

BAD REPUTATION

RIA-B

“To an Otherwise Unknown Event”

August, 2017, Bad Reputation, Los Angeles

Underneath the bloodstained and sandy stage of the Roman Colosseum was the hypogeum, a multistory stone and wood basement of ropes, pulleys, elevators, ramps, and workers. These mechanisms, and the laborers who put them to use, raised hundreds of thousands of gladiators, animals, and set-pieces into spectacle-sport through trapdoors in the floor of the arena.

In RIA-B’s “Tender Robbing Caron Covers Strapped Jocks: Cups Overfloweth with Extra Padding,” a set of weathered bleacher boards raised into a tall and constricted six-sided stadium arrangement, one is allowed down into a haunted claustrophilic high-school hypogeum. The construction just barely fits within the boundaries of Bad Reputation’s space by engineering feat; the tolerances and allowances are kept tight. Less directly concerned with either the spectacle or the spectator, it is an exposition of the architecture that supports the two.

Two silver-gelatin, partially solarized, photographs hang offset of large city-view windows, whose size they mimic. One photo is of a phoropter, the optometric tool for measuring eye-glass prescription. The other is of gym equipment. Both are technically, scientifically, titled: time in camera, time spent in sun, time spent in bath; “(4 25 17 7:23:18 / 7:23:44), (6 25 17 9:17:15 / 9:21:51)” & “(4 25 17 7:23:18 / 7:23:44), (6 25 17 9:17:15 / 9:21:51)”.

They are chronotopes, markers of space-time in the narrative of the exhibition. Perhaps they are even “chronotopotropes,” tropes of space-time that fit well into this coming-of-age story.

The exhibition spends some time with the free-weight of the spectacle. Behind the play between stadium spectacle and eye-glass spectacle are the diagnoses of near and far-sightedness. I think of near-sighted as the euphemism for poor judgement, an inability to look beyond the present; far-sightedness as the aptitude for looking into the future. Given these, what is the diagnosis for a persistent, perhaps obsessive, peering into the past?

Under the skin of the Jock vs. Nerd polarity trope, between the contact-sport-spectacle and the four-eyes, are techniques reminiscent of high-school safe-houses: Woodshop and the Dark Room. These places are now treated with a strange kind of reverence or even spirituality in the public imagination of young escape.

Certainly adolescent attempts at self-extrication through self-expression are referenced. Early learning experiences are pointed to through the diagnostic system of the phoropter: the patient peers through the machine at a disorganized alphabet on the opposite wall. The focal correction is determined by the palindromic, redundant, and fundamental question asked by the optometrist: “This or this?”

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The sun sees itself in as a ghostly equalizer. The bleachers have been “bleached” by the sun, the photographs have been solarized. In both processes a solar memory is written directly into the material. A record is made for retrospection, and yet there is something terribly present-tense lurking. I am reminded of Milton’s “When I consider how my light is spent...” In looking back he cannot help but take command of the anxiety-ridden now. As in Milton, questions of self-worth, talent, and success are all present here; identity as a component of a larger mechanism is at stake for the workers of the hypogeum. Nietzsche admits: “‘I did this,’ says my Memory. ‘I cannot have done this,’ says my Pride, and remains inexorable. In the end – Memory yields.”

These bleacher boards, which can be exhibited in innumerable arrangements depending on site-need, have a similar quality to the wide-spread pieces of the True Cross, the splintered and coveted remains of a historic torture device. Not only has the artist carried them for years, but they are presented at revised scale of the original form; the splinters of the cross were sold, gifted, and smuggled out of Jerusalem, and can be found inset into variously gilded crosses in Churches across Europe. Compounded questions of veracity also follow: whether or not they are from the True Cross, as opposed to those of the two thieves executed with Christ, or if they are even from a cross at all. Calvin famously wrote in defiance: “...if all the pieces that could be found were collected together, they would fill a ship.” Are we looking at the True Bleacher?

Equipment is central, not only to the correction, but to the building, and demolition, of body. The solarization process that inscribes the gym equipment photo reads like evidence of a ghost, as seen through paranormal imaging equipment. Body-building’s reliance on the machine, as a greater weight than the body, is also essential.

Arnold Schwarzenegger is quoted as saying: “The only way to be a champion is by going through these forced reps and the torture and pain. That’s why I call it the torture routine.” The trilateral connection between body-building, routine-torture, and photographic equipment is not far off. Elaine Scarry notes in “The Body in Pain” that in Chile the torture room was dubbed the “blue-lit room,” in South Vietnam it was called the “cinema room,” and in the Philippines it was referred to as the “production room.” These were rooms built to break bodies down. Simultaneously, and within the budget of a body, they produce, edit, and distribute both information and ghosts.

— Jake Eisenmann