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By Josephine Berry

Review of Aziz + Cucher's photography show

When does a human stop being human and when does a computer cable start being anthropomorphic? The show *Unnatural Selection*, by the San Franciscan artists Aziz + Cucher at the Photographer's Gallery this autumn, traces and opens up interstices between humans and their attendant technologies. The continuous nature of man and machine is investigated through the morphing of 'actuality' and dystopian fantasy into chimeras of the lived present and projected future. As the show demonstrates, it doesn't require a radical alteration of perspective to see inanimate qualities in humans and the animate second nature of the object world.

The work *Still-Life Series*, 1996, consists of two photographic series of object groups; the first untitled and mounted on the wall and the second entitled *Discontinue...Now* and displayed in a vitrine. The untitled works show close-ups of objects, partly sheathed in pinkish latex and partly bound in medical gauze, whose only readily identifiable parts are the computer cables and ports that traverse their sterile surfaces. The masking effect of the sheathing means that the objects can only be loosely ascribed to the family of small-scale, household electronic gadgets. Swaddling these 'gadgets' in latex and gauze also lends them the suggestion of vulnerability and pathology. *Discontinue...Now* also presents objects which defy our powers of accurate identification, but this time remaining closer to the conventional appearance of computer design. These objects have been photographed against a black backdrop in the heavily shadowed and sensual style of commercial photography, aligning them to computer design through their shared coloration ('computer beige') and the ergonomic quality of their forms. The viewer's dawning suspicion that they are entirely without utilitarian function is soon confirmed by the explanatory text which tells you that they have been specially cast from moulds designed by the artists.

In both photographic series human qualities are transposed onto the object world which they produce and inhabit. The untitled group of photos adopts a medical vocabulary - computer parts are partly sheathed in pinkish latex and partly in medical gauze - that hints at the contiguous relationship between embodiment and objecthood and the proximity between fetish and pathology. Notions of human frailty are transposed onto the object world. *Discontinue...Now* achieves similar ends through its questioning of the relationship between development and obsolescence - technology's inbuilt frailty. Its objects have been photographed against a black backdrop in the heavily shadowed and sensual style of commercial photography. Their coloration ('computer beige') and the ergonomic quality of their forms again aligns them to the world of computer design. Only on reading a wall text explaining that the objects are custom made for the artists is the perplexed viewer able to accept that these objects are entirely without utilitarian function. Aziz + Cucher's obsolete objects, so inextricably linked to the body through their ergonomic determination and their inference of pathology and biology, create an eerie parallel to the aberrations of controlled breeding. Analogous to the physical impairment of a pug's nose resulting from the excesses of aesthetic perversion, the inferred evolution of technological devices, ostensibly driven by a passion for utility, paradoxically result in an equal loss of functionality.

Aziz + Cucher's imaginations do not rest at insinuating the impact of the Western fetish for ceaseless development upon its phenotypes, but also visualise a projective human physical evolution driven by the phenotypic forces of culture and technology themselves. Through the use of digital manipulation Aziz + Cucher have produced two series of Ektacolor prints - *Faith, Honour & Beauty*, 1992, and

Dystopia, 1994-5 - in which socio-technological developments are inscribed upon the body. The former work focuses on the dehumanising effects of American Republicanism in the early 90s. These values are expressed through the representation of nude, classically posed, idealised 'WASP' subjects, each carrying an attribute relating to the gender stereotypes and consumerism espoused by American conservatism. The photographs parody these values both through the absurdity of conflating classical antiquity with the products of a technologised consumer society - a nude man stands, right arm raised and finger pointed in the manner of visionary or prophet, holding a Macintosh Powerbook in his left hand - and through the erasure of their nipples, navels and genitals which render the protagonists barren, asexual and hence ahuman. Each individual's defining attribute - a bowl of apples, fur coat, hand-mirror and child - reduce humans to their (stereotypical) utilitarian identity, and again offers a parallel and equalising treatment of both humans and their objects. Their lack of procreative and sexual powers again reinforce their objecthood - they become like organic machinery, or cyborgs assimilated by their own phenotypes.

In *Dystopia* a similar treatment creates a rather different result. In these bust-length portraits of nude subjects, photographed in a similarly corporate style against monochromatic backgrounds, all 'facial orifices' have been cancelled by means of skin grafts. As the wall text explains, 'By erasing the facial features, while preserving the humanity of the sitters in their gestures, Aziz + Cucher confront the viewer with both the anonymity of modern life and the rapidly decreasing opportunity to interact "face to face". In this imagined and extreme technological era, physical communication is no longer possible and evolutionary change has left us totally and horrifically dehumanised'. Whether inadvertent or otherwise, I detected within these 'dehumanised' representations certain utopian qualities admittedly at odds with their title. In a sense the obsolescence of the human body wrought by the telematic power of technology also suggests a Gibsonian disembodiment or life beyond the body's limits. Also, the balance reached by these images between individuality and homogeneity can be understood in terms of a sort of social *Gestalt* - difference being subordinated to the operations of the whole - which, although admittedly ominous in this particular incarnation, could also be seen as having a utopian element. The ambiguity cast by these images, despite title and explanatory text, opens up Aziz + Cucher's formulation of the man/machine paradigm. In their own words, 'In no way do we want to be prophets of doom, or even to think that we have a high moral ground to warn society about the ills of technology. To begin with we are not Luddites; technology is here to grow with us - hopefully not against us'.

The sealed and internalised appearance of *Dystopia*'s subjects is reminiscent of the features of humans in the foetal stages, replete with the same notion of contingent development. Aziz + Cucher formulate this ambiguity once again in the exhibition pamphlet, remarking, '[...] we can't help feeling that behind the much touted hype about the communications superhighway and the Internet, lies a much more isolated human being, and a society in which public space, even civic structures, as we know them are liable to disappear. It is impossible to judge whether these developments will be for better or worse, who knows, perhaps we will all be happier being completely shut down from exterior experience [...].' The nagging question posed by the show is whether our next evolutionary step (in the broadest sense) is a step toward our own obsolescence or an up-grading of our ontological utility.

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