

Brian J Morrison, *'A Flick of the Wrist,'* COLLAR, Manchester

As the work of art becomes increasingly muted, its resemblance to language becomes all the more apparent. If we labour long enough to read them, it becomes clear that the best examples of contemporary art reveal themselves as questions to which the solution is not given. As Theodor Adorno remarked, "...in no less strict terms, artworks are enigmas."¹ Brian J Morrison's latest exhibition – advertised as blurring the boundary between painting, sculpture, and performance – does exactly this.

The exhibition, consisting of four works in latex – three wall-mounted, distressed and spread across frames, the other hanging from a light fitting like an open curtain – and a wall-mounted sculpture of plaster, is restrained, placid—and alluring. There is a doubly semantic quality to Morrison's work: bulges and tucks in the latex meet with the hard edge of a canvas stretcher, folds of material descend from above and terminate abruptly on contact with the concrete floor; at once they are soft and hard, domestic and alien, inviting and uninviting, masculine and effeminate. Surface aesthetic qualities – oily fingerprints, sloughed off the skin and onto the work as they have been constructed and arranged, pinches and folds in the material, bulges and troughs – illustrate the historical process of their making and the unseen performative gestures of the artist, whilst their very material indicates industrial operation, machine-handling and an artificial, optimum state.

The folds, protruding bulges and creases in the material, and the latex itself, are reminiscent of fetish clothing worn in the BDSM subculture. The fetish, in this case, is not on the flesh, but the absence of it; we associate the material with the body from which it was cast off and the state of affairs which led to its being cast off in the first place. Never is this potential body – of which these surface elements are emblematic – gendered—the work, at all times, is both masculine and feminine, and as such, we encounter a destabilisation of the traditional gender-binary and our sexual ideals associated with it. All we are left with is the material and the eroticism found on its exterior.

In these exchanges, between skin and material, between real (as sensual) and imagined (as desire), we are again faced with the work-as-language; the difficulty of saying anything definitive when attempting to establish a dialogue, of translating thought into the spoken or written word—as the latex itself shrinks or relaxes in relation to certain environmental factors, so too does discourse, pulling away in dispassion or opening up with receptivity.²

Simultaneously employing sculptural elements, aggressively cutting into the space in an effort to establish a territory with materials which we associate with industrial processing, whilst dealing with surface aesthetic qualities (the aforementioned folds, pinches, bulges and fingerprints) and embellishments in a similar way to the textile arts – traditionally seen as 'women's work' or associated with lower-class labour, and neglected due to gender and economic bias³ and their being regarded as less aesthetically complex as the qualities which are traditionally applied to the fine arts – Morrison transgresses the divide between the effeminate and the masculine, and highlights that discourse on practice cannot proceed if it is to talk of '*women's*' or '*men's*' work as something like fixed categories.

In this case, are we to read the draping curtain-form as a metaphor for alienation, a closing-off? Or, rather, is its appearance as being pulled aside an allusion to an 'unfinished closure,'⁴ a provisional full-stop intended as encouragement for other discourses to be heard?

The gallery itself must work in tandem with the art it exhibits to establish these discourses. The independent and artist-led space welcomes experimental and challenging work based not on the acknowledgement of an artist's success, but rather building on relationships founded on trust, character and quality of work; such an open-ended approach enables the independent space the potential to exhibit those artists who, whether from lack of exposure or marginalisation, do not enjoy the same opportunities as their more established mid-career counterparts. Spaces such as COLLAR are not content with simply existing as podiums for the presentation of an artist and their craft, hidden from the spectator whilst offering material support to an exhibition. Rather than the timeless, pristine and harmonious object of consumption which fine art is often associated with, sitting in its gleaming white cube, COLLAR and their peers introduce contrasting – yet not incongruous – elements, presented under a unifying concept, and in so doing, actively engage in the dialogue between the work and its audience, and call attention to the frameless nature of the experience of work-as-language. In this democratised space, the overlapping authorships⁵ – artist, curator, audience, space itself – mesh. The continuing relevance of the gallery, I argue, is not as a space for the presentation and consumption of art, but as the site of a temporary home for these overlapping authorships, a coming-together as 'collective creator.'

Against the strict demarcations of form and medium, Morrison's work cuts across artistic genre and playfully ignores their *does* and *do-nots*.⁶ In this sense, the indeterminateness of the work – its enigmatic quality – should not be read as a negative criticism. Morrison problematises the naïve categories of the feminine and the masculine, deconstructing their motifs and uncovering the flaws behind such binary thinking. We are presented with materials which stretch, sag, bulge, are pinched, and – with time – will rip, discolour, be forgotten—in such a practice, the promise of a fixed, stable work is constantly deferred at the same time as the promise of a fixed, stable meaning, the result of a dynamic process which resembles that of identity formation.

A Flick of the Wrist challenges a false harmony based on the myth of closure; in this unstable, constantly-deferred state, it offers us a question mark and the opportunity for discourse. In the absence of an answer, the work of art demands our attention.

Brian J Morrison, *A Flick of the Wrist*, COLLAR, Manchester. 10 March – ? 2017.

Images courtesy the artist and COLLAR.

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¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 159-160.

² Moira Roth, "Reading between the lines: the imprinted spaces of Sutapa Biswas," in *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies*, ed. Katy Deepwell, pp. 35-36.

³ Thomas Leddy, "Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities: 'Neat,' 'Messy,' 'Clean,' 'Dirty,'" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53:3 (Summer 1995), pp. 267.

⁴ Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," in *ICA Documents 6: Identity the Real Me*, pp. 45.

⁵ Boris Groys, *Art Power*, pp. 97.

⁶ Jacques Derrida & Avital Ronell, "The Law of Genre" *Critical Enquiry* 7:1 (Autumn 1980), pp. 56.