

Exhibition Guide

Matias Faldbakken

Shocked into Abstraction

25 November 2009 – 24 January 2010

First and Second Floor Galleries

Jeremy Millar

Projector

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Tower Room

IKON

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The following text by Faldbakken featured in *Artforum* magazine, September 2009.

To me 'Shocked into Abstraction' is sort of like an absurdist play without exit: it's this big production that is all about holding back, about being almost non-productive. It's my first solo museum exhibition, so there was of course the question of how to conceive of such a show. I didn't want it to seem like a retrospective, but at the same time I didn't want to make all new works: I wanted, rather, to contextualise the new pieces by means of highlights from the past four years. The solution, one that goes along with the overall logic of my work, was to take seriously the generous invitation to exhibit in such a context, yet at the same time to somehow cut short the positive vibe that comes with such an invitation by more or less just dumping the stash—the material, the artworks—in the museum, without much regard for where it all would be placed or how it all would look. Basically, I tried to let the works stand or hang where the transportation people had placed them, as if the premise of the exhibition were just to haul everything—the stuff from storage and the lenders and the things from my studio—to the museum and get it in the door. Once that was done, anything I did in the museum space would be a bit arbitrary. This strategy is linked to my general attempt to do things in

a really half-hearted way, to make half-heartedness the core of my production, so to speak, as if very little were at stake. And it is clear to me that the museum — even if it's a place where I might not want to spend all my time — is the only institution that allows you to work in such a manner. I cannot imagine any other place where such a practice would be possible and even appreciated. And so my work turns around all the conflicts and ironies that come with the institutionalisation of these kinds of strategies.

I think the packing-tape wall pieces are among the most emblematic of this way of working. At first, around 2008, they were based on the way in which broken windows are taped together by store and office managers: I would photograph and then remake the kind of senseless abstractions that are created this way. But I soon found that the link to vandalism became too obvious, so I chose to drift into my own kind of abstraction, just arranging strips of tape on the wall really quickly and spontaneously. The works are simply what you see: pieces of tape on the wall. They are rewarding, somehow, on a visual level, but at the same time they are completely throwaway gestures and hard to take seriously as artworks. Still, they get the full museum treatment when made in this context: "We are going to measure this and describe it and photograph it, and it will follow you for the rest of your life." I'm interested in almost cartoonish ideas of abstraction and the relations between the cartoonish and the deadpan serious that you may find in, for instance, the work of Ad Reinhardt. Or Wyndham Lewis, for that matter. If one

considers Reinhardt's image production as extremist, then the caricature of the extremist is brought to the forefront in his writing, but not necessarily in his cartoons.

Then there are the pieces that seem a bit more worked out—the tiled walls, the kind you usually see in subway tunnels or public restrooms, with more or less successfully washed off graffiti markings that can always still be seen in cracks between the tiles. Here I wanted to make a kind of painting that was really easy to pass by, one that tells us, “move on, there's nothing to see here”. A type of painting where the quasi-vandalising act of marking space—so prominent in so much modern painting—competes for attention with the act of cleaning up and returning to order, a painting that would stage some sort of collaboration between the vandal and the vandalised, if you will. In painting, there is always the question of what to put in and what to remove, but here it's as if painting were informed by a much more banal and straightforward problem: How can we possibly get rid of these violent markings and what they represent? *Cultural Department* (2006) a work that replicates, directly on the wall, the splashed-paint vandalism of the Palestinian Cultural Department's offices by Israeli soldiers—is a different but related take on this theme. *The Abstracted Car* (2009) is another work that places a sign of equivalence between destruction and abstraction. However, there is no underlying story here—just a car that has been burned to a dysfunctional carcass and that has then been named “abstract”. The whole point was taking an object that would immediately have all kinds of

dramatic political connotations and then emptying it of all such things, ending up with what is essentially a rather vapid formal gesture.

People often tend to see all sorts of subcultural or “underground” fascinations or allegiances in my work, but my approach to such phenomena is based on a doubt as to what the underground could actually be. It is hard to know what kind of activity would be truly marginal, what would be below zero, or where things are really situated. I think a lot of my work, in fact, normalises the transactions that are already taking place between different fields. To take one example: my video with the girl wearing sandals whose feet pump the brake pedal of a car, *Untitled (Pedal Pumping)* (2009), made with Lars Brekke, was first placed on YouTube, where it got ten thousand views in no time, supposedly by the car-pedal-fetishist underground. I don’t know what you would have to do to get ten thousand people to come and see an abstract painting in such a short time. In the end, I’m more interested in the mechanisms of extremism and the homologies that might be traced between the mute, passive, good-for-nothing artwork and the kind of really desperate actions that are products of various types of extremism—it is simply a more natural connection for me to make than between high and low, above and underground, and so on.

I guess I am trying to map out the affinity between the exceptional and the normative—or to bring out the interaction between the two. Art history is of course

full of various types of attempts at the extreme, and I suppose my work turns around the tension between extremist impulses and forms of freedom and the control over, or 'musealisation' of, extremism that takes place in the name of the same institution. More specifically, you could perhaps say I work with the highly ambivalent responses to the spectacle and the spectacular that can be traced in and through various cultural transactions—i.e. the many situations in which the extremist, or artistic, response would be to try to delete or negate or subvert the spectacular. My remake of the “educational sculpture” of the Taliban—the roadside pole around which they had mounted videotape pulled out of cassettes as a sort of public monument to forbidden imagery—would be one example. I continually seek out icons of the non-spectacular, and I am particularly interested in the many cases in which such attacks on the spectacle still somehow tend to end up in the realm of the spectacle.

I know of course that I'm handling huge generalisations here, but that is somehow also the point: I allow obscure details to become representative of the wildest generalisations—and vice versa. This is an aspect of the half-hearted approach that you can also find in my writing, even though I keep that strictly separate from my visual-art productions. There is a point at which working with way too big words and terms, a completely un-nuanced, generalised outlook, comes to represent a particular kind of existential conditioning—one that ultimately results in a totally nerdy, introverted, pedantic

and abstracted product or attitude. Maybe it is a response to the realisation that most complexes are, in the end, too big for anyone to survey.

© *Artforum*, September 2009, '1000 Words: Matias Faldbakken', by Ina Blom.

Jeremy Millar *Projector*
25 November 2009 – 24 January 2010
Tower Room

Projector (2007) forms part of a larger body of work taking inspiration predominantly from the use of obsidian in ancient American cultures and in part from the Jorge Luis Borges short story *The Mirror of Ink* (1933). The following texts are extracts from Millar's writings in which he discusses these influences and his own work.

On obsidian

Obsidian is a volcanic lava cooled rapidly before crystallisation can occur, creating a lustrous dark glass. Due to its lack of a crystalline structure, its broken edges are incredibly sharp; as such it was used in pre-Columbian weapons and knives and is still used today in surgical scalpels, the edges of which are only a few molecules thick. Its use in Meso-American bloodletting and sacrifices gave the material a value as much symbolic as utilitarian, and it was the black obsidian mirror that possessed the greatest symbolic power of all. With his obsidian mirror, Tezcatlipoca (a central Deity in the Aztec Religion) was able to see everything, and see everyone; he was able to see into the hearts of men and, perhaps most impressively, divine the future.

On The Mirror of Ink

In this story, Borges relates a tale from Richard Francis Burton's *The Lake Regions of Equatorial Guinea* (1859) that

the explorer was, in turn, told by the sorcerer Abderramen al-Masmudi. In it, the sorcerer is held captive by the cruel Sudanese governor Yaqub the Afflicted and, in pleading for his life, promises to show the governor 'forms and appearances more marvellous than those of the fausi jihal, the magic lantern'; through a series of magical rituals, these are shown within a mirror of ink poured onto the governor's right palm. These rituals continue day after day, thereby keeping the sorcerer alive, and are only brought to an end when, in a gruesome vision desired by the governor, Yaqub unexpectedly witnesses his own execution and dies instantly.

On Projector

Part of a series of works that explore the creation and use of 'dark mirrors', whether of ink or obsidian. Such mirrors have been used in many cultures to see into the future. However, rather than one mirror, as is usually the case, the object on display here consists of three obsidian mirrors, which suggests the existence of not a single future, but rather of many. The use of two-way mirror Perspex in the display case also creates an infinity effect, with the object multiplied in all directions and breaking beyond the boundaries of the case itself; the viewer, and the room in which they are standing, are not reflected similarly.

Please visit the Resource Room to find out more about Matias Faldbakken and Jeremy Millar.

A catalogue, *Shocked into Abstraction*, accompanies the Matias Faldbakken exhibition, priced £15, special exhibition price £12 (only available in person at Ikon). Visit www.ikon-gallery.co.uk/shop for the full range of Ikon catalogues and limited editions.