

this is tomorrow
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Silvia Bächli and Eric Hattan: What about Sunday'

MK Gallery

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Review by Kate Pantling

A snowman sledges around in the snow, on a kamikaze venture that sees him lose his carrot nose. Not to worry, he gets up and has another go. Hattan and Bächli's playful video collaboration 'Snowhau' (2003), depicting a snowman that learns to sledge, is the first work that greets us at the entrance to MK Gallery. It's an appropriate start to the artists' cheeky, thoughtful and engaging joint exhibition. The two Swiss artists actually produce quite diverse artwork in their separate careers, but it is work that is neatly connected by common themes of brevity, wit and an air of melancholic reflection. Beautifully curated in the space, the resulting exhibition is more than the sum of its parts.

Of the two artists' work, Hattan's stands out. Finding intrigue in the banal, Hattan plays with the Duchampian found object. In the first space we see his 'Round and Round' (2000-2012), a video installation composed of several looped films of urban scenes. One screen follows the path of an empty white plastic bag swirling in the air. The video brings to mind a scene from the film 'American Beauty' when teenager Ricky Flitts finds endless beauty in the world through his film of a plastic bag dancing in the wind. Hattan prefers a less hopeful interpretation of this mundane moment, presenting the bag caught in a cyclonic gust destined only to travel around in endless circles amongst the urban debris. The artist sits this scene with other videos featuring repeated journeys through anonymous locations of urban banal. He creates a melancholic atmosphere of a concrete environment offering no hope of salvation. Appropriately enough, those familiar with the city of Milton Keynes will recognise a notorious underpass amongst the videos.

Hattan's '(Yes I) Can' (2012) takes the idea a step further. Instead of a plastic bag, the camera follows a crumpled empty beer can that the artist himself kicks down the street in front of him as he films. It's a quirky humorous piece, but another gloomy gesture, referencing homelessness, drunkenness and despair in urban living. The grating, unrelenting sound of the can rattling down the city's paving stones echoes throughout the rest of the gallery space.

Bächli's Indian ink drawings of dandelions provide some light relief in the next gallery. With easy gestural strokes Bächli describes the flowers on flimsy rolls of paper that echo the fragility of the plants themselves. She makes subtle observations and has a light touch. In the Long Gallery several museum-style display cabinets collect together works on paper arranged into groups. We discover collections labelled 'Women' and 'Homes', each of which combine diagrams, sketches and photographs, working together to build up a theme. Bächli acts almost as an archivist, gathering together observations into interesting compositions that echo Hattan's video installation in the previous space.

In their strongest moments, both artists' work is characterised by a lightness of touch, the minimal gesture, creating a wistful air of reflection. There are, however, a couple of more heavy-handed works that appear. A strange obsession with lampposts seems to dominate Hattan's work and a full-size street lamp has been pulled out of the ground and hung in the show. In its Milton Keynes setting, a city of a thousand identical street lamps, the focus seems more poignant than it might elsewhere.

Hattan's 'Boy Band' (2005) is the star of the show. It is a subversive work engaging his typical sardonic humour. The artist has taken five pieces of everyday product packaging, turned the packaging inside out, and simply presented all five pieces in a row for the viewer, balanced on five wooden sticks. In itself, it's a bold artistic move to make such a minimal gesture. However, as if to intentionally challenge the traditionalists even further, the artist brazenly presents a video next to the objects, showing exactly how easily he 'made' them. With the camera on full zoom as though it were watching a magician at his art, the artist shows in detail, his very simple technique of taking a piece of ordinary packaging and turning it in on itself. The joke is on us.

This exhibition is brave programming from MK Gallery. It is the artists' first show in the UK and it's not an exhibition that will appeal to everyone. There was only one comment pinned to the comments board in the gallery and it complained of the exhibition's 'utter banality'. Actually, 'banality' is a fair summary of the artists' interests, but if you're willing to engage with the subtleties of their artworks, you will come across some pertinent observations in their study of the mundanity of contemporary urban life.

