



*Butterfly Man*, 2012, video stills (including image opp. page), 4K UHDV, 19min  
Images courtesy the artist and Breenspace, Sydney

# Dani Marti: *Mariposa*

CARRIE MILLER

The title of Dani Marti's recent solo exhibition at Breenspace, *Mariposa*, is the Spanish word for butterfly. And in the major video piece that dominates the show, a process of metamorphosis typically associated with that singularly beautiful creature does take place. Marti filmed *Butterfly Man* (2012) in two long sessions six weeks apart at the Greene Street studio in New York. In the interval between shoots his subject, Mark, a chronic meth addict whom the artist befriended on an earlier visit to the city, had deteriorated: one eye had swollen shut from a nasty infection, he'd lost teeth, lost weight, and his face was marked by the sores common to heavy users.

The video can be read as a type of reverse metamorphosis then – but like the artist's work generally, its meaning is far from literal, deriving its conceptual potency from a vibrating indeterminacy. The two sections of the piece are seamlessly edited so that Mark's decline isn't recorded like some clichéd documentary on addiction. In fact, Marti chose to represent Mark performing one of his more positive passions: flagging – a routine commonly performed in gay clubs (where coloured flags are spun in patterns in rhythm to high-energy dance music) which draws inspiration from Japanese fan dancing.

The non-narrative structure of the work mirrors the disjointed way in which the viewer becomes aware of Mark's decaying state. It's foregrounded then lost in the

constant whirling of material around his face; awareness shifts between admiring Mark's skilful, sensual movements, and a palpable sense of the sheer physical exertion of flagging on his visibly flagging body. This strange and shifting portrait is made more compelling by a soundtrack that builds an atmosphere at once ominous and triumphant. Despite signs of his demise, Mark continues to dance in a trance-like state with no sense of a beginning or end to a routine that he appears to be both the agent of and somehow driven to perform. The analogy to addiction is subtle yet powerful, just like Mark's athletic, hypnotic movements.

Marti's choice of subject matter – a continuous balletic action set to an atmospheric soundtrack – was risky. *Butterfly Man* could have come off as a romantic search for the essence at the heart of a broken man. Instead it successfully achieves the same poetic yet unsentimental, exquisitely honest yet quasi-nihilistic sensibility characteristic of Marti's video works which reveal, not the truth of an essential self, but rather the performative nature of subjectivity. His work explores intimately the meaning of/behind 'surface', and how, as we see in *Butterfly Man*, someone's story can be literally written on their skin.

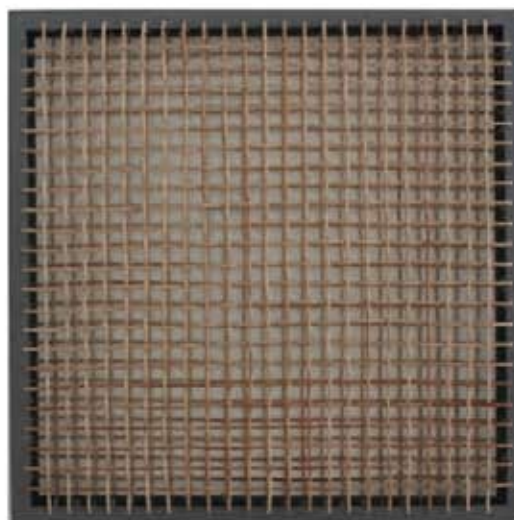
The exhibition also included two sets of Marti's woven works. If considered as abstract extensions of the video portraits as these wall-mounted pieces often are, they invoke the bifurcated mind and body of a man wholly embodied while flagging but existentially riven as an addict. They become visceral embodiments of the Cartesian nightmare that a chronic user like Mark is trapped in (the works are even made of bondage materials). Tormented by the pain in their head, addicts seek temporary relief through bodily pleasure which only



serves to further alienate these dual aspects of their being through the futile cycle of addiction. The three *Trap* works (2012) – tautly strung grids made of pale leather inside powder-coated aluminium frames – suggest the stripped-back neural networks of a mind unplugged from the imagination that animates it when addiction sets in. *Armour* (2012) – a work consisting of a mass of curling, thick, knotted pieces of black rope protruding out from the wall – is instead alive, squirming, intestinal; as if the literal physical armour that cocoons the human body has split open, spilling its abject contents.

Of course, trying to pin down Marti's work to any definitive reading is like pinning down the wings of a butterfly in order to classify it; a reductive exercise which ends up destroying the very thing the process aims to possess. By filming Mark in constant motion Marti never allows us to get a proper reading on him – the audience as moral compass is constantly thrown off course. This is where *Butterfly Man*, while superficially different from his best-known video work, can be seen as continuous with it. Similar in style to the strikingly original, highly personal work of *Gummo* (1997) director Harmony Korine, Marti's practice always strives to retain a 'margin of the undefined', as Korine puts it.

Like the Earth, Mark will continue to spin, until he doesn't. The universe is indifferent to human finitude as



*Trap 1-3, 2012, (detail), leather, powder-coated aluminium, 65 x 65 x 8cm*

well as its own. In this exhibition Marti's art is yet again both a confronting recognition of this brutal truth and a beautiful, fucked-up consolation for it.

Dani Marti's *Mariposa* was shown at Breenspace, Sydney, 21 September to 20 October 2012. [www.breenspace.com](http://www.breenspace.com)

Carrie Miller is a Sydney-based writer.



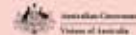
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Adam Laerkesen  
*Something in the Way, 2008*  
Plaster, wood, cast foam  
150 x 190 x 110cm  
Private collection