

PARTICIPATOR

WHEN I SAW Kate Davis' drawing *Untitled* (2003) for the first time, I was amazed by its daringly hybrid appearance. A fleshy neck grows out of a doubled plinth and stretches out in an almost Baconesque, phallic way. On its top there is a kind of a 'head'. But the head's 'face' has unidentifiable features. The mess of sketched structures in it looks like a wildly-grown plant. There are many of these strange creatures which Davis gives birth to in her body of work. They consist mainly of fragmented body parts: legs, arms, breasts. But their most disturbing aspect is their fusion with objects like pedestals, drapery or a table.

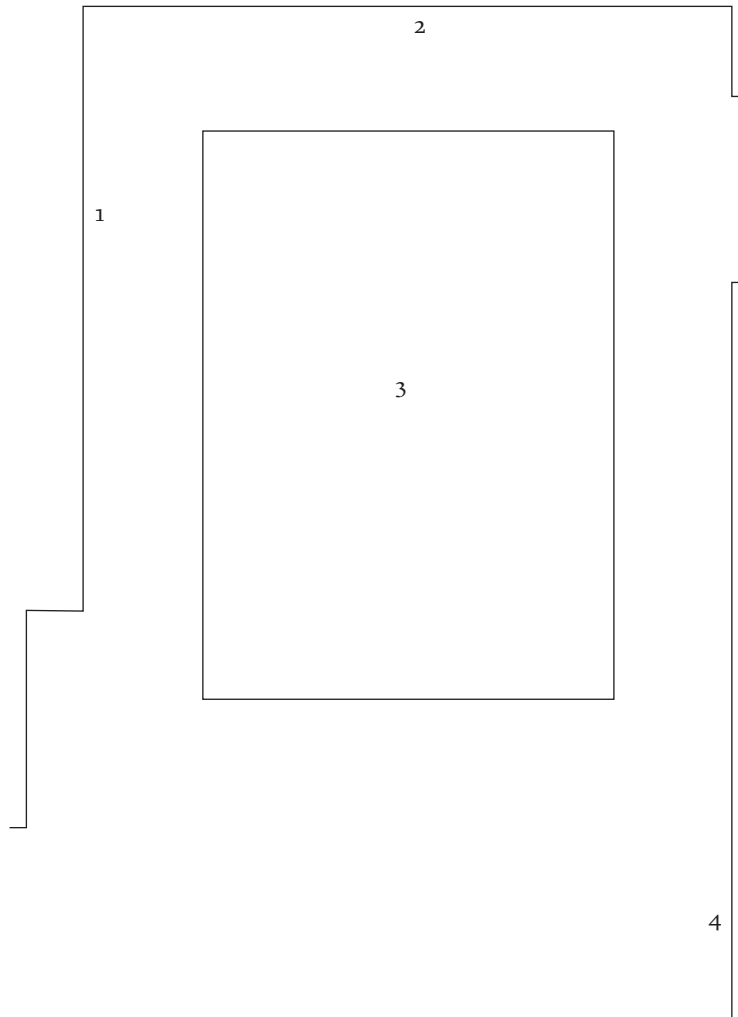
In these earlier works, particularly in the *Applicant* series, these fusions were composed by the contrasting and yet uniting operations of the synthetic collage. In the new paper works in this exhibition at Sorcha Dallas the body parts become objects and objects become bodies.

The bizarre improbability of these unions is increasingly evoked by the aesthetic manoeuvre of 'melting' them together; reaching at a new coherence of the image-prop. What we get is a new parade of dubious objects which, in the vision proposed by the artist, are to populate, to inhabit our daily life and our domestic spheres, maybe without us being able to notice yet. It seems that Davis would like to show us that there could exist a new animated world in our environments, beneath what we consider to be common and real.

A leaned-back fleshy wine bottle has handles which are crossed behind its bottle-neck in a dandy way. A cup shapes the figure's voluminous belly. The bottle-creature stands on a small rectangular table which has the same fleshy tone as the object. The leaning pose shapes a shadow on the table. The background is painted in a rich dark blue. In the shadowy back room there is another black round object revealed only as a partial eclipse to us. We can just guess that it is a circular object in the interior. Or maybe just another disturbing hybrid. The function of the bottle is stressed by the fact that it is still part-filled with red wine – what a bold image of a dandy pregnant wine bottle. The whole still-life is illuminated in a way which cannot be described simply as visual drama, but which has more of a cool, light dramaturgy. The shadow effects on the bottle's surface provoked by the simple pencil hatching look like a parody of Giorgio Morandi, the master of the modern ultra-subtle still life.

The other motif in the show presents an equally absurd scenario. This time we have to come to terms with a triple hybrid. There is a wine glass which has dropped down from the edge of a brick or, more likely, a table corner. But the stand of the glass is shaped like a stiletto heel which makes it impossible for the glass to ever be able to stand upright and to perform its appointed daily function. The glass is lying on the dark ground, broken. Wine has poured out and formed a tongue-shaped puddle. So what we get here is a capricious stiletto-glass-mouth.

Even more than the former *Applicants* these figurations are closely related to the special re-incarnations of Surrealist painting, the pictorial re-enactment of the



1 *Could you please should, please?*, 2004 (pencil on paper)

2 *Could you please?*, 2004 (screenprint and paint on paper)

3 *Could you please should?*, 2004 (paint and platform)

4 *Could you?*, 2004 (pencil on paper)

body's imaginary potentials. The cool operation of the enigma is at work in them, schematising the body and treating it manneristically to an extent that the organic, figurative and representational nature of it dissolves, *excarnates*, 'which offers the prospect of a return of the flesh'.¹ The body-nature in the Surrealist imagination is perceived as effected by its various declines and modes of alienation and destruction in modernity. But exactly by this enforced transformation we get a new vision of the body and 'unknown physical experiences'.² Henceforth figuration is exposed to danger, risk and experiment.

What Kate Davis exposes to us is a pictorial situation in which there is nothing beyond this new mode of danger — and it is welcome in her world of creation. Davis leads the body into a realm beyond its integrity. It gets a new contemporary life here — already far away from the formal demonstrations of Cubist and Futurist art, which exposed the body to its modern mechanisations in cascades of polished cylinders, bereft of any fleshy presence — but nevertheless alienating in its obsession with the machine-man-hybridisation; and maybe less far away (although already arriving somewhere else) from the fetishistic hybrids in Surrealism. When Breton in *Les Vases Communicants* (1932) writes about the energy that is set free by the meeting of two very different objects, he aims primarily at an eruptive pan-eroticism: 'two different bodies, rubbed against the other, attain, by their spark, their supreme unity in fire.'³

But in Kate Davis' motifs there is more of a domestic obsession — instead of the 'supreme unity' of the holy church of Surrealist eroticism — an obsession with the domestic sphere more related to Meret Oppenheim's notorious fur-lined tea set in *Le Déjeuner en Fourrure* (1936). Other women artists have used domestic objects as allegories for discriminatory forces. Polish sculptress Alina Szapocznikow⁴ experimented in the late 1960s in the series called 'Cendrier de Celibataire I–IV' with polyester imprints of her own body, like half heads, breasts and belly, formed like ashtrays in which she dropped real cigarette butts. But although the image of a women's head used as an ashtray for an imaginary bachelor is quite drastic, Szapocznikow's sculptures are not determined by scenarios of oppression and exploitation of the female. She uses these images as a provocative new artistic language, the too-close-to-the-body-nature of the imprint as an almost non-artistic technique undermining late modernism's premises of abstraction. The always-endangered, omnipresent and concrete eroticism of her sculptures is a site of a joyful and courageous play with the limitations of society and art. She once stated: 'I direct my gesture towards the human body, towards this "totally erogenous sphere", towards man's most ambiguous and fleeting emotions.'⁵

Similarly in Kate Davis' images the body-objects start to have their own secret life. Out of the dark domestic spaces (which bear no traces of the individual) these figurines seem to wake up at night, filtrating out of the human psychological debris of the day an energetic force which animates their dandy awakening. The iconography of feminist stances on the objectification of the female body due to domestic oppression is used by Davis in a much more independent way. Her figures, similar to Szapocznikow's, exist in no way beyond or freed from historical and daily limitations. But they carry these

phenomena within or around them like the aggressive beauty of a corset. And even more, they develop out of their determinations and cryptic nature an eccentric and powerful artistic imagination of their own. In this new sphere exists no logic anymore of the normal and healthy versus the unconventional and unbalanced, of a clear cut female and masculine Gestalt. There is an androgyny to almost all of her creatures. But even more obvious, the visionary mechanism of the bizarre, the hybrid, the enigmatic inhabits her images, leaving the human outline behind. They are applicants for a still-unfamiliar future.

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1 Ralph Ubl, 'Flesh and Enigma: an Uncanny Dialectic in Surrealism', in upcoming exhibition catalogue for 'Flesh at War with Enigma' (Enrico David [London]/Kate Davis [Glasgow]/Julian Göthe [Berlin]/Diango Hernández [Kuba/Trento]/Piotr Janas [Warsaw]/Alina Szapocznikow [Kalisz 1926–Praz-Coutant 1973]). Curated by Anke Kempkes, Kunsthalle Basel, 19th September–14th November 2004.

2 Ralph Ubl, *Ibid.*

3 Quoted by Julian Kelly, 'Prière de Frôler: The Touch in Surrealism'. In: *Surrealism. desire unbound*, ed. Jennifer Munday, London 2001, p. 80

4 Kate Davis conceived the display for Alina Szapocznikow's sculptures of the 1960s in the recent show 'Flesh at War with Enigma' by designing a variety of plinths which related back to the use of these dated institutionalised presentational forms in her own drawings and sculptures.

5 Alina Szapocznikow, April 1972, in: *Alina Szapocznikow. Capturing Life*, ed. Josef Grabski, Cracow/Warsaw 2004.