

this is tomorrow

Contemporary Art Magazine

Marsden Woo Gallery, 23 Charlotte Rd, London EC2A 3PB

Christoph Zellweger: Domesticated



Title : Installation view of Christoph Zellweger, Domesticated at Marsden Woo Gallery, 2016

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Christoph Zellweger: Domesticated

Marsden Woo Gallery

13 January - 13 February 2016

Review by Aris Kourkoumelis

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 Biagetti 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 worshiped. 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.