Artslant

Succulent in Culver City: Rodney McMillian

Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

By Marcus Civin

*Corpus: a body is a collection of pieces, bits, members, zones, states, functions. Heads, hands and cartilage, burnings, smoothnesses, spurts, sleep, digestion, goose-bumps, excitation, breathing, digesting, reproducing, mending, saliva, synovia, twists, cramps, and beauty spots. It’s a collection of collections, a corpus corporum, whose unity remains a question for itself....*

– Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus: Fifty-eight Indices on the Body*, 2008

“Succulent,” Rodney McMillian’s corpus corporum as solo show at Susanne Vielmetter’s new, expansive gallery space in Culver City, is an enticing collection of deflated vinyl and cobbled vinyl, columns of scabrous black, Southern California domesticated plants, and a silent video hand dance—a body of work of diverse bodies of work. Combining a poet’s sensibility towards vernacular materials with a robust sense of humor (political and sexual), McMillian’s passionate, lush show admits harsh realities, then sloughs tough skin. McMillian presents four tall, strong looking bumpy latex-painted columns, perhaps pock-marked, albeit non-load bearing, but still effective, dignified guardians for a garden.

A splayed wall piece resembling a sphincter, 14 feet x 27 feet large, lovingly sewn with thick veins of white thread, offers itself as every sphincter in a plasticized human body: plastic upper esophageal sphincter, sphincter controlling what liver secretions may come, internal and external anus sphincters. McMillian’s *Untitled*, 2010, could well be an anus; and if it is an anus, it is an anus that grew up hearing about HIV/AIDS, afraid, trying to be smart, protect itself, but in the process growing permanent “protection-skin,” plastic as skin where skin used to be. But certainly, though, *Untitled (anus)*is still somehow not shy; it is flowering. McMillian allows us to zoom in on this body legislator; this black hole that stretches out, but doesn’t go very far in—six inches, then stops, art on the gallery wall. Looking, especially in slow motion, is important.

In a side gallery, by itself, McMillian installs another *Untitled* 2010 vinyl. Perhaps once a place of delight, tough and flexible, this vinyl encasement now recalls a night of insomnia spent drawing with Louise Bourgeois, a painfully delirious sack wanting bodies, a geometric with no pattern, a dark, foreboding architecture inconsolable.

But don’t let me get you thinking this exhibit preaches or wallows. At the opening, a capacity crowd was having trouble not tripping over a hilariously bizarre signed and numbered edition of close to one hundred healthy potted succulents of various sizes among the columns and radiating out from the sphincter. (Some plants are only somewhat inflated in price, others very inflated in price; by some reports, the thousand dollar plants are so priced because of McMillian’s sentimental attachment to those particular plants—a gift from an ex-lover, a house-warming cactus.) The succulents mirror the vinyl, both bodies organic, flowing, playful or played, if tinged with melancholy, intriguing linguistic and narrative prompts. The plant body and the human body are the same.

A seventeen minute silent video of just the artist’s hands mostly conducting, floating, phastasmic, is a dreamy night drive of hands: generous, snappy hands inventing a sign language or sharing ecstatic secret handshakes with Gustavo Dudamel symphony orchestra hands, Obama health care hands, maybe Alicia Keyes *Where Do We Go From Here* hands. McMillian’s hands point to Trisha Brown’s 1971 *Accumulation*, a series of rapid-fire exponentially repeating even gestures as minimalist dance. McMillian’s *Untitled (hands)*lets emotion in, isolating the earnest attempts of hands to help communicate. In “Succulent,” the exhibit, the body as a whole, McMillian is artist as director directing joint fluid through a beleaguered, but unashamed, at least whole-hearted human body.