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We Live Only Through Ourselves

Catalogue Essay

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“What is the good of this work? The question contains a challenge to contemporary practitioners...that is connected more to what we have become than to what we might propose...The challenge is the supposition that artists today—whether they like it or not—have fallen into a trap that is predetermined by their existence within a regime that is centered on a rampant capitalization of the mind.”

–Liam Gillick “The Good of Work”

Two prevailing ideas driving the discourse of contemporary art run counter to core notions about what makes art successful. Stifled young artists are forced to choose between accepted artistic permissions in order to participate in this discourse. One idea, states that narratives about the History of Art have run their course and artists are free to pick and choose, mix and match at will to create something new. Another says that we are still unpacking the narratives that led just to this moment, placing us back in that familiar linear narrative arc.

The challenge for contemporary artists becomes one of rising above this restrictive, style-driven milieu. In addition to transcending classic mind/body, high/low dichotomies the artist must work outside restrictive historical narratives if he is to make work of any significance in this moment. Given the practical challenges of merely getting into the studio in this economy it is easy to understand the difficulty in moving beyond professional art regimes. To transcend all of this takes a special kind of finesse.

Ben Buswell creates poetic objects that have presence and gravitas because they open up new liminal spaces that allow viewers to engage with the sublime and feel ascension. He has a reductive aesthetic that is more about focusing thought upon the material and how it is worked and less about carrying the torch of any one movement or style. Restrained small gestures and marks, bordering on the obsessive, represent grand shifts in thought. Whether using construction-grade insulation foam or some strange epoxy the rest of the “art world” has likely not heard of, Buswell has demonstrated, with increasing prowess how to join material and concept toward making work with finesse and import.

We Live Only Through Ourselves is an exhibition of new artworks that incorporate a range of sculptural objects and framed works, some freestanding and some wall-mounted. Buswell presents a tent, a vessel and trapezoidal forms that house embellished photographs at human scale. The works speak poetically about a

range of issues related to time, loss and their relationship to work. Photographic images of sand and water are embellished with lines made by scratching away the emulsion. Like picking at a scab to reengage the feeling of a healing cut, the scratching reveals the paper beneath at once reading as part of the image while simultaneously allowing us to see through the actual image to some of the inner workings. Like the familiar image of prisoners marking time with a day corresponding to a line, this evidence of the hand marks time. Yet the time it took to make, the time it takes to view and the concept of time in general become conflated as we experience the aesthetic pleasure of viewing Buswell's objects.

Among the half a dozen works *When the Cathedrals Were White* stands out as a particularly poignant piece. At just slightly smaller scale than a "real" tent it is a simple triangular prism form created out of graphite marks on and holes cut into polypropylene, a sort of plastic paper, stretched on a frame. The prismatic form evokes a classic pup tent and is completed with a simple sleeping mat. Lighting from within the tent creates a mesmerizing play of light and shadow in the space around the object. Made of a near perfect combination of formal elements conspiring to engage every sense, this object seductively nudges us toward transcendence.

We Live Only Through Ourselves is an important reflection of our selves at this moment in history; Ben Buswell employs a reductive, poetic approach to object making with this purpose. There is no hint of blind adherence to dogma. Art historical references are smashed almost as soon as they are conjured, leaving us to face the objects and the work that went into making them. In the presence of these objects, traditional narratives of history are scratched away, allowing for the possibility of working up something more productive, something that lets us feel free from restriction.