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Olivier Richon



"Acedia," the title of Swiss photographer Olivier Richon's exhibition at Ibid Projects, describes a state of indolence, reverie and torpor. Associated with a medieval monastic affliction, this "paralysis of the soul," as Saint John Climacus described it, was similar symptomatically to melancholia but attributed to lassitude and sloth. The 17 photographs from 1995 to 2012 on view here are highly staged, often taken in neutral studio settings, their cold stillness mimicking such malaise. Richon, who is head of photography at London's Royal College of Art, is known for his portraits and still lifes that recall canonical artworks and genres, often Dutch painting and its allegorical tradition. The appearance of these quotations in his work suggests the moment when, from a daze, a reference is suddenly recognized.

Over three floors, the exhibition presented medium-size photographs along with several literary extracts printed on the wall. The first floor featured images organized thematically around "the hunt." *The Quarry* (1995) depicts a dead roe deer hung from its hind legs, evoking Courbet's 1856 painting of the same title. However, "La Curée," the title in French, refers to the traditional feeding of the animal's entrails to the hunt's hounds. Far from the violence and gore of disembowelment, Richon's picture is static and sanitized. His subject, though posed identically to Courbet's, is isolated in a starkly lit empty studio; gone are the trail of vermilion blood, the expectant dogs, the hunter eyeing the stag's underside. Richon instead emphasizes artifice, inanimateness and detachment. The image takes the subject out of context, just as a photograph

frames and excludes.

In the same room, photos of a horse (2010), riding boots (2010) and a dragon fruit (2005), the last appearing like a bloodied organ, were accompanied by an excerpt from Gustave Flaubert's short story *The Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitalier* (1877), which read in part: "When his mother kissed him, he submitted coldly to her embrace and seemed to be pondering over weighty matters. He killed bears with a knife, bulls with an axe, and boars with a spear." The contrast between the subject's brutality and his passivity mirrors the tension in Richon's photographs, which synecdochally refer to a violent act.

The surreal images on the second floor were anchored by a quotation from Flaubert's book *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874), recounting the protagonist's hallucinations. In one photograph, *The Low Countries, with Asparagus* (2011), a spear of white asparagus extends from a plinth like a pointed finger; in *Melencolia, with Fish* (2012), two severed salmon heads face each other like Hieronymus Bosch grotesques. In contrast to the playfulness of the compositions, the photographs' studio backdrops impart an unsettling formality and solemnity, in the same vein as de Chirico's immaculate Neo-Classical piazzas.

The dialogue between the animate and the inanimate, subject and studio, reality and representation was made manifest on the third floor, in a series of photographs taken in the restoration room of the Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid. They appear to be straightforward, authoritative indexes of reality. With their emphasis on the sober solitude of objects, they invite an idle gaze. Closer inspection, however, conjures associations: *Ellipsis with Ship* (2010), a toy vessel situated on an ocean of undulating blue fabric, is an obvious metaphor. Before-and-after images of crystal glasses (2010)-first upright, then toppled-suggest a narrative. Like daydreams, they transform reality into listless fantasies.

PHOTO: Olivier Richon: *The Quarry*, 1995, C-print, 59 by 48 inches; at Ibid Projects.

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