

TOUCH: The Portraiture of Dani Marti

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EUGÈNE MINKOWSKI, A FRENCH PSYCHIATRIST ACTIVE IN THE 1930S, wrote about the psychological intensity of dark spaces and claimed that we cannot hold darkness at a distance; ‘instead, it covers me completely, it penetrates my whole being, it *touches* me in a much more intimate way than the clarity of visual space’. The charcoal walls and low lighting of ‘TOUCH: The Portraiture of Dani Marti’ helped create such a space at the Newcastle Art Gallery, with the rich textures and colours of Marti’s heavily woven pieces and accompanying video works punctuating the darkness. The materiality of Marti’s enmeshed ropes and beads, all non-objective portraits of the artist’s family, friends and lovers, invited physical engagement and, in the case of the red-beaded curtains of *Looking for Felix*, 2000, something to be entered. Functioning as a counterpoint to the physicality of these works, Marti’s videos were portraits of a different kind as they vividly and almost unbearably exposed their subjects. As a survey of Marti’s work from 2000 to 2011, ‘TOUCH’ was a thoughtfully selected presentation of a mid-career practice that has proved to be conceptually, aesthetically and materially coherent.

Exemplifying the dual approaches to portraiture in the show were *Bacon’s dog*, 2010, a 12-minute two-channel video, and *It’s all about Peter*, 2010, an abstract burst of coloured plastics – with the subject, in both cases, being Peter Fay, collector and patron of contemporary Australian art. The plastic objects were collected by Fay from 1999 to 2009 and given to Marti to meld together to create a wall piece quite different from his usual woven ropes. Behind the wall where this hung, *Bacon’s dog* provided video fragments, recorded over three months, of the sexual and emotional intimacy between artist and subject, with Fay lying before us at one point with the starkness of a Lucian Freud painting. I found this video overwhelmingly intimate – the raw openness of Fay’s whispered declarations were at times uncomfortable to watch – and yet my presence as its audience was



much too intrusive for this to feel voyeuristic.

The ease with which Marti’s practice seems to cross between personal and public spaces is balanced by his sensitivity to the very private nature of the spaces he encounters. The exhibition’s dual portraits, *Bolted*, 2008, a 41-minute three-channel video, and *Beige*, 2008, a three-panel weave of golden and black ropes, portrayed the silent life of a man living alone in his Glasgow flat. He was glimpsed masturbating in front of a webcam, going to the toilet and standing at his kitchen bench to eat. In contrast to this austere life, Marti’s neighbouring portraits of his teenage niece in Barcelona comprised a single bright panel of pink and yellow ropes and a video of a vivaciously chatty teenager explaining her internet love life.

As these works demonstrated, Marti’s videos portray their subjects through largely confessional documentary means, with the artist often insinuating himself into the process. Such was the case with *Time is the fire in which we burn*, 2009, an hour-long video of Marti and an ex-porn star friend lying together in bed and talking about life, while for the exhibition’s closing work, *Vial queen*, 2009, Marti had threaded on the wall hundreds of used medical vials, the contents of which he had injected to treat his HIV condition.

The latter work offered another moment of uneasy disclosure, further revealing an underlying theme of the show. While the civic spaces of Newcastle seemed unlikely ones for exposing these very personal narratives, as Minkowski has reminded us, their enveloping darkness granted us unusual levels of intimacy, touching us in ways that were often beautiful but never comfortable.

TOUCH: The Portraiture of Dani Marti, Newcastle Art Gallery, 17 September – 13 November 2011.



from left: *Andrea the secret life of tweens*, 2008, courtesy the artist and BRENSPACE, Sydney; *George*, 2001, Newcastle Art Gallery Collection; *Looking for Felix*, 2000, Newcastle Art Gallery Collection, installation view, 2011.