

## art

DAVID ALTMEJD  
THE SETTLER,  
(DETAIL), 2005

EYE EXAM

**External Pleasures**

By Jason Foumberg

THERE'S SOMETHING ROUGHLY PORNOGRAPHIC ABOUT SAMIA MIRZA'S NEW SCULPTURE AT KOSCIELAK GALLERY. IT'S A BEASTLY THING ENGAGED IN A POSE LIKE THE YOGIC UPWARD-FACING DOG, yet also reminiscent of a woman halfway between birthing and orgasm. Her infant swims nearby, a smiley-faced tadpole. All the while, she's lost her head; it rests by her neck. Her anus, pushed up in the air, exhibits a frightfully screaming face composed of gouged holes. The whole scene is reflected in a mirror beneath the figure, like a prostitute's ceiling, so that all angles are exposed in all writhing perspectives.

I'm not usually swayed by titles, but Mirza's "Drop your legs and lay on me said the Macha to the Meecha" proved too enticing to not prompt a bit of Internet research. Macha is a Celtic goddess of war who sometimes takes the form of a horse. Meecha is a difficult reference to pin down, but a religious text from the mid-1800s states that Meecha is a Hindu term for someone "not born twice." The connection is loose, but given Mirza's past penchant for mythology, I'll infer that these beings served as inspiration for the primal scene on the mirror; an awful scene indeed, but it's just another cosmic day for some strange gods.

David Altmejd's wolf-man is a figure in a similar position. The grisly haired shape-shifter is pierced throughout his body by mirrored stalagmites. Decayed bits of body don't putrefy; they enchant. Exposed guts take the form of shiny multicolored rivers of pixie dust. Many sharp mirror rods impale the wolf-man through the roof of his mouth. At the other end of his body, his torn and disconnected hand still tugs at a testicle. Like a chicken running around with its head cut off, he performs a routine act in desperation, and clings to a primal gesture of safety. The testicle tug also hints to his future incarnation as a fully formed wolf, terror of the streets, in search of red meat and chasing his own dogged libido. It's a treacherous, painful scene, and viewers are witness to a magic transformation of self.

British artist John Isaacs has a sculpture on view at Kavi Gupta gallery that references Auguste Rodin's infamous 1902 sculpture, "The Thinker." Rodin's original is a massive naked figure who sits hunched over and nearly devours the back of his hand whilst in deep contemplative meditation. Isaacs' sculpture dismisses the body and presents only the earthy (but bronze cast) plinth upon which the philosopher typically perches. The bronze stump may be as slumped over as the brain-burdened thinker, but the seat barely alludes to the body, for if there is a body's imprint, it does not register. So much has been made of the base in the history of sculpture. Brancusi redefined it. Carl Andre made it his sole preoccupation. Today, many whitewash it to pretend it doesn't exist. Isaacs reveals that the pedestal looks a little forlorn. It is a memorial to the loss of the thinking man.

In dialogue with John Isaacs' sculptural base are works by Nathan Mabry from Los Angeles and Sterling Ruby, born in Germany and also residing in L.A. Both take issue with the history of sculpture, in particular the Minimalist masters John McCracken (Mabry) and Tony Smith (Ruby). In the mid-1960s McCracken experienced a heyday for propping shiny boards, about human height, against the gallery wall. Mabry duplicates the famous plank and accompanies it with twin pseudo-African sculptures. They span the length of the plank, one absurdly upside down, and meet in the middle with heads touching. Whereas McCracken's planks quietly and abstractly alluded to a leaning body (that is, if you could willingly displace your cynicism for the found object), Mabry's adornments overstate the obvious. As dummies, they reduce the viewer to dummies, too.

Sterling Ruby remixes Tony Smith's mammoth cubes (again, a mid-1960s god, whose sculptures dominated viewers). Ruby doesn't stray too far from Smith's design. The block is taller than the viewer, and imposing like Smith's cubes, but where Smith favored black and steel, Ruby uses off-white Formica. Notice, too, the bottom of the sculpture hovers about one-half inch off the floor, which is a Tony Smith trademark (and, wonderfully, this small gap constitutes a base). Ruby scratches small graffiti into the Formica. The inscriptions are not readable, and there are only a few. The piece has also been manhandled—there are dirty gray fingerprints all along its edges. It's as if someone were trying to make sense of the oversized cube by groping it. The moral of the story is that even pristine Modernist furniture is sometimes home to house keys, loose change and an ashtray.

Samia Mirza shows as part of "Wish List" at Koscielak Gallery, 646 North Bosworth, (773)252-9921, through January 12. David Altmejd shows as part of "The New Authentics" at The Spertus Institute, 610 South Michigan, (312)322-1700, through April 13. John Isaacs, Nathan Mabry and Sterling Ruby show as part of "Fearful Objects" at Kavi Gupta Gallery, 835 West Washington, (312)432-0708, through January 26.