

Alex Bennett, Review, This is tomorrow (web), November 14, 2017

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Serpentine Sackler Gallery, West Carriage Drive, London W2 2AR

### Torbjørn Rødland: The Touch That Made You



Title : Torbjørn Rødland, Bathroom Tiles, 2011-13

Website : <http://www.serpentinegalleries.org>

Credit : Private Collection

### Torbjørn Rødland: The Touch That Made You

*Serpentine Sackler*

*29 September - 19 November 2017*

*Review by Alex Bennett*

**'Avocado' (2013): a uselessly decadent guacamole bowl, dotted material pulled through its orifice, a tongue to a lip. 'Vacuum Cleaner' (2002): nozzle sucks at a skirt, she freshens her bedding, the dull shock of privilege.**

In Torbjørn Rødland's photography activity is stalled. Chemistry is cauterised and left to breathe and rest, surfaces and nubile skins are luminous and lustful, viscosities slip and collaborate. The motor in these works could be that which is left out, suppressed, unseen either in shadow or out of frame. It is this perversity that shimmers beyond detection, beyond system, titillating attention and enabling coercion. Touch, over-egged in this show, remains manicured and well lit. Still and aestheticised, unintended overflows are no accident. Here, oddity is a signature.

With Rødland's imagery we can understand perversion as solitary drive. Arguably, the deviation exists strongest within established frameworks, and this is where Rødland's demonstration of whiteness, aloft in its privilege as we always knew it, can beautifully buckle. With Paris Hilton and her chihuahua in 'Heiress with Dogs' (2014), or the flat polarity of an elderly man gripped at the collar by an unblemished, muscled youth in 'Midlife Dilemma' (2015), the sexuality of whiteness is grounded in the feel of self-lubricating plastic: extruded and hollow. Clearly, it is sanitised misogyny played back, without loop.

Fashion editorial is a key feature of Rødland's oeuvre, and it gives his work another skin, a greater mobility. Aspirational wealth is played out in the safe confines of a knowing readership, cloaked in catchall keywords: 'progressive politics', that is, politics as polite intellectual fetish, a thin creamy veneer that lends various forms of inequity a palatable, ingestible flavour. It is a readership that can wink back at these images with confidence while imbibing the floral-sweet result of cold-press, flipping through pages graced with half-naked women who appear like porcelain devices enriched in Vetements. Ultimately, the joke (if there really is one) is on the viewer, and that includes the publisher.

Crucially, in Rødland's work, perversity is more than a wink, steeped in privileged taste to a point repellent, his images masticate, reassemble, but do not blankly reaffirm. His work participates in cycles of dominance and power without, at least, mindlessly reinforcing their violence, but revealing their anomic brutality. Here, the politics of context become instrumental. This strange complicity is at its worst when polarities are at their most potent, popular to his fashion editorial; the power relations have flat friction. When contrasts are most diffuse, as with 'Trichotillomania' (2010-1), 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar' (2005), or the elegant arc of piss from 'Boy' (2000), alienation reinforces itself.

His work is at its best in its intractable coiling of dalliances into mordant distortion, a saturnalia of aberration that shows the darkness hidden within easy whimsy. It is left to the individual to gauge how half-hearted Rødland's reaffirmations are of representation's authority, even as he fibrillates them mid-statement. Regardless, it is a judgement that I am sure you will make in good taste.