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The Main Entrance

Tolia Astakhishvili
Mark Barker
Co Westerik

19 November – 17 December 2022

Maybe all the structures we rely on are based on a kind of lie. Maybe lying is not so bad. Who really wants the truth? Lying is a protective measure, it is a form of privacy. It is also a form of entertainment, a thrill. Lying is the fiction we construct to sublimate the parts of reality that cannot be coped with as they are. And as I write this, I am lying, I hope.

A character in Fanny Howe's novel *Indivisible* said that the Holy Spirit was everywhere if you just paid attention. 'Not as a rewarded prayer but as an atmosphere that threw your body wide-open.' Howe writes that this character 'had sacrificed intimacy and replaced it with intuition.' It takes a minute to wrap your head around what this might mean. To be conscious of an atmosphere that throws your body wide-open results in such a skinless exposure to one's surroundings that intuition can be a substitute for intimacy. That is, that a kind of pure, pre-discursive impulse (any movement at all) can feel as loving as a caress or as tender as a wound because the world is *just that close*.

Perhaps Co Westerik was someone who had sacrificed intimacy and replaced it with intuition. In the swollen vein, at once pale and dark blue, that forks across a hand like a river, we sense some of that wide-openness, that radicalised sensitivity. What is it, in the end, that separates inside from outside and stops us from bleeding all over the place? A thin, in fact, *translucent* material, thinner than gauze and similarly perforated. Skin: one of the parts of reality that can be difficult to bear when you think about it. The real fragility, the illusion of our containment. But there are no two ways about it.

In another work by Westerik, a single crumpled finger points to a naked, stitched-up landscape of body. There's a subtle obscenity to the barrenness of this picture that has already shown us too much, let us in too close. The finger recalls Adam's reaching for God's in the Sistine Chapel, and Saint Thomas's when he had to poke Jesus's wound to know that it was real in the painting by Caravaggio. Westerik's wound would almost be more bearable if it was, like Caravaggio's, available to penetration. Instead it is neither safe nor sorry. A thin line, like an untrodden path or a silent creek. Is this wound an entrance or an exit; the site of intimacy-cum-intuition or a cure for incredulity?

I reach for Christian imagery here because Christianity is so incredibly fleshy, and so much about precisely the type of exposure at stake in this exhibition: being naked in public, the vulnerability of the body, its mortality and sameness to everything else. But what Christianity is also about is lying, dreaming, hoping. What is a system of belief other than a style of coping? And so what is it that this particular fiction – here in this room – allows us to cope with?

Mark Barker's photographs of the ventilation grills of portable restrooms figure the gills of privacy. The good intentions installed in certain spaces much in spite; if mercy was a hieroglyph is this what it would look like? Japanese toilets give you an option to play a little tune as you defecate. Tell a little lie. Stay a little longer. An absurd measure, really. But a nice one! Skin is just the first lie in the story about the containment of subjectivity, outside in the world there are many, many more.

Imagine the signature as a form of cartography. You sign your name on some important document, and in doing so draw a map of some vast and strange land. This is how I have learnt to think about the expansive practice of Tolia Astakhishvili: a seamless to-ing and fro-ing between the outline of a single subject and a cosmology. It is a way of seeing the world in the same frame and to the same scale as an individual body, or a memory, or a thought. Something as vivid as a dream, and as slippery. Barker's drawings too have that tendency to condense in one line the horizon and a flap of skin, an element of the fantastic as well as what is close. Here, the leaky to wide-open state of our bodies is not a threat to our integrity but an invitation to intimacy that asks for other forms of privacy, other fictions.

I believe we can find on this map of river-veins and scar-paths and in the ghostly back and forth between body and landscape, the lie that Saint Thomas did not believe because he hadn't understood that the point was not reality. He stabbed at the wound when he might have merely traced his finger around it to understand the outline of the plot. Because there is a way of arriving at some kind of truth by going through the back door while insisting that it is the main entrance.

Kristian Vistrup Madsen