

Five Centimeters Short @ rupert goldsworthy gallery, Berlin

by Elda Oreto

From the beginning, even with the title, this group show, named "Five Centimeters Short" (curated by the American artist Erik Bakke, at rupert goldsworthy gallery), states its provocative character. The title was inspired by Joseph Beuys who, during his legendary statement of 1964 on the Berlin Wall, suggested elevating the Wall 5 centimeters more in order to better its proportions. Only twenty years after its fall, the Berlin Wall, a physical border between East and West Germany (and Europe), is already an icon in the collective imagination. It is a symbol of destitution, separation and/or globalization--the Berlin Wall, or what remains of it, is recommended by travel guides around the world.

Most of the people going to Berlin do not look for the Brandenburg Gate or the Reichstag, or some cathedral, or for buildings in Potsdamer Platz or one of the museums of the city, a city recently labeled "poor but sexy" (a quote from Klaus Wowereit, Berlin mayor, during a press interview in 2003). It is the 'Wall' that lures tourists and travelers. In search for a physical piece of it or just a signal of its past presence, everyone looks for the Wall. Not only for what it has represented historically, but for its *objective* meaning. And, above all, for what it still represents: an idea.

The group exhibition "Five Centimeters Short" presents a series of works by Bruce Conner, Tracey Emin, Desirée Holman, David Huffman and Bakke himself, who curated the exhibition. Bakke builds an ideal bridge between Berlin and his native city, San Francisco, and, in particular, the American counterculture of the late 60's. The linkages between these two (mental?) places are the ideas of counterculture and underground, hippies and squats, ideas generated by division and separation.

Bruce Conner's experimental movies are a mix of images and documentaries depicting the mechanisms and the dynamics of US capitalist society of the 60s. Conner manipulates the flow of images, cutting and pasting, inserting commercials and news. In the film "Report" (1967), for example, the artist juxtaposes images take from the advertising industry, inspiring the idea of a happy life dedicated to consumerism, with those of the assassination of JFK. The speed and cynicism of "Report" collides with "The White Rose" (1967), a documentary movie on Jay DeFeo's painting "The Rose." The film shows the transportation of this famous work out of the artist's studio. The huge painting was an obsession for the artist, who worked on it for around seven years. Moving it from the artist's studio in San Francisco required making a hole in the wall and a crane. In the movie the artist is seen while separating from her work: she looks out the window, waiting for workers to take away the painting, smoking nervously, sitting on the edge of a window, her legs waving in the void. The artist expresses the tension between mass culture and society, on the one hand, and, on the other, the need for freedom. The studio is the visual representation of this conflict.

Desirée Holman's research grew out of her interest in behavior, human relationships and life in society. The video called "Troglydyte" (2005) presents a group of dancers and actors dressed as monkeys, playing in a naturalistic setting. The images are split as in a mirror and dancers (who are dressed as chimps) dance at a relentless pace in an attempt to recover a lost authenticity.

In the exhibition "Five Centimeters Short," this viewing of archetypes begins with a painting by David Huffman taken from his "Traumanaut" series. This series depicts African Americans dressed as spacemen in urban or romanticized surroundings to mark the psychological subjection stemming from the slavery of African people. The need to redeem an undervalued culture is also present in the "Banners of Oroville" by Erik Bakke. The banner is part of a project linked to the book "67 76" in which the artist associated '67, the year of the beginning of the student protest movement in San Francisco, with 76 the emblem of oil. Bakke made a series of collages in which this association is multiplied through the use of characters and stories belonging to the imagery of American popular culture. In this work Ishi, the last 'wild' Native American, is compared to Chris Ishii a Japanese American cartoonist, who after having worked with Walt Disney was interned during World War II, along with other Japanese Americans.

These stories are all interwoven in the work of Erik Bakke similarly to the images in his collages. Slightly different is the path taken by Tracey Emin with her attractive work "Fighting for Love:" in two identical pages of a letter, one the photocopy of the other, the British artist tells how to live without love. The copies remind us that life goes round and round the chances we missed and the things we dismissed.

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2010

As written for White Hot Magazine.