

## ABSORPTION

CURATOR VANYA BALOGH IN CONVERSATION WITH MARK WOODS ABOUT HIS CREATIVE PRACTICE

**Vanya Balogh:** Mark, your exhibition is titled “Absorption”, what made you select this word and use it for your exhibition?

**Mark Woods:** Initially the show was going to be called “The Absorption of Light and Love”, after a title I gave to a piece of work. Made in black leather and dark suede, it was a cross between a sex toy and an African fetish object. It has a vaginal opening at one end and a leathery handle on the other. The suede sucked in all the light and was a deadening sort of material. It occurred to me that I could name a show after that. The way we absorb things in an emotional way; being alive, living and absorbing in our society, our relationships with other people - it is almost like a chemical process. Absorption means different things; both can be chemical and emotional.

**VB:** How would you define this exhibition in comparison to all the other shows you have exhibited in, in terms of ambience, the concept, and complexity of it.

**MW:** It is an accumulation of earlier shows. Some of these objects I have presented 3, 4, 5 times. When you start putting them together, they become a different thing but also the same. What I am ultimately realising is that even though I am moving on and developing – using photography and making objects - it is the same thing. It becomes wider but it is always the same thing.

**VB:** In terms of the viewer and the way they enter the exhibition becoming immersed in the space. Comparing that to other works where the audience is on the outside, here they suddenly find themselves part of the installation. Would you say that absorption happens here?

**MW:** I like how you have observed that things are now becoming far more internalised, the space has, like you said, people in it and they are being absorbed, but they are absorbing the experience of being within something. They can't physically touch the work; it is only visible through peepholes. The audience is prevented from haptically experiencing the work.

**VB: You painted the walls black, why did you paint them black?**

**MW:** So, it can almost cease to be there. You don't know what space you are in, and it is almost like being in a dream. There are no boundaries; it is completely painted out. That makes people unsure. I am priming them to be perceptive to going into the space without being assured.

**VB: When viewing this exhibition, people are motivated to focus on the light points that are in the show, from images on the walls to the light coming from the peepholes. Therefore, the immersion in the show becomes greater. That was the intention of Absorption?**

**MW:** Sure, to be absorbed and for absorption to take place. Also, with it being painted black, we built a little set, like a labyrinth. It is disorienting, so even if you know what the gallery space at Cross Lane Projects looks like, you won't have a clue whereabouts you are in the building.

Another thing about the mechanism of being in a dark, painted out space where you are unsure where you are, but there are peepholes with light coming through; you will be drawn to these peepholes. When you look through you will see the work but when you look away you will be absorbed into the darkness again. You must wait until your eyes adjust and then move tentatively along the room. The lights will draw you on and you need the light to get out.

**VB: A lot of things are hidden or obscured in this show, this trickery that exists using mirrors and reflections, creating illusions and multiplications of objects. In the mirror room you have kaleidoscopes, and in the last section of the show there are more peepholes. Why not a big hole, a window for the audience to see your work? Why tiny ones?**

**MW:** Because I am restricting what they are seeing. I am in control of what they see. There is some need for me to be in control.

**VB:** In this show, we see two large lightboxes with images, is that the extension of the advertorial idea, as lightboxes can be used for such a thing. Lightboxes are an object themselves but show a two-dimensional image.

**MW:** You are quite right; they are three-dimensional objects presenting a two-dimensional image. The first one "Natural Blonde" the one with a lampshade on her head; she is a mannequin and is being asked to perform, leaping over a chair. It's the very thing I was talking about earlier, being able to command someone to do these actions.

**VB:** The second lightbox is the pram image, that we see on the posters. The pram is a symbolic object in a way, and it can signify in dreams and in recreation a new life. However, in your pram you have stacks of objects, and it looks weird. It's strong and powerful, what is the image trying to convey?

**MW:** It's a pram, not a full sized one but a child's toy. The figure is a pink romper suit for a baby. I like the idea of people being uneasy about that, it's cautionary, is that the right word? I want people to be uneasy. When they look at that, thinking, now why is that making me feel uneasy?

**VB:** In your work you explore a place of uncanny fantasy, that can make a viewer at times uncomfortable. Uncomfortable is strange.

**MW:** I like the idea of getting an emotional response from somebody. I've always been interested in surrealism, and I like the idea of presenting a surreal scenario. We are very much separated from that part of our psyche, the surreal, by modern life - which is pretty surreal.

**VB:** Let's talk influences. You have mentioned, in the past Guy Bourdin, who is not a maker of art or sculpture, but a photographer. Apart from Bourdin, I see this connection to his work, what other artists have inspired you, especially when developing these pieces.

**MW:** Many, many influences, not just artists as you point out but photographers and people who present things that hit you in the gut. On that level, one of my heroes would be Louise Bourgeois. I first started out as a jeweller; I've always made strange objects, but they weren't art objects, they were jewels. And then I saw a Cathy de Monchchaux show in the mid-90s at the Whitechapel Gallery and it almost made me give up, it hit me so hard. It was so visceral, so sexual. Just to be able to put that level of intensity into artwork has become an ambition because of that show.

**VB: You talk a lot about surrealism and its influences on your work and how it transforms your thinking as well. Would you say that surrealism is one of the main drivers in your work in general? And an influence of it? What would be the most inspiring surrealist artist you've looked up to?**

**MW:** Surrealism became an interest to me even before art. Salvador Dali was everywhere and he's maybe not so much a popular surrealist, but I liked what he did, and it fascinated me. It's the landscapes and transmogrification of everything and the layered meanings of objects that weren't what they seemed. I like Merritt Oppenheim, because of the objects, and again, she's female.

**VB: In some of the recent photographic work, you seem to be dressing up in dresses and transforming yourself. Now you're becoming part of the installation.**

**MW:** It's being open to feminism. As a child and a young man that was a fear; being feminised was something you were frightened of. It's irrational and it's about having a machismo exterior. As time has gone on, I've been thinking, what's the big fear with that? You can almost ask the question, what have you got against women? Feeling threatened by being feminised it's kind of something from episodes of my childhood, being ridiculed and being disempowered. All those things, playing around with gender and power and authority.

**VB: There is referencing of fashion photography, and we touch on consumerism and other topics addressed in your work. Now consumerism being one, seduction of consumerism being the other.**

**MW:** I have always loved cameras, but I have never used them much

until lately. Thinking about the power the photographers have. They are the director, being used in commerce, adverts, PR, they pay people; women to do what they want them to do in front of the lens. They have this power, do this, do that, bend over, stand here. It is kind of the power relationship, and it is almost machismo in itself: "I've got the power". I am quite curious about that, so am playing around with being manipulated by my own camera and it's the commodification of advertising and how photography is used to present a model of persuasion.

**VB: A lot of the pieces in this exhibition are created from collecting objects, some appropriated and changed, some transformed and reused. You have been characteristically producing materials and making objects, and I think that this is a recent thing – the collection of dolls and objects. How did this come about?**

**MW:** I've been collecting things longer than I have been making artworks out of them. The manifestations are recent things, but I have just been collecting things to create a vocabulary within the photography.

**VB: Are you particular about it and looking for certain things?**

**MW:** Yeah, for instance, the pram is probably 40s, 50s, 60s design and there is a nostalgia to these objects. That is probably one of the unifying things about what I collect, the nostalgia aspect to it. Nostalgia is a trope that advertising use, another form of presenting an ideal that never existed; it can seep into people's psyche. That is what I am referencing in a way.

**VB: I want to elaborate on the 'Heads'. In the "laboratory", which is the last part of the exhibition, the last scene, the last bit of theatre, is something you haven't done before. The "Heads" are full of expression and emotion.**

**MW:** The "Heads" are new and a departure, in fact using figuration at all is a bit of a departure for me. I avoided it for many years, and I just made objects. But then I started to collect these things for my photography, and I needed models to photograph. I started buying these mannequins to pose instead of using a human. I bought the

heads as a part of that. During the lockdown I started thinking I can turn these heads into skulls; I drilled the eyes out, drilled out the mouths and made them into memento mori images.

**VB: They have this ethnic aspect to them, they almost look tribal.**

**MW:** I describe them as “contemporary grotesques” which is a European tradition, normally for churches etc. But they are referring to fetish objects, with the fetish being a spiritual aspect of animism. I turned them into skulls for the purposes of photography and I began adding to them. I made some teeth, and some glass eyes from animal taxidermy – owls’ eyes, which are quite predatorial; making the “Heads” look almost like predators. But they are really referring to advertising and selling, in a dysphemistic way; they are not euphemisms, they are quite harsh and in your face. I am loosely calling them an “alternative presentation of persuasion” which is advertising as persuasion. This is a different form of persuasion.

**VB: In terms of your creation, production, and presentation, what is the most satisfactory part of this exhibition for you as an artist?**

**MW:** It is the presentation of the old and new altogether and coherent. I can present work that I made 10-15 years ago and put it alongside I made in the last few weeks, and it makes sense. That, I like, it’s been a long road and there’s been a lot of doubt about what I am doing and now I am realising it was always there, like I said earlier, the work is really all the same things.

**VB: How much do you allow the spontaneous moments to happen within your work?**

**MW:** More and more, it’s becoming more spontaneous, and I think that it is becoming more evident.

**VB: I find that to be a great aspect of this show. In previous exhibitions you have done, you have achieved the mirror boxes. This is the full thing, the exhibition is the box. In a way it is an internal and external environment. You are allowing people to enter the construction and experience it, leading them through a set of illuminations and illusions, which I find to be a complex situation. I also think this is the furthest**

**point that you have pushed your work.**

**MW:** Yes, I think this is the most ambitious show that I have ever done. I am incredibly happy with it.