IKON

Exhibition Guide

Victor Man *ATTEBASILE*
26 November 2008 – 25 January 2009
Second Floor Galleries

Victor Man was born in 1974 in Transylvania, a province of Romania where he continues to live and work, based in the city of Cluj-Napoca.

This is Man's first UK museum exhibition and largest to date in Europe. It comprises assemblages of paintings and sculpture, bringing together disparate references to his birthplace, with its 'folk' traditions and myths, as well as allusions to more recent Eastern European history. The physical and mental isolation of the period in Romania during Communist control is implied through Man's use of particular imagery and objects; his painting style has a reduced palette, hues seemingly dulled as if retrieved from another time, pictures that repeatedly hint at acts of subversion, fictions half-uttered as if time were paused, the present dissolving. Richly evocative, dark in both colour and subject matter, suggestive of a voyeuristic gaze that meets both revelation and concealment – recurring themes signify an alternative world beyond familiar experience. This quality is enhanced through the artist's technique of viewing objects and images through a 'black' mirror, a device which distances the act of visualisation for both him and us. A reversal connecting different realities is also embodied in the exhibition's title, alluding to a personal mythology. Representations of women, wolves and gloves appear in several pieces, sometimes eroticised, conveying notions of the unconscious, a surreal nether-world of new codes. *Untitled* (2007) is a painting and print on acetate, presented in corresponding positions on either side of a wall. We might be forgiven for assuming that the image of a silhouetted face creates an umbilical-like connection from one room to the other, where it is abstracted into a puff of smoke; illusion and magic becoming metaphors for shifting, fugitive meaning.

This enigma of shadows and masks is seen in other works. Another painting coupled with a print on acetate, also *Untitled* (2007), infers some form of assignation between a man and a woman, the ambiguity of the painting doubled by its partial obscuring with fabric and juxtaposition with an image of a starched collar. It could indicate some

clandestine yet innocent fumbling; alternatively perceived as unwanted attention, pointing to interconnections between desire, power and control. *Those with teeth and those without* (2008), is a large sheet of glass propped against the wall with felt rolls, its surface silk-screened and painted black, reflecting light that reveals phantom figures, women engaged in the act of smoking. Like other works it alludes to events furtively glimpsed, giving rise to a mood of disquiet, underlined by Man's intervention blocking the view from one of the main gallery windows with a curtain of heavy black cloth.

Untitled (2008) combines a small-scale painting of some ghostly atomic form with a pole, leather gloves tightly bound with wire around its centre. Nearby photographic images of discarded or lost gloves recall the proto-surrealism of Max Klinger, whose suite of etchings *Ein Handschuh* (1881), arguably his best known work, was shown at Ikon in 2005. Man's work considers notions of desire and fragmentation – geographical and ideological – coming together to create new narratives. Human sexuality, with all its various dream and nightmare scenarios is evoked.

Man obliquely scrutinises the transformation occurring in Eastern Europe, retrieving issues and artefacts from disappearing local contexts. Images and objects are captured and recycled from a wide range of sources found near his studio and home, so that his changing world and the Romania of previous generations are sustained. It is as if he is attempting to reconstruct a memory long lost. Two new sculptures, both *Untitled* (2008), an assemblage of a humble wooden stool and strange metal funnel, and a wooden former respectively, are uncannily human, reminiscent of the work of Man's fellow compatriot Constantin Brancusi. However, through the use of everyday objects, their function denied, surface qualities betray individual histories and a dramatic charge occurs. When considering the recent history of his country and its fast-changing environment, Man's work becomes ever more pointed and crucially, poignant; the sudden breaking wave of information is reflected in the diversity of his work conflated in newly found freedom with things of Romania's past, rich with association. Through the reconstitution of found imagery and smart juxtaposition, new meaning emerges. Brought out of context, each painting or sculpture reformulates itself to create as Man has described, a "terrain of turbulence, where truth becomes a matter of clues".