

Jimmy DeSana & Paul P.: Ruins of Rooms

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Beatrice Sacco

“In different ways, Paul and I are both emotionally and politically committed to creating visibility of the forgotten, the outlawed, and the queers that have suffered under political oppression and disregard. We met on a trip to New York, where I went to see Jimmy DeSana’s retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, which I was negotiating to bring to KW. Paul was invited by P.P.O.W., the gallery that also represents the estates of David Wojnarowicz, Martin Wong, and Jimmy DeSana, among others, to research Wong’s drawings in relation to his own work. As I had just organized a Wong retrospective, I was curious to know more about Paul’s research and methodology, especially as he drew inspiration from the same generation of artists as I do. Through this encounter, I became increasingly fascinated by the idea of looking and being looked at and therefore invited Paul to collaborate with me on selecting work from Jimmy DeSana’s oeuvre in relationship to his own work. The resulting exhibition functions like a matryoshka doll, expanding our understanding of portraiture through an overlapping conversation between different generations. Ruins of Rooms is an ode to a lost generation and the conclusion of my program at KW, through which I sought to advocate for the marginalized, the overlooked and the radical.”

With these words Krist Gruijthuijsen comments his last exhibition at KW Institute for Contemporary Art as director, Jimmy DeSana & Paul P.: *Ruins of Rooms*, on view until October 10th. The exhibition is an open dialogue between the exiting director and the two artists, a conversation across time and space that is of a common language.

Jimmy DeSana grew up in suburban Atlanta, and remained fascinated throughout his career by what happens behind close doors, investigating with humor the human body. His practice deals with it almost as an object, and his first series, *101 Nudes*, marks the beginning of his exploration of desexualised bodies in his primary landscape. The pictures, all in a rare black and white, were inspired by the divorce of his parents due to infidelity, and the models he used were himself and his friends, playing with the camera in a simple suburban environment. DeSana then started a collaboration with *File* magazine, and moved to New York where he became part of the punk and no-wave scene and the queer fetish subculture in the late 1970s and early 1980s. His pictures during this period develop their colourful aspect, carrying his practice further.

Contracting HIV in the mid 1980s caused a radical change in his practice: a shift towards abstract and otherworldly imagery that also reflected a shift away from the body, both as a result of the changes in his own figure and the polarizing political climate of the AIDS

epidemic. He temporarily leaves the body behind and starts to capture everyday objects, as in the pictures *Grill* (1987) and *Chair* (1988).

For his latest series, also included at KW, Paul P. started to create furniture, chairs and booths, detaching from the body and starting to work with objects used by bodies, in a similar way to the detachment of DeSana towards the end of his life.

Paul P, born in 1977 in Canada, began his journey dealing with bodies as well, this time though belonging to strangers. They are taken from the pages of gay erotic magazines, from which he extrapolates them and paints them in a meticulous 19th-century aesthetic. These figures look like they belong to another time and place, frozen in the past, and the contrast with their origin and his appropriation is stunning. He is able to take off the glaze of the erotic magazines, and he confronts us with sad solitary figures, stuck in a limbo that feels incredibly familiar.

“I am interested in homosexuality as it existed in eras of criminalization and its stratagems. In my work, I pair the energy of the semi-outlaw gay pornographic industry of the mid-1970s with the defiant attitude of the dandy of the late 19th to early 20th centuries. By imposing the secretive visual language of the latter upon the overt sexual material of the former, my art brings together the implicit and the explicit – the irreconcilable and diverging aims of two historical methodologies – in representing homosexual desire in art,” he writes.

The need to speak about the hidden, and to take a stand for disregarded communities is a common trait of these three figures, whose work manages to connect, creating a conversation that remains still very relevant. How do we relate to our bodies? How does illness affect them? How do we deal with the marginalised in our society and in ourselves? The way we need to look at things need to remain open and vigilant, and their work helps us to do so.

The dialogue continues outside the museum with the publication done this year of the last book by Jimmy DeSana, *Salvation*, realised by Primary Information and Laurie Simmons Studio (Danielle Bartholomew, Laurie Simmons, and Mary Simpson). Laurie Simmons is a contemporary artist whose stunning work about the female body remains iconic to this day. She was a friend of DeSana and the beauty of this publication lays also in the fact that a close person to the artist was able to finish something he couldn't. Following the instructions he left behind, Simmons was able to create the book, which goes back for one last time to the body, a body dying. The pictures reconnect his latest photographic abstractions to a quiet and poetic meditation on loss, death and nothingness. An important document of his legacy, this publication and the exhibition at KW are there for us as a reminder of humanity, of the liminal space between life and death, pain and pleasure, and they bring us on a poetic journey about our bodies and our inner selves.

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Primary Information