



Crafting pathos with Dani Marti

UNA REY & FAYE NEILSON

Touch: the portraiture of Dani Marti, a survey of eleven years' work, opened at Newcastle Art Gallery (NAG) on 17 September 2011 and remained closed from 11 October for the remainder of its eight-week installation. Censorship had nothing to do with the shut-down, although Marti's filmic *oeuvre* is arguably more controversial than photographer Bill Henson's captivations. Newcastle's infamous Laman Street fig trees were deemed by the city council to be a risk to public safety¹, leaving the artist's first public survey brooding in the dark, largely unseen and metaphorically untouched. For Marti, at least, his debut solo exhibition at Adelaide's Greenaway Art Gallery served as a welcome distraction, and was closely followed by time in Glasgow, Scotland, and a residency in New York, culminating with two solo exhibitions recently shown in Sydney.

Originally conceived by Marti and then NAG curator Lisa Slade, *Touch* embodied a paradox. As Marti stresses, the act of portraiture is always bound to fail, and it is a mission he constantly questions. His works are characterised through a struggle to mimic and document human intimacy.

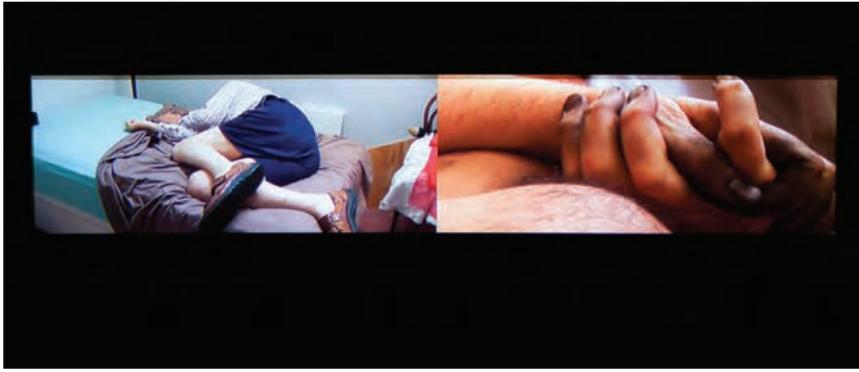
Knowing Marti's work, and his portraits in particular, means to recognise two distinct practices. Intimate video vignettes of sexual and emotional encounters between Marti and men that he meets via virtual or actual social networks are realised alongside his highly crafted wall and floor weavings, which transcend minimalism's 'cool'. It is futile to resist Ann Finnegan's 'Baroque Minimalism'² to describe the sensually redolent, industrial fibre works that manipulate a place so effectively within the field of contemporary art.

Marti arrived in Sydney from Spain in 1988, a big year in Australia's search for cultural identity and a period of deepening interest in the possibilities of 'the other'. Multiculturalism was one of the spices whetting appetites for artistic variety, as Chris McAuliffe observed in 1990:

Spain is frequently characterised as radically different from the rest of European culture. A variety of geographical, historical and psychological clichés are used to prove that Spain is exotic, oriental, mysterious. This kind of rhetoric defines the audiences as well as the object of their attention. Thus if Spain is anti-rational, we are rational; if Spain is sensual, we are restrained.³

In the context of Marti's work, restraint offers a literal interpretation, with themes of bondage and restriction infusing the materials. Studying tapestry as a youth in his hometown Barcelona in the late 1970s was an instinctive response to Marti's pubescent fascination with industrial macramé, and a kind of aesthetic awakening. Marti describes his wall-mounted works as 'paintings'. These draw comparison with the late Mike Kelley's *More Love Hours than Can Ever be Repaid* (1987), a work that trades on the 1970s feminist activation of textile-based practice as a high art form. It too is confidently presented on the wall as a painting. The surface of *More Love Hours* is a grotesque, swarming mass of hand-made soft toys and blankets. Kelley invites the viewer to consider both the contact barrier, which is the abject surface skin of the work made *untouchable* through the conventions of the gallery space, and the craft practice itself, which Kelley claims 'loads the object with all this intense ritual energy'.⁴

Whether freestanding or wall-mounted, Marti's densely woven surfaces present a mechanical precision which understates the artist's ultimate absorption in the process of crafting. These are the 'love hours' that Kelley refers to in addressing the currency of making and giving – 'the commodity is the emotion', he states. Marti's monumental triptych, *George* (2001), buzzes with 'ritual energy'. Part of the Newcastle Art Gallery's permanent collection, *George* portrays an architect friend of Marti's from Sydney. Bound tight in golden yellow, the work emits a radiance that extends beyond its physical borders, giving the dark-walled space a chapel-like ambience.



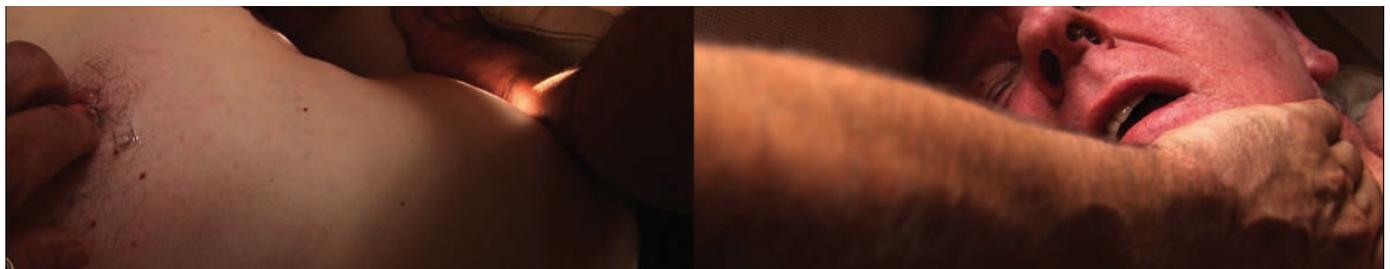
1 + 4/ *Bacon's Dog*, 2010, still image, 2:55 HDV, two-channel projection; 11min:30sec



2/ *My Sad Captain (take 2)*, 2011, polyester, glass beads, 210 x 10cm diameter; image courtesy the artist and Greenaway Art Gallery



3/ *It's all about Peter*, 2010, plastic objects collected by Peter Fay from 2000- 2009, 200 x 330 x 16cm



The challenging notion of emotional currency is most evident in Marti's filmic portraits. Ritual also confers to the video work, which can span months and even years of editing, the channelled window eventually metamorphosed into the large-scale gallery screen. Marti transgresses the boundaries of the disembodied 'virtual relationship', meeting his subjects in the real world and recording the ensuing intimate contact, which is later replayed in the gallery space to an implicitly voyeuristic audience. Often these works appear to traverse barriers of physical isolation to provide a fleeting cure, which is then perpetuated through the filmic version of the event. Others appear to be potentially exploitative, such as *David* (2008), where Marti invasively hovers around a beggar on the street in Glasgow. Here, the subject maintains a solemn distance through his refusal to engage. At first glance, these exchanges raise ethical questions. How does the subject respond to this invasive penetration of private space? Is sexual intimacy simply being traded to create an artwork? Is Marti simply mining the personal experiences of others for a cavalier romp through sex, power and money? Are such considerations redundant in the 21st century online environment?

In discussion Marti reveals the cathartic nature of the work, for both subject and artist. In his film *Bacon's Dog* (2010), Marti collaborates with prominent art collector and curator Peter Fay, apparently leading Fay through his first homosexual encounter.⁵ What emerges is a confronting and mesmerising narrative of sexual intimacy. This work is a refined composition, built on the firm friendship between Marti and Fay, which is recorded in the frank, poetic email correspondence displayed within *My Sad Captain* (2010).

In the Newcastle installation, *Bacon's Dog* was accompanied by a large wall-piece, *It's all about Peter* (2010). Here, a multitude of colourful plastic vessels, collected by Fay and gifted to Marti, are corrupted into a singular surface of

sensuous melting, neutralising and transforming their emptiness. This 'painting' becomes a witty critique of the connoisseur, as well as the artist, in playfully referencing the collector's collection, Julian Schnabel's plate paintings, and Jackson Pollock's aggressive abstractions.

Marti's scarlet beaded curtain, *Looking for Felix* (2000), acknowledges and closely resembles Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Golden)* (1995). However, rather than crossing a metaphorical boundary between life and death, the viewer is here potentially lost, or snagged in the labyrinth. Both works refer to the heavy weight of AIDS-related illnesses and deaths, but also to the ephemeral 'gift' of life. Marti's personal experience gives resonance to *Vial Queen* (2010), composed of the precious glass bottles that once contained his HIV medication. Their collection suggests a passage of time, each tiny vial becoming part of a twinkling chandelier. In breaking with the conventional grid Marti's works take on a more evanescent quality, an approach also beautifully realised in *Portrait of Joni Waka as a Fallen Angel Crying behind the Wall* (2006-2011), a work set free from its earlier form on a rigid stretcher.

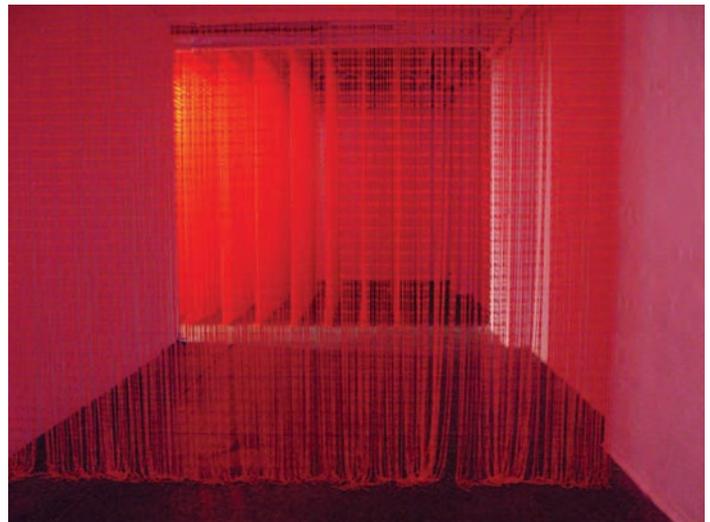
If *Touch* in Newcastle was a look back, Marti's 2011 exhibition at Greenaway Art Gallery, *And that's it*, provided variations on similar themes. The exhibition title comes from dialogue in a video work made during a residency at Stills Gallery, Scotland's Centre for Photography. Taking part in the *Ethics of Encounter* exhibition and associated public programs,⁵ Marti met his subject through Gay Men's Health in Glasgow. Typical of many of the men in Marti's films, the ravages of HIV, age and loneliness present faces and bodies that defy accepted notions of beauty and wellness.

Across Greenaway Gallery's three co-joined spaces, the exhibition faltered in a number of places, but made up for lost ground in the gravity of key works. Both video works suffered on a technical level. *David St Vincent* (2011) was shown on a small monitor with headsets adjacent to the gallery's office, making it somewhat encumbered. *And that's it* (2011) was compromised by too much ambient light and poor audio, exacerbated by William's broad Glaswegian accent – not that there's much of a plot, but dialogue is central in sequences where nothing much happens. The overt subjectivity of the works requires a quiet, dark enclosure to augment the empathy, longing, despair, or boredom which such works provoke. *Oh William oh William* (2011), the painting complement to *And that's it*, lacked the formal, instinctive grace that characterises Marti's best works. The white gloss, hard-edged aluminium made no concessions to the woven panel, bulging in an obese, distended form that felt altogether too literal.

This response was in direct contrast to *My Sad Captain (take 2)* (2011), a floor piece that ambushed the (female) viewer with an overwhelming sensation of maternal instinct. Not much larger than a sleeping cat, the work was disarming in its simplicity: a pearl-encrusted, white, woven rope, both matrilineal and naval, the thickness of a man's forearm, curls upon itself like a snake – or a scat. *My Sad Captain* begs to be plucked up and nursed yet is equally erotic – an engorged, double-headed phallus waiting to be aroused. The work's magnetism and

libidinous vulnerability makes it perhaps a talisman of Marti's guileless charm as much as a receptacle for longing.

The success of the gigantic codpiece *Looking for Pablo* (2006-11), beyond its obvious reference to Picasso's virility, is in the penetrating depth of its woven surface which effects a fantastical, gothic form reminiscent of a bird's nest. The work is as much an esoteric guardian as a physical shield, emblematic of Marti's methodology where the process becomes its own sensual reward; the beautifully crafted objects acting as counterweights to the pathos and insularity of the video portraits.



Looking for Felix, 2000, plastic beaded curtains, approx 300 x 300 x 300cm

1. Planted in the 1930s by returned soldiers, the Laman St fig trees created a colonnade between the gallery and the War Memorial. Despite widespread local community protest, including from the city's Mayor, the trees were removed by early February 2012.
2. See Craig Judd, 'Bacon's Dog: Dani Marti's portrait of Peter Fay', *Art & Australia*, 2011, pp. 426-429.
3. *The Ethics of Encounter* comprised a series of exhibitions, residencies and exhibitions, hosted by Stills, Scotland's Centre for Photography, November 2010 to March 2011. www.stills.org
4. Ann Finnegan, *Variations in a Serious Black Dress*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, ACT, February to March 2004.
5. Chris McAuliffe, *Art e3 Text*, No. 36, May 1990, p. 97; cited in *Artlink*, Vol. 11, no 1 & 2, Autumn/Winter 1991, p. 15.
6. Mike Kelley and John Miller, 'Mike Kelley', *BOMB*, No. 38 (Winter 1992), p. 28.

Touch: the portraiture of Dani Marti was shown at Newcastle Art Gallery 17 September to 13 November 2011; *And that's it* was shown at Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide, 16 November to 11 December 2011; Dani Marti's *Against Day* was shown at Peloton Gallery, Sydney, 16 August to 9 September 2012; his most recent solo exhibition, *Mariposa*, showed at Breenspace, Sydney, 21 September to 20 October 2012; see review following.

Dani Marti, the title of a 2012 monograph published by Hantje Cantz, Berlin, will be launched at the Australian Centre for Photography, November 2012.

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

Dani Marti: *Mariposa*

CARRIE MILLER

The title of Dani Marti's recent solo exhibition at Greenspace, *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.

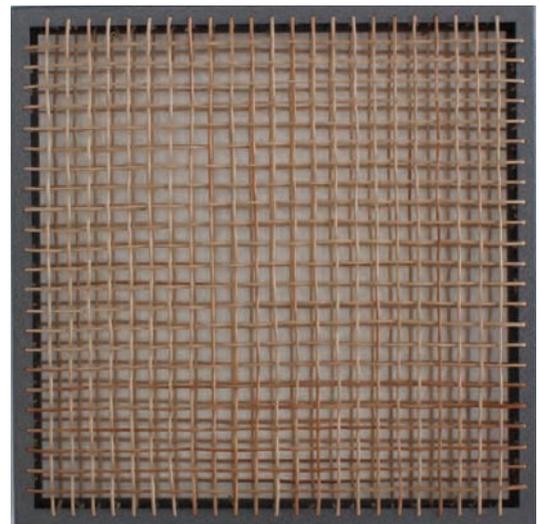
The exhibition also included two sets of Marti's woven works. If considered as abstract extensions of the video portraits as these wall-mounted pieces often are, they invoke the bifurcated mind and body of a man wholly embodied while flagging but existentially riven as an addict. They become visceral 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.

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 Dani Marti's *Mariposa* was shown at Breenspace, Sydney, 21 September to 20 October 2012. www.breenspace.com

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 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
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