

BUILD CRACKS

Dicksmith Gallery, London, 2005

What do a punchbag, a ladder, a door handle, a bicycle, a telephone, and a steering wheel have in common? All of these motifs have features prominently in works produced by Kate Davis over the past few years. They have been variously presented as readymades, as 'assisted' readymades, and as wholly reconstituted sculptural objects; or they have appears in two-dimensional images produced through a mixture of techniques including exquisite line-drawing, simple silhouette, collage and frottage, as well as a variety of printmaking processes. They have been incorporated into contexts ranging from full-scale installations to ephemeral posters and a recently published artist's book. What these objects have in common is that they are all mundane, functional objects designed to conform, to varying degrees, to the contours of the human body, thereby enhancing its ability to perform certain everyday tasks. The ways in which they ameliorate our bodily interaction with the world around us range from a rudimentary improvement in physical strength and fitness to the facilitation of a complex interaction with advanced automotive technology. If we add to this list of objects the microphones, headphones, and reading glasses, which are key components in Davis's latest ensemble of works, collectively titled *Build Cracks*, an underlying fascination with the prosthetic enhancement of the human body, on however a modest scale, becomes ever more apparent. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) Freud famously described modern Man as a 'kind of prosthetic God', but noted that humankind's lately acquired 'auxiliary organs' were at once magnificent and troublesome. Of course the rate at which the human body's given physical attributes are artificially augmented has increased exponentially since Freud's day, especially in recent times. Yet these opposing aspects of this incremental evolution seem to be no nearer resolution.

On the whole, it is the troublesome, or somehow compromised, facets of such mechanical or technological augmentation that tend to be foregrounded in Davis's work, as well as the enduring delicacy (rather than frailty) of the human body itself. The objects and images in *Build Cracks* were evidently selected on the basis of their role in the facilitation and receipt of communication (the headphones, microphones, music stand, *Yellow Pages* and reading glasses) and/or their associations with the domestic sphere (the vase, towel rail and door hooks). The distinctly domestic feel of the two Dicksmith gallery spaces provides the ideal environment for this folding of a world of communicative social interaction into a domain of more or less isolated domesticity. Yet this process involves subjecting both realms to a degree of distortion and defamiliarization, which partly accounts for the sense of unease as well as inscrutability which Davis's work often evokes. (The absence of daylight in both rooms, though generally unremarkable in a gallery context, subtly amplifies the viewer's sense of domestic disquietude.) The artificially imposed colour scheme of myriad shades of yellow -- as if the humble *Yellow Pages* had somehow infected all the other objects in the exhibition -- contributes to this 'making strange', while at the

same time drawing these disparate objects into a carefully orchestrated unision that resonates through the two similarly proportioned rooms, situated on different floors of the gallery. This is a strategy Davis has used before -- a solo exhibition at Sorcha Dallas Gallery in Glasgow in 2004 was permeated by flesh-tones, while her recent show at Breeder in Athens was suffused in red -- and she is mindful of the associations borne by different colours, both in popular culture and in classic colour theory. While yellow is conventionally associated with cowardice, Goethe saw it as having 'a serene, gay, and softly exciting character', and thought that a strong pure yellow, for instance, had 'a magnificent and noble effect.' Davis's use of adulterated hues characteristically adds further complexity to such received associations.

In choosing the precise form in which a given object is represented Davis's distinct preference is for the generic rather than the specific, the stereotypical rather than the styled. Hence the old-school bulbous microphones, the traditional 'ear-muff' headphones, the classic foldaway music-stand, the non-designer spectacles. She stresses that such choices highlight the inherent 'potential' (both literal and metaphorical, functional and symbolic, one supposes) of these particular 'forms'. Yet this potential is persistently confounded in actuality. The headphones are made from ceramic. The microphones, too, are mere crockery; or they are depicted as swathed in crumpled pages torn from the Yellow Pages. The microphones dangle impotently from wall-mounted coat hooks. The headphones are slung over a towel rail. The music stand is diverted from its prescribed purpose and used to display drawings. The reading glasses sprout incongruously from a vase in an image printed on a leaf from The Yellow Pages, rendering that ordinarily useful source of reference practically unreadable and consequently useless. In the words of Sylvia Plath, whose poem 'The Applicant' inspired an important earlier series of works, 'The black telephone's off at the root/The voices just can't worm through'.

The objects with which Davis chooses to populate her mute tableaux, in the particular form in which they are represented, more often than not have an air of imminent obsolescence about them. These days, after all, even an up-to-date edition of the Yellow Pages is probably as easy to access on-line as in print. The year before Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* appeared in print Walter Benjamin published his essay, 'Surrealism; the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', in which he commended the Surrealists for 'perceiving the revolutionary energies in the 'outmoded'...the objects that have begun to be extinct'. That was then and this is now. While Davis owes an obvious debt to surrealism, it is one refracted through crucially enabling rereadings of the surrealist legacy in recent decades, especially those informed by feminist theory and engaged with a succession of once marginalized women artists. (Her artist's book *Partners* (2004) draws explicitly on the work of Meret Oppenheim). Despite the fact that such classical surrealist tropes as the monstrous, hybrid or fragmented body play an important role in her evolving pictorial grammar, her work is quieter in tone and has a more muted psychic and erotic charge than most art that has latterly laid claim to this inheritance. While anything but gender-blind, it also registers the attractions of androgynous zones, their highly suggestive indeterminacy. Here the querulous stridency of an earlier generation has

given way to a kind of tense quizzicality. Uncertainty is endemic in a procession of art works, produced over the past five years or so, many of whose titles end tellingly in a question mark. Davis's choice of Stevie Smith's 'Not Waving but Drowning' as the epigram to *Partners* (2005) confirms a fascination with the ambiguous gesture, one which, in extreme circumstances, may turn out to be a matter of life and death. The phrase 'Build Cracks' is itself semantically and syntactically ambiguous. Are we to read 'build' as an imperative or, more obscurely, as a substantive; 'cracks' as a plural nouns or, however improperly, an active verb in the present tense? Ultimately, Davis is an artist of the irresolute, more interested in prising open discursive spaces -- in 'building cracks' -- between familiar objects, images and gestures than in any easy foreclosure of their conventional symbolic meaning.

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