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An Aside

Camden Arts Centre, London, UK

Max Andrews

Tacita Dean's work delights in spinning a yarn or following a trail. This pleasure was clearly manifest in her curatorial project 'An Aside' – a hothouse of suspicion and bluff that festered with an off-key atmosphere of wayward anthropology. Although the accompanying catalogue is a plot spoiler – Eric Rohmer, Gérard de Nerval and Friedrich Fröbel enter the conspiracy – it gives yet further licence for her rampant speculation and what in Italian is called *dietrologia*, literally 'behindology'. Here the vintage German typewriter that's the star of Rodney Graham's astonishing film *Rheinmetall/Victoria 8* (2003) looked as sinister as an Enigma cipher machine (coincidentally, the Rheinmetall company made arms for the Third Reich), before its dusting in snowy flour effected a white-out, a cover-up or buried news. And did the two uniformed farmers spreading straw on their field in Sharon Lockhart's *NO* (2003), like dogdily disguised undercover agents, have a malicious motive for the uncanny ordinariness of their ritual? Like faces in the clouds or the Virgin seen on a burnt tortilla, Raymond Hains' two lacerated poster works could have harboured veiled visions. Photographs of cryptic rocks (Eileen Agar) and tree stumps (Paul Nash) from the 1930s shared a similar enthusiasm for anthropomorphism or supernatural communication, while the very title of Nash's cranky painting *Event on the Downs* (1934) sounded like the artist had witnessed further anomalous experiences.

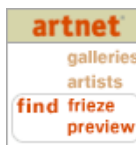
With a gallery to itself, Lothar Baumgarten's *Da gefällt's mir besser als in Westfalen, El Dorado* (There I Like it Better than in Westphalia, El Dorado, 1968–76) was the first work that Dean chose and was the mother lode of the exhibition. It comprises a sequence of almost 200 slides with a soundtrack evoking a tropical wilderness where insects incessantly chirp and birds squawk an ominous ritual music. Images of dappled foliage and swampy thickets are either blurred or desperately hard to decipher. Here, a floating log might be a crocodile and copulating snails appear threatening. This is the dark jungle of the colonial imagination, the same that defied Klaus Kinski's characters in Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) and Aguirre: *The Wrath of God* (1972) and, although found a continent apart in reality, might host *Rafflesia*, the giant flower with the stench of rotting flesh depicted in one of Thomas Scheibitz' drawings nearby (Untitled, 1993–2004).

Thomas Schütte's glazed ceramic *Hund III* (Dog III, 2005) – something between a dachshund, a turtle and a Moomin – could be a model of a mythical creature said to lurk, like a gormless Chupacabra, in such a hallucinatory forest. Likewise Baumgarten's *Mosquitoes* (1969), with their bread bodies and quill wings, are like hasty reconstructions of monster bloodsuckers. Of course, the artist's *El Dorado* slides were not taken in the tropics but rather at a polluted stretch of the Rhine. Fischli and Weiss' *Son et Lumière, Le Rayon Vert* (Sound and Light, The Green Ray, 1991) attempted a similar transubstantiation, though with comedic chutzpah. A pocket torch, a 'cut-crystal' plastic cup and a motorized confectioner's turntable are employed to represent a rare atmospheric phenomenon in which the rays of the setting sun momentarily flash green.

Other works too performed as double acts or seemed to conspire among themselves, notably a cluster of heads. Joseph Beuys' innocuous-looking bronze *Portrait Bust* (1947) stared at Walther Brüx's own *Portrait Bust of Joseph Beuys* (1946), near the window of the west gallery, as if each disembodied head were trying to out-shaman the other. In the corner of another gallery Marisa Merz' *Deux Têtes* (Two Heads, 1983) – tsantsa-like rudimentary clay skulls on a sleek paraffin base – seemed to be the product of painfully beautiful decapitations. Studies for a *Portrait Bust of Isa Genzken* (7.12.1990) (1990), a scribbly little pencil drawing by Gerhard Richter, looks as if the artist had been fantasizing about what Genzken, artist and Richter's ex-wife, would look like with her head on a stick.

Group shows like this, which also included work by Roni Horn, Yvan Salomone and Kurt Schwitters, have a mood rather than an explicit theme; they imply that there may be a compelling order, but that it is necessarily just beyond everyone's reach. And in the role of the curator, an artist has a much freer licence, as Dean amply demonstrated, to cultivate or exploit this potential for glorious spin, and never to let on if the viewer is being confided in or deceived.

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