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Olivier Richon

IBID Projects

'If seeing comes before words, what comes before seeing?' asks Olivier Richon. Richon's photography is like the love child of Victor Burgin and Man Ray. Theoretically heavyweight and invested in elaborate deconstruction, his work is also cheeky and flirts with the surreal. The photographer's second solo show at IBID Projects, 'Anima(l)', brought together a selection of mostly new works that focus on staged portraits of animals and still lives, subjects with which Richon has been preoccupied since the 1980s.

In the first gallery, a triptych of works included Portrait of a Monkey with Fruit (2008), which shows an oddly pensive macaque monkey perched against the pristine grey of a photographer's studio examining fruit, while in the earlier It is Now Our Business Not to Let the Beast Get Away (1995), a greyhound stands poised with a mustard velvet drape and a bunch of grapes. Richon plays with our allegorical expectations, equipping his images with artefacts that, at first, seem laden with art-historical symbolism, but simultaneously confuse conventional readings. Other works eloquently examine the ways in which photographs can embody the inanimate and animate; in Portrait of a Tortoise and Portrait of a Tortoise in Motion (both 2008) for instance, a depiction of a tortoise is paired with the blurred outlines of the same creature apparently in high-speed motion. The title of the show made reference to an 18th-century discussion regarding the existence of an animal's soul, or 'anima'. But the anima and animus also feature in Carl Jung's school of analytical psychology, as being what Jung held to be the unconscious or true inner self of an individual, as opposed to the persona or outer aspect of the personality. These ideas seem relevant to Richon's work, which uses the conventions of portraiture but replaces the human subject with allegorical depictions of animals. Richon's photographs explore the way meaning can operate in portraiture as a projection of interiority or, as is the case with his creatures, on a more externalized literal level.

The influence of Surrealism was evident throughout, most blatantly in the form of a lobster in Generic Still Life, with

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Lobster (2008), and in the compositions and arrangements of books, glasses and plates stacked awkwardly, even implausibly, in his other still lives. It could also be found in Enigma (2004), which showed a mysterious, theatrically lit object covered in drapes; a clear reference to the mysterious object wrapped up in a blanket and tied in string by Man Ray in his The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse (1920). (Man Ray's work was inspired by the famous line in the 1869 book Les Chants de Maldoror by Comte de Lautréamont, Ducasse's pseudonym: 'beautiful as the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table'.) Richon uses this veiled surrealist gesture to draw attention to his game – the art of suggestion. All of his photographs appear to connote highly specific meanings, yet refuse to give anything away. They are more parodies of allegories than allegories themselves, invested in the aesthetic of ambivalence and promising a narrative content or meaning that might unfold over time or, equally, never materialize. If Richon flirts with Surrealism, his photography is also friends with the psychoanalytical. In Generic Still Life with Glasses (2008) six wine glasses sit next to two books, one spine reads The Selected Papers of Otto Fenichel. Fenichel was a socialist member of the Viennese Psychoanalytic Association and fascinated by the scoptophilic instinct, describing the camera as a 'devouring eye'. This idea clearly intrigues Richon whose work brilliantly demonstrates that photography, in his own words, is 'not dissimilar to a certain fetishism which oscillates between blindness and illumination, absence and presence, fragment and completeness.'

Sarah James

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