

Gilles Barbier: galerie georges-philippe & nathalie vallois

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What do artworks think about? What do they dream of while hanging in the museum, seeing us walk past them--at times rushed or indifferent--when all they are trying to do is catch our eye and hold our attention? And what curious, vulgar, or abstruse thoughts come to their minds when we stand fixedly before them for long minutes, or then again at night, when the museum is emptied of all visitors? Such questions may seem ridiculous yet become decisive in the face of works like Jeff Koons's mirrored Rabbit, 1986, for example, and they are at the heart of the sculptural work of Gilles Barbier as well.

The proof: In this exhibition, Barbier's entire oeuvre conducted its own self-analysis, a general brainstorming session. This was an oeuvre's chance to gather its thoughts, review its notes, and take stock of its main themes and particularly of its theoretical acquisitions in complete autonomy: describing and exploring itself in marvelously handled black-gouache drawings saturated with writing like so many interior monologues. Here we found skaters, snowboarders, and surfers, adept at the sliding and waves dear to Gilles Deleuze, and skilled at moving, holding forth on the links between the cosmos and cosmetics, considering space to be, as one of the works would have it, a "gigantic network of tubes ... where each mass would have its own toboggan," a "silent and universal slide." In this vast science fiction, we go from the "great departure" of objects to a drawing of a "factory of dreamlike Vaseline," then to a general view of the "pornosphere," a broad and very contemporary realm that serves and intensifies not only our sexual libido but our drive to consume. Mean while, we reencounter the Loch Ness Monster and giant worms out of some science-fiction movie offering themselves as a constant metaphor for the consumer.

No surprise, then, if Barbier's reflection on the contemporary body involves an elaborate reformulation of sculpture. We may recall his exhausted superheroes--superannuated, no longer useful, precisely because they were shown as if at the real age of their copyrights--sitting around lamentably in the installation L'Hospice (Nursing Home), 2002, presented last year in the "American Effect" exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York: a wrinkled Wonder Woman, a skinny Hulk in a wheelchair, Captain America confined to bed and hooked up to an IV, and so on. This time Barbier's work also included "clones" of himself, and he placed his latest in a separate room: a strange wheelbarrow sculpture, Le Prince des ventres (The Prince of Bellies), 2003, where a small Swiss chalet set in a landscape with trees and a lake has been constructed in the pudgy body of an ordinary consumer and a

small voice can be heard singing. Clearly, obesity is doing well for itself. With his hyperrealist clones, heirs to Duane Hanson; his remake of a Carl Andre sculpture composed of slabs of resin in the form of Gruyere cheese (*La Conquete de l'espace* [The Conquest of Space], 2003); or the transparent Plexiglas toilets that he set up in the middle of the gallery (*Business Architecture*, 2003), the ultimate by-product of the ideology of the smooth, the clean, and the transparent, Barbier's work is devoted to imagining the body in the age of intensified consumption and advertising, the biological morphologies of today: What becomes of a body entirely penetrated by the media?

Translated from French by Jeanine Herman.

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