

Love Theory in Suspension

The work of Charles Mason

Equilibrium is less a question of gravity and weight, than a question of balance. Instead of weight relative to mass, balance is the resultant of a smooth collusion of strengths and expectations experienced through friction or of shock felt during any encounter. Charles Mason's *Between you and me* (2008) is not just the reflection of a spectator incapable of reaching the other side of the mirror, but at once the representation *and* the object of that representation prevented by a reflection of oneself - of one's ego perhaps - in the endless black mirror of a transparent screen of Perspex. It is above all a power struggle, a game of exchange and balance that structures all organisations and all relationships.

So let us formulate the hypothesis that Mason's sculptures are for the most part compositions emancipated from formalism and charged with poetics of affect. If we attribute feelings and psychologies to these objects, they become an image of a group or a position, united, inseparable - inseparable because united, a societal organisation and a relational space. Balance in this sense is the sine qua none of equilibrium, based on notions of weight and counterweight, of rivalry and negotiation, of vision, tensions and flexibilities, of equivalent and mutual exchanges.

The latest groups of Charles Mason's sculptures are fixed structures all about balance. Skeletal and muscular systems based on a strict organisation, they are architecture-worlds and balancing acts, where a black, shiny translucent screen supports itself on metal struts countering 'The Thing', a concrete and serpentine shape, sometimes covered totally or partially with porcelain scales. They physically answer the problematic of equilibrium, weightlessness with mutual support - theirs is a *chic* aesthetic posture. They are the encounter of textural antinomies, through contact and collage: the metal plays against the mirror effect of the Perspex, which plays against the concrete, which in turn plays against the mosaic. The meeting points are solid and secure, for should one component slip the whole edifice collapses. Doubtless from this springs 'the anxiety' that Mason uses in the title for two of his exhibitions in 2009 and 2010.



In this way *Crutch* (2010) a chair back, slightly magnified, moulded in polished bronze, resting in a corner gives the impression of a strange awkward object, disproportionate and amputated, unusable. Materially supercharged in bronze but immediately put aside, the object is the proscription of a sick shape, a worried, isolated form - unlike the other works which are frozen in their own combination systems - for *Crutch* - there is nothing for it to really worry unduly over.

In his essay *Peri Bathous, the Art of Sinking in Poetry* (1727) Alexander Pope coined the word *Bathos* to describe a fall from the sublime to the ridiculous that produces moments of (unintentional) comedy in would-be solemn poems. The bathetic style, Pope suggested, is distinguished from the true sublime by an absurd combination of antinomies making verse a form of stupidity. The meaning of the term bathos has noticeably shifted; it is now sometimes used to describe something that is so pathetic and poignant that it becomes comic - to the point where the solemnity within a bathetic production becomes 'a seriousness that



Dummy II 2010
Perspex, concrete, galvanised steel and ceramic tiles
203 x 102 x 207 cm

fails'. Such is the condition that afflicts *Crutch*. Here the chair back that usually supports its user is confined to a corner of the exhibition space and is able to stand thanks only to the kindness of a stranger, the wall: an embarrassing situation for an object that resembles a crutch. In *Dummy II* (2010) the shapeless 'Thing' poses in front of its own reflection, maintaining its upright posture due only to a perfectly equal 'rapport de force'; it remains a narcissistic structure, performing open-mouthed, stupefied by its own image. In holding such a balanced posture of elegance it could be an allegorical architectural representation of a love relationship, or of the Dandy in the story who placed a mirror in front of his bed to have the pleasure of watching himself sleep. The optical effect of the three panels deployed in *Backsliding* (2010) is of a folding screen hiding nothing, showing everything (and more) through a kaleidoscopic effect of multiple reflections. When the spectator's body does not interfere, two twin 'Things' are mirrored, rather like Rita Hayworth and Orson Welles in the mirrored corridor of *The Lady from Shanghai*. The 'Thing' and we, its spectators, are creatures caught in a trap, living in a world of images, of forms and reflections on the border of day - dreams.

'Camp taste doesn't propose that it is in bad taste to be serious', writes Susan Sontag, 'it doesn't sneer at someone who succeeds in being seriously dramatic. What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures'. Mason's work is a game of improbable balances, maintained with an almost comic dignity, often absurd, and coloured with humour and irony. This shapeless, feminine 'Thing' dressed as if for a night of clubbing on the town, is suspended, transfixed by its own reflection, balancing in unnatural positions like an acrobatic tight-rope walker in a circus, producing a sculptural group at the crossroads of formalism, architecture and pole-dancing.

Marie Canet

Translation from French: Nicky Zurlino

1 Susan Sontag, Notes on 'Camp', in *Against Interpretation*, 1966.



Crutch 2010
Bronze
87 x 53 x 56 cm



Backsliding 2010
Perspex, concrete, galvanised steel and rubber
Dimensions variable