

Lucy Skaer/Anita di Bianco: Elisabeth Kaufmann

ArtForum, Feb, 2007 by Valerie Knoll

The work of Lucy Skaer and Anita Di Bianco is connected by the artists' strategies of appropriation and by their decontextualization and defamiliarization of appropriated materials. The two artists occasionally collaborate on projects; Skaer tends to use photographic materials as sources for works in various media, while Di Bianco's film and video work is frequently based on literary texts and figures. This show, "Minor Characters," was an elegant presentation not of collaborative work but of five autonomous pieces.

Skaer often makes use of drawing and sculpture, and her four works here, all titled after cards of the tarot deck, provide a good example of her recent work. The large-format pencil drawing *Death* (all works 2006), presented as an installation, is based on a photograph of a whale skeleton. Made up of countless tiny spirals creating a kind of matrix, the framework of the bones can scarcely be differentiated from the overall texture of the drawing's surface. This fragmentary and skeletal language of form is characteristic of much of Skaer's work. The original image is removed from its context and subtly metamorphosed to arrive at something entirely different; indeed, one might have a hard time making out the

source image. In the short film *The Joker*, produced especially for the exhibition, the camera focuses on the hands of ninety-eight-year-old Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington, whom Skaer visited at her home in Mexico. In *The Wheel*, a two-part cherrywood sculpture, the aesthetic appeal of the form contrasts with its blunt content. Half of the sculpture is a wooden semicircle that resembles a miniature amphitheater whose cross-section delineates the silhouettes of figures instantly recognizable from a famous photograph taken at Kent State University after four students protesting the Vietnam War were shot and killed by the Ohio National Guard in 1970. That picture became an important symbol of antiwar protest and pacifist attitudes. Given the lack of any mediation here, however, the viewer is obliged to interpret the puzzling schema on the basis of his or her own experience.

Equally complex is Di Bianco's 16-mm film *The Dead Souls Scandal*. The literary foundation of this work is a textual fragment taken from Heinrich Boll's 1971 novel *Group Portrait with Lady*. A female voice offscreen recites the text throughout the film. A construction site and railroad tracks at a desolate "non-location" are shown in a documentary style, through wire netting; people appear only coincidentally. The netting covers the image with a gridlike structure so that the viewer perceives the scene in fragments. The nearness of the camera turns the fence into a blind spot that obliterates and blurs sections of the picture. This imposed pictorial framework has its auditory equivalent in the repetitive rattle of the 16-mm film projector and the train cars. Film, literary text, and title cannot be aligned according to any definite logic but rather lead the viewer to a series of associative readings.

--Valerie Knoll Translated from German by Jane Brodie.

COPYRIGHT 2007 Artforum International Magazine, Inc.

COPYRIGHT 2008 Gale Group