

buried in space: christopher brooks

by Elisabeth Kley



Self-portrait with Cape
1997



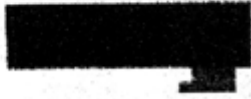
Untitled
1998

What does rubber fetish photography have to do with Minimalist painting? For the first show at Rupert Goldsworthy's new gallery on West 17th Street, Christopher Brooks set up this question as a dialogue between vacancy and concealment. In his abstract paintings and drawings, the British artist carefully arranges straight lines and geometric shapes to create quasi-Minimal images suggestive of large, uninhabited spaces. In his photographic self-portraits, nothing of the artist is revealed except his elaborate fetish paraphernalia.

At the entrance to the gallery is *Untitled* (1998), a white enamel canvas whose three lines and single geometric shape read as the corner of a bare room containing a rectangular hole in the floor. White paint, thinly brushed, does not completely conceal an earlier layer of black. It's as if the darkness of the gravelike pit is the foundation of the space it inhabits.

In another untitled painting, a horizontal black rectangle floats haplessly on a shiny yellow enamel field. Abutting the bottom of the rectangle is a smaller blue shape. According to the critic Neville Wakefield, who provided some notes that accompany the show, gloss colors refer to institutional architecture, with all its connotations of control. Here, the little blue shape, perhaps an escape stair, does make the painting read like a building lost in a yellow expanse.

Self-portrait in Rubber Boots, a large photograph pinned directly to the wall, shows the artist wearing an inflated black rubber suit. With his small white hands supporting the unwieldy, balloonlike costume and his eyes peeking pathetically out of the round black helmet, the actual person inside seems very insignificant. In another self-portrait the



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Self-portrait in Rubber Boots
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black rubber presence stretches out a vast cape like a great big vampire bat, head also covered with a helmet, two fang-like rubber tubes dangling from his mouth. Nearby is a pencil drawing, its faint lines depicting a round shape without eyes or nose -- nothing but a toothy mouth, echoing the rubber helmets.

"For Brooks," Wakefield writes, "it is the fear of becoming bogged down in literal, metaphorical and emotional shit, that motivates the antiseptic virtues of modernist abstraction." But Brooks isn't aiming for a typically pristine Minimal surface with his simple but hardly antiseptic paintings. His architectural shapes diffuse the impact of what would be hard, uninterrupted fields of colored enamel, as if he couldn't summon up the conviction to either fill the space with another, more geometrically assertive shape, or leave it alone.

His fields are disrupted, almost defiled, by small imperfections of surface, making one wonder - what could be under all that paint? He tries to cover up the fear, but clues remain. It is as if the coats of enamel are hiding something too emotional to reveal, so he paints its absence instead. Maybe his secrets are buried in the holes, or maybe there's nothing in the paintings at all. In the end, aren't graves filled with emptiness?

Brooks challenges his audience to find some connection between his more aggressive photographs and his forlorn and almost self-effacing paintings and drawings. The rubber costumes are frightening, but the ordinary person inside, whose pleasure no doubt results from being trapped inside his disguise, is as insignificant as the shapes that float wanly within Brooks' paintings.

At once imprisoned and protected, he finds comfort in covering his weakness with monstrosity, as if he is hiding within a manifestation of what he fears. Up against the reality of the photographs, the best the paintings can do is to summon disturbance indirectly. In the end, the photographs gave the exhibition a slightly demonic presence, while the paintings remained occupied in expressing what it is like to feel helpless and empty, lost in unlimited space.

Christopher Brooks, Mar. 14-Apr. 11, 1998, at Rupert Goldsworthy Gallery, 453 West 17th Street, New York, NY 10011.

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