

Means of Engagement¹: Oliver Herring

by Carlos Motta

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“You are amazing!” exclaimed an enthusiastic viewer at Oliver Herring’s seventh exhibition with Max Proecht Gallery in New York City last spring. Other visitors at the exhibition, including myself, turned our heads to his call to find the man speaking to *Cheryl* -a life-size photo/sculpture of a woman- who unapologetically remained silent. She is after all- though uncannily (photo)realistic- a lifeless figure made of foam core, polystyrene, museum board and digital chromogenic prints.

Herring’s photo/sculptures are the product of an intimate artist-model interaction in which he systematically photographs every part of the their body and then applies the resultant prints in fragments with utmost detail to a proportionally sculpted human form- in a process that takes many work sessions.

Unlike earlier pieces such as *Gloria* and *Patrick*, in which Herring delivered an almost hyper real representation of the models, *Cheryl*, *Wade 1* and *Wade 2* push his process formally and conceptually in an unexpected direction. The latest figures underline the artist’s subjective interpretation and participation in the process by manipulating the contrast and saturation of the prints and by producing two slightly different versions of the same figure thus exalting disparities in their production and perception. Simultaneously, Herring managed to situate this works between (photographic) representation and (sculptural) abstraction. The manipulated photographs- no longer indexical to their source- became sculptural material in the service of an interest in sculptural portraiture and away from discourses of photography.

¹ Term used by the artist during a private conversation in New York’s Coffee Shop in April 2007.

This is also apparent in a series of photographs of the sculptures - in various stages of construction- presented along the gallery's walls. The artist created pictorial collages of the figures' faces intervened with random pieces of photographs, x-acto knife blades (photographed and literally stuck to the surface), etc. This fragmented portraits of his photo/sculptures read primarily as formal exercises or sketches, perhaps included in the exhibition to divert attention from the traditional and academic sculptural qualities of the free standing figures.

While Herring's earlier photo/sculptures seemed concerned with portraiture in a more formal sense, his latest seem to be portraits of time; the time - in silence, in conversation, getting to know one another- that Herring spends together with his models. The physicality of the figures, their textured, tinted and fragmented skin, their fragile nude bodies and their vulnerable presence portray his attempt to intimately connect with other human beings. This work brings to mind his well-known knits of blankets and coats in Mylar from the early 1990s, which paid homage to performance artist Ethyl Eichelberger². In both works the Herring ceremoniously fills a void- that of absence, of longing, and of a desire for communication- rendering it visible through extremely labor and time intensive manual procedures.

Oliver Herring's artistic practice- in particular his video and performance works- is characterized by active collaboration with models and spontaneous performers found through open calls, with students from colleges where he is invited to lecture and with large groups selected through application processes. Herring literally develops his works as he develops new friendships using as material for his art the intricacies of these intangible and immeasurable emotional processes.

² Drag performer, actor, accordion player, and playwright who committed suicide after being diagnosed with AIDS. Strongly influential to queer artists he was best know for his self-penned solo plays based on the lives of the great women of history, literature, and myth.

Anza-Borrego- one of two performance videos presented in the exhibition- showed two men dancing a waltz together down a cliff in a rocky desert. The men (Herring being one of them) are seen dressed in formal attire while they struggle to stay on their feet, inevitably slipping and falling, though insistently trying to maintain their rhythmical pace and solemn poses. Both figures are committed to this somewhat absurd and painful task and have only one another as support and *raison d'être*. After a few accidents and recoveries they achieve their goal to arrive to the flat ground successfully and unharmed. This short video is read as a moving - if somewhat too literal- allegory to the efforts of sustaining affective relationships.

Similarly, Herring worked with a stranger that responded to an open call in *Hotel Room (Nathan)*, the second video performance in the exhibition, which shows a young man dressed in a suit doing a clumsy ballet in a hotel room. Nathan jumps on and off the bed in one foot, defies the softness of the mattress, dances with the room's foot lamp, bounces against the wall and so forth, visibly wearing off physically. The camera (Herring) plays an active role in following Nathan's choreography and engaging with his nonsensical and amusing struggle; it is clear that Nathan is not alone but actively responding to the camera's presence. Nathan continues to perform as he undoes the bed, entangles himself with the phone cord, etc., but gracefully outlives his undertaking. A kind of endurance exercise for both Nathan and Herring, this video is both comical as it is emotionally overwhelming.

Anza-Borrego and *Hotel Room (Nathan)* demonstrate Herring's strength at delivering conceptually clear statements with the barest of formal means. Typically, his use of video is only for recording performative actions. Not concerned with employing filmic strategies or with the creation of artifice in favor of narrative structures. Unlike his craft-oriented sculptural works, Herring's videos are formally matter of fact and direct.

A key contribution to this exhibition was the inclusion of *Task (photo archive)*, a piece composed of documentation material from the performance *TASK*, held at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC in April 2006. Hanging along the gallery's eastern walls, close to forty photographs depicted scenes from a thrilling live event that brought together 60 members of the public from diverse social backgrounds to execute a series of tasks -designed by the artist and the participants- during an 7-hour event. ³

Conceived as an "improvisational art-making event,"⁴ this work is concerned with one of Herring's most pressing issues of his work: the formation of temporary communities through *planned-spontaneous* interactions among strangers. Herring is concerned with providing a context -through artistic performances- to encourage the development of interpersonal relationships, which can only be fully experientially understood when contributing as a partaker.

As an utopist perhaps, Herring successfully generates dialogues, peaceful negotiations, temporal situations, contradictions, affective attachments, etc., which at large, are the most positive characteristic of our ability to coexist as human beings.

³ For more information about this event visit: www.taskathirshhorn.com

⁴ Quoted from Hirshhorn Museum's Directions- Oliver Herring, *TASK* brochure.