Christoph Zellweger: Domesticated
Marsden Woo Gallery
13 January - 13 February 2016
Review by Aris Kourkoumellis

In his new show at the Marsden Woo Gallery in East London, Christoph Zellweger has turned the exhibition space into a contemporary shrine of physical self-improvement. Some of his installation pieces resemble fitness facilities, whereas others call to mind equipment used in cosmetic surgery clinics. Amid the intriguing versions of a barbell, a swing and a weight bench, there are two waiting room chairs teamed with a couple of complicated constructions. These include a cabinet with a sample-book for labiaplasty, which enables one to view a wide selection of folds and shapes available to the potential client.
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Born and raised in Switzerland, Zellweger was brought up in a family of goldsmiths. His
early decision to follow the family tradition by serving an apprenticeship as a jewellery
maker is one way his work is informed; his later enrolment into the Royal College of Art,
which was instrumental in switching vocation, is another. Instead of hiding his deep-
rooted fascination with style, detail and craftsmanship, he made his art out of it. Yet
codifying the influence of Zellweger’s technical ability upon his artistic output is not
what sets him apart from other artists. Neither is the exhibition’s apparent commentary
on the vanity of physical beauty in contemporary western societies.

During recent years there have been numerous contributions to a broader
understanding of what the social endorsement of reshaping physical appearance to fit
certain conventional images might mean. Much of this has been in response to
postmodernism, and to feminist criticism in particular, which, since the 1970s, has
been exploring evaluations of the body based on its appearance, objectification and
commercialisation. In design, gym mania was central for the ‘Body Building’ series by
Alberto Biasiotti and Laura Baldassari, and for the ‘Shaping Bodies’ installation by Bas
Geelen and Erik Hopmans. But this theme does not seem to be Zellweger’s key
preoccupation here.

Both the weight bench and the waiting room chair are a clue to Zellweger’s actual
artistic intentions. At first sight, they seem elegantly crafted design products, expensive
objects that could be easily found in luxurious gyms and cosmetic surgery clinics. You
need to be more deeply informed to realise that the weights hanging under the bench
are actually testicle stretchers used to increase the male orgasm experience, whereas
the breast-shaped waiting room chairs are stitched with the lollipop pattern preferred
by surgeons when performing breast-lift operations. These little disruptions of the
otherwise meticulously handcrafted objects are indicative of Zellweger’s skill for
rendering awkward the familiar and unwanted the desirable, but they also speak of
another narrative that quietly threads its way through his work. Design is used here to
draw our attention to design itself, exposing its key role in seducing individuals into the
temples where the flawless, lean body and the airbrushed Hollywood face are
worshipped. Like the Catholic Church that used architecture and art as tools to transfix
the pious crowds during the Counter-Reformation years, gyms and cosmetic clinics are
now using design as an effective means to attract their clientele. Zellweger does not
hold back, and it is precisely to this shocking intellectual honesty and humour that his
work owes its greatest depth.

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