desire to "connect" through sex regardless of the cost.



Monica Majoli,
Rubberman Bound #2,
2007, watercolor and
gouache on paper, 30 x
22". From the series
"Rubbermen," 2000–2007.

I'd venture that not unlike her friend's quest to "connect' through sex regardless of the cost," no small part of Majoli's beholdenness to the documentary resides in finding something outside the self, something, irrefutably, on which to stub a toe or to bring one to some kind of climax, that nevertheless conditions the self. Via a building up of layers of pigment, which achieves a shimmering surface, the paintings fold the devotional into the mode of their depiction. And that depiction's embeddedness within the "nonverbal" quickens the work's ability to elude any rote theorization, by which I mean: The paintings are in advance of any theory (of sexuality, of subjectivity, of the social) that might be seen to reckon with them.

Few paintings about the "body" and its exposure have so thwarted the naive assumption that anyone truly knows what a body is or how it longs to be configured. Not just burdened by its drive to plumb the limits of interiority, i.e., the skin and what remains of the aura around it, and how those limits feel (rubber a way of intensifying the sensation of those limits, and obliterating them), the figure is liberated, paradoxically, by binding itself to and waiting for "pleasure." Its inside topologically turned out via weird tubing and contraptions, the human thing in the "Rubbermen" series—simultaneously "other" and "self," hidden as it is exposed, exposed by and in its hiddenness—is found to be as delicate and frustrating as a stain, the stain of being.

WHAT DOES A FACT REVEAL? Is memory doomed by facts or, truly, only memorable (involuntarily) when facts dart out of the murk? With six perplexed and perplexing portraits of five former lovers (Pamela, Jarrett, Kate, Amy, and Judie, who garners two separate confrontations) caught in the reflection of the walls of black mirror in the artist's home, Majoli yet again pursued the nonfictional, some documentation of what had been and the emotional drift that remains. Except for *Black Mirror (Judie, 1)*, 2012, the portraits are paired



Monica Majoli, *Untitled*,
1992, oil on panel, 5 x 5".

with “non-representational works on paper,” made with elements of lithography and additional gestures of gouache and ink, as if, through some calculus, the already difficult-to-see visages and parts of bodies of the former lovers had been gridded or mapped as zones of apartness. The specific elusiveness of what is agonized in this juxtaposition proceeds as though Romaine Brooks and Agnes Martin collaborated on an exquisite corpse. The abstraction and/or defacement and/or blankness of the “Rubbermen” here appears as a folding into or out of the intimate and named. The two kinds of works in each pendant present movingly emotive and yet private experience, all of its liminality and psychic travail intact—but with nothing as comfortable or ubiquitous as confession. Neither the “self” nor its “abstraction” provides direct access to any “truth,” which oscillates beyond the reach of, or is lost between, both modes. It’s as if, rather than Warhol, it were Alice Neel who paired portrait with monochrome.

In *Black Mirror (Judie, 1)*, a woman’s head rests against the floral arabesque of a carpet or bedspread. Her shoulder and lips are just barely visible, despite the darkness. (What does it mean to be visible? Isn’t it always a question of, Visible to whom?) Many things are kept in abeyance: Are the figure’s eyes open or closed? Is she sleeping or disconsolate? How does she unravel the narrative of gender or desire as much as she inhabits it or is its cause?

The woman in the second portrait, *Black Mirror (Judie, 2)*, 2012, is seen from a middle distance, stretched out, resting on her right shoulder, the right arm extended, while her left arm, angled tightly, a wing, nestles against her rib cage. She may be wearing a tank top. Because of the lighting, either bouncing off or “into” the pool of the black mirror, her nose is purple, her hands large and seemingly growing larger. Caught in such a crepuscular instant, something murmurs, shifting, a possible aftermath of “girl.” Self-reflection is beyond her right now, or too much all around. Maybe she’ll text somebody and change to go out, not knowing what else to do with herself or how to reconcile this feeling, whatever it is, with those that came just—how long ago—before.

Bruce Hainley is a contributing editor of Artforum. His study of Sturtevant, Under The Sign Of [Sic], will be published by Semiotext(e) later this year.