Becky Beasley: Sleep is when you grow

Curated by Vladimir Vidmar

Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana, Slovenia

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Link to Skuc Gallery website

for further information and exhibition documentation:

https://www.galerijaskuc.si/exhibition/becky-beasley-sleep-is-when-you-grow/

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The exhibition is a co-production between Škuc Gallery and the International Centre for Graphic Arts,

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It is the unheimlich sensation that engulfs the viewer on first entering the show, as if what is the most intimate in us emanated a disquieting kind of unfamiliarity, an unsettling opacity. Sleep is when you grow is a show based, like much of Beasley’s work, on the tensions between the image, object and language. Two photographic images. Abstract, shelf like structures. A pair of huge revolving sculptures. Images that change into objects and objects that perform as images. On the one hand, there are only two photographs in this solo exhibition; the first a large, life-size close-up of the foliage of a fig tree, the second a small, life-size image of a man’s hand holding a pair of walnuts. On the other, there are hundreds of photographs, those comprising the work Flora, A Life (2013). Like leaves –both those in a book and a tree – the works in this exhibition all consider abstracted nature as a way of thinking about time and space; as cyclical, seasonal, sexual, familial. But what is it that makes these works so familiar, captivating, and simultaneously ominous? It is the fact that they are not to be taken as mere elements of a natural language with its expressive allegorical ranges, but that they articulate a distrust of language. They are condensed into mathemes, formulas that reveal the limits of the utterable and representable, opening up an ambivalent zone where the Real protrudes through the cracks in the Symbolic.

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We are surrounded by formulas. Fig Tree (2001, Amwell Street) (2014), a large size silver gelatine print, is dissolved in the book work Days of Life (2015), the fragments of which intersects with an autobiographical poem in prose, a reflection of the artist’s pregnancy and birth of her first child. Mano fica, manus obscena. The fruit that the ancient Romans dedicated to the god Bacchus and associated with the cult of fertility, unveils in the paired work sexuality as the moment of irruption of the unthinkable, introducing the show as an ambiguous topography of evocation and receding. Walnut Hand, a small photograph of a decontextualized man’s hand holding a pair of walnuts, seems to imply a distant male input to the (impossible) sexual equation. Given (Cock & Clam) (2015) is a formula in its own right; a huge revolving sculpture containing two small paired pearwood objects. These assume proportions taken from Duchamp’s Étant donnés, a voyeuristic installation that consistently appears in Beasley’s works.

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Within the show both formulas adopt their specific formal dynamics. While Fig Tree and Days of Life interchange portrait and landscape orientation, Given (Cock & Clam) takes up a mechanical immersion in space, reflecting on the question of the body between the work, human presence and space. The large rhomboid structure is set revolving in a gallery room of the same shape, with each turn confirming and then rebelling against perspectival image space. Reference to Duchamp’s Étant donnés by abstracting its proportions and applying them to the work is by no means accidental.  With his final work, Duchamp emphatically negated the pictorial plain through his radical reliance on the perspective view, thus reaffirming his belief in the hermeneutic effort, the act of reading and interpreting, constitutive of Beasley’s practice.

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In the following string of mathemes, the question of the body is aligned with another phenomenon that resists the signifying power of the symbolic order, death. Shelves for my Parents (A Shelf for My Mother, A Shelf for My Father) (2010)  and Brocken (2009), sculptural parental portraits, condense and recombine bodily proportions of artist’s parents, taking measurements like a tailor for a new suit or a carpenter preparing a coffin. And indeed, Beasley’s wood works possess a certain stifling quietness, invoked by the impossible presence of death, in constant evasion of the symbolization in the letter, object or image. This experience is intensified by the meditative pace of the film A Man Restored a Broken Work (2015), in which a man’s hands are seen restoring one of artist’s sculptures.

Beasley’s sculptural and photographic contemplations on creation, re-creation and procreation thus bear witness to the enigmatic evasiveness of the Real. One would therefore venture to attach yet another element to the sequence of sexuality and death, that of the mother. Although Becky’s reflections on motherhood take place through a symbolist metaphor of changing nature and the seasons throughout the show, in its alliance with other works it becomes an ambivalent moment of otherness, stifling presence and withheld absence. Sleep is when you grow hence thickens around the image of motherhood as the fixed vanishing point of all desire. Like with the image of the mother, the exhibited works give themselves in the fullness of their materiality only to show it as the signifier without true referents. The first – and last – work, Bearings (2014), a three-metre-long suspended brass branch – made by bolting together various small casts of twigs found by the artist’s father after the St Jude storm – is suspended in the entrance to the gallery. Its slow, disoriented rotation becomes a model for the parcours of the visitor, navigating the digressive sequence of interconnecting rooms. So, too, the movements of other displayed works become elements of notation, orbiting each other in their impossible mission of reference to the seasons of sexuality and death.

Text by: Vladimir Vidmar