

Bad Mannerism

Galerie pompom, 2-27 May 2018

Bad Mannerism brings together artists of diverse sensibilities, each of whom explores a non-conventional approach to figuration. The theme 'Bad Mannerism' is centred on the potential subversiveness of the Mannerist style, in which artifice and exaggeration are employed as strategies to playfully critique 'virtuosity', especially in relation to idealisations of the body and the objects it encounters. This coalesces with the common understanding of mannerisms as idiosyncratic human gestures or foibles—good, 'bad' or otherwise. A sly pun is also set in motion by the allusion to ill-considered social comportment, or a lack of politesse, suggesting artworks may be unapologetic in what they propose—in their unashamed ambiguity, performativity, or curious materiality. The Mannerist approach reflects a tendency amongst various artistic traditions to eschew naturalism in favour of the affective impact of 'eccentric figuration.'¹

The exhibition references the art historical context of Mannerism, a 16th Century style that reacted to the aesthetic apotheosis of the High Renaissance by deploying stylistic devices such as collapsed perspective, irrational settings, elongated forms and precariously balanced poses. The freedom of invention and heightened emotional pitch of Mannerist works indicated a reorientation of the role of the artist as a resourceful and independent thinker, unburdened by the cultural supremacy of the High Renaissance and its artistic and social orthodoxies. Other characteristics common to Mannerist works include distortion of the human figure, a flattening of pictorial space, and elaborate decoration. A number of these attributes were maintained in the successive period of Baroque art, which also featured such characteristics as high drama and implied movement — qualities that are present in many of the artworks in *Bad Mannerism*.

The idea of 'bella maniera' (beautiful style), associated with the Mannerists' appropriative strategies and their divestment of naturalism, is central to the aesthetic and conceptual intention of the exhibition. Bella maniera was theorised as an approach that employed the best from a number of sources, synthesizing it into something new. This is a familiar paradigm in the 21st Century where an atemporal or anachronistic perspective frames art historical time as a vast 'internet' of artificial designations in which tradition is an un-concluded agenda, rather than a series of ruins, or something that has been stabilised once and for all. Many of the artists in *Bad Mannerism* quote art historical images, objects or techniques and reanimate these sources with concerns from the present.

The Mannerist sensibility resembles Susan Sontag's ideas on camp where the world might be seen 'not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylisation.'² It celebrates the eccentric and the performative by openly exemplifying the constructs and conceits that visual art deploys to bring attention to both itself and the object of artistic application. While Mannerism has also been framed pejoratively—hence the not unwelcome connotation of 'wrongness', pastiche or anti-climax—the artwork in this exhibition shows how the 'mannered' and the authentic are not mutually exclusive. This perspective acknowledges that humour can already reside in the serious, 'reality' in the artificial, and doubt in what might appear outwardly certain.

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**Chris Aerfeldt's** paintings in *Bad Mannerism* employ the appropriative tactics of the Mannerists and their peculiar stylisation of figures, embodied in the mannequins she has painted into scenes imported from Seurat's famous paintings of the Seine in Paris. Aerfeldt states, 'I was fascinated with *La Grande Jatte* when I discovered it at the age of nine in our family encyclopaedia and dared to cut it out for my scrapbook'. She particularly identified with the idea of social performance and aspirational lifestyle that Seurat so cleverly highlighted by contrasting societal groups on opposite sides of the river – the affluent bourgeoisie of *La Grande Jatte*, and the working class of *Bathers at Asnières*. Aerfeldt points to the artificiality of social pretences and distinctions by dubbing the plastic dummies that inhabit these painted scenes *Siri*, *Alexa*, and *Cortana*, names given to the ubiquitous and disembodied voices we call our 'virtual assistants' today.

In **Chris Dolman's** artworks, practically everything and everyone is non-conformist, from the body fashioned from negative space in *Incognito sans pants*, to the 'bad-mannered' characters of *Too Many Chefs* and *After Party*. In the spirit of a Hogarth etching, Dolman's characters jostle each other for room to smoke, drink and eat (and, one assumes, cough, belch and fart) within the confines of pictorial space. Their medieval irreverence and comic extensions (and excretions) push Mannerist exaggeration to new extremes. In Dolman's hands the stylisation of caricature becomes a metaphor for the tragicomic moments of day-to-day life. These scenarios are depicted with the kind of tongue-in-cheek humour that references both the absurd and the emotive registers of human pathos.

**Lynda Draper's** ceramic works in *Bad Mannerism* combine the monumental with the playful. As objects, they suggest both 'body' and 'world' in their looping skeletons of pinched clay adorned with various protrusions. Draper's artworks have been described as possessing a certain 'economy of touch'<sup>3</sup> evident in the sensitive consideration of colour and distribution of shape, yet they are also exuberant manifestations of invention and process. In the work *Spring*, the Janus-

like head appears to sprout tentative forms that resemble flora and fungi, while *Black Widow's* improbable anatomy is more imposing, though this is offset by her spidery pink crown and delicately formed embellishments. Draper's objects invite an empathic response from the viewer elicited by their tenderly moulded anthropomorphism and a sense of tactility that indexes both the artist's hand and imagination.

**Drew Connor Holland** creates images of the virtual body and embeds them into the fabric of hand-made pulp paper, an unexpected meeting of fluid avatar and the intractably physical detritus of everyday life: penalty notices, wrappers, business cards, dried native flora, schedules, etc. These existential aggregates of what Holland describes as 'junk, street trash, and things I can't throw away' are recycled from his life, referencing the way we consume material culture and use it to furnish an ever-transitioning identity. Holland's prints employ the mannerist tropes of distortion and exaggeration that are familiar features of the virtual body. Through the inherent artifice of these devices, he shows how traditional understandings of bodies and identities can be expanded and traversed in the context of technology, and re-materialised on surfaces amassed from the by-products of existence.

**Chelsea Lehmann's** paintings are influenced by mannerist affectation and the grandiosity of the baroque figure. In *The Snake (after Cagnacci)*, Cleopatra is unleashed on the future with unbridled, heroic force, playing on the idea of the 'hallucinatory relationship between past and present', considered a key hallmark of the Baroque period.<sup>4</sup> In this painting, based on Guido Cagnacci's *Death of Cleopatra*, the performativity of the Baroque is envisaged through the brushstroke, exemplifying the uncontrolled excesses of form and expression common to both mannerist and baroque sensibilities. Lehmann responds to Cagnacci's painting by deploying Baroque painting's conceits to underscore the very artifice of imagining/imaging the bodies and fates of women through the male gaze, showing how these representations might become less fixed and less stable through 'excessive' gestures.

**Madeleine Preston's** objects reference the body through the archetype of the 'vessel'. Her work in *Bad Mannerism* is based on the unusual and frequently elongated forms of medieval glassware housed in the Cluny museum in Paris, which holds a remarkable collection of objects from the Middle Ages. Preston explores these delicate and deteriorated receptacles and the curious functionality of glasses with precariously round bases, speculating on their possible role in religious practices, or to impede over-imbibing, (or perhaps the opposite – to encourage drinking). Reaching far back into the archives of human civilisation, Preston responds to these artfully conceived vessels by reimagining their materiality and context, alluding to tensions between necessity and luxury, utility and artifice.

**Bruce Reynolds** re-envisions the Baroque personage and the decorative tendencies of mannerist architecture through the provisional material of plaster. In these wall-based objects, the ancientness of the casting process and the gravitas of the artefact are re-framed through material improvisation. In *Man of Letters*, chunks of carefully cast and carved plaster are fitted together to construct an intellectual 'type' whose facial features have been replaced with marine motifs rendered in the relief style. These forms resemble aquatic marvels like the Australian yabby, as well as patterns from Chinese ceramics, in an unlikely coupling of East and West. In contrast, *Coronet Sconce* emphasises the tactility and rudimentary qualities of plaster as a counterpoint to the frequently ornate tendencies of these lighting fixtures. Both works point to the potential of cultural, material and geographical combinations and the treasure seeking of the transhistorical gaze.

Chelsea Lehmann, 2018.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Eccentric Figuration' is a term that has gained currency in recent years, and was largely informed by the 1978 exhibition *Bad Painting* at the New Museum, New York. The curator of the exhibition (and the museum's director at the time) Marcia Tucker, said of the exhibition, "'Bad" Painting is an ironic title for 'good' painting, which is characterized by deformation of the figure, a mixture of art-historical and non-art sources, and fantastic and irreverent content.' The term also appears in the catalogue essay for *Eccentric Figuration: The Painting in NY Group* (Jennifer Samet, 'Painting in New York', May 19<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011), and in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age: Gesture and Spectacle, Eccentric Figuration, Social Networks*, Eds. Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit, Museum Brandhorst, Munich, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', in *Against Interpretation*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> 'Lynda Draper: Why I Create', Phaidon, (web). <http://au.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2018/january/08/lynda-draper-why-i-create/>. Accessed 24/5/2018.

<sup>4</sup> I. Lavin, 'Why Baroque' in *Going for Baroque: Eighteen Contemporary Artists Fascinated with the Baroque and Rococo*, exh. cat., eds. L.G. Corrin & J. Spicer, The Contemporary and The Walters museums, Baltimore, MD, 1995, p. 5.