

- 1 Henry Richards Luard (ed.), *Matthaei Parisiensis, Monachi Sancti Albani, Chronica Majora*, vol. 4, London, 1872–73, pt 3, p. 546. Cited in Julian Gardner, ‘Opus Anglicanum and its Medieval Patrons’, in Clare Browne, Glyn Davies and M.A. Michael (eds) with the assistance of Michaela Zöschg, *English Medieval Embroidery: Opus Anglicanum*, New Haven and London, 2017, 49–59, p. 51.
- 2 Bonnie Young, ‘Opus Anglicanum’, in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 29, no. 7, 1971, pp. 291–298, p. 291.
- 3 Constance Classen, ‘Museum Manners: The Sensory Life of the Early Museum’, in *Journal of Social History*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2007, pp. 895–914.
- 4 Helen Rees Leahy, *Museum Bodies: The Politics and Practices of Visiting and Viewing*, Farnham, 2012.
- 5 Karin Harrasser, ‘(Dis)playing the Museum: Artifacts, Visitors, Embodiment, and Mediality’, in Sharon Macdonald, Helen Rees Leahy (eds), *The International Handbook of Museum Studies*, vol. 3, Chichester, 2015, pp. 371–388; Laura De Caro, ‘Moulding the Museum Medium: Explorations on Embodied and Multisensory Experience in Contemporary Museum Environments’, in *ICOFOM Study Series*, vol. 43b, 2015, pp. 55–70.

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‘Jana Euler’, Cabinet, London, 19 January – 11 March 2017.

A small painting hidden in a corner of Cabinet’s new gallery space in Vauxhall sets the scene for Jana Euler’s solo exhibition: a tropical island has imploded, much like the world order in 2016. As if being sucked down into the centre of the earth, the palm tree-lined coastline has morphed into an underwater open circle, from which foul fumes emerge. That *island* (all works 2016) is framed by the gallery’s state-of-the-art smart home devices only adds to the work’s dystopian effect, nuclear warfare seemingly at the visitor’s fingertips.

Melting paradise aside, on view are eight oil paintings, roughly two by two metres each. Representation is altogether evicted from the centre of four of these paintings, all titled “ ” and unframed. Each depicts a face whose features have been evacuated to the margins of the canvas, reversing figure and ground. A smiley’s loud yellow hue, airbrushed eyes and grin are placed outside of its round outline, much like the hour marks of a wristwatch are mirrored along the outer perimeter of its empty face. Another work depicts the watch’s negative image, with the hours decreasing from twelve to one, taking up a notch the exhibition’s vertiginous distortions. But it is in the painting of a woman’s body that Euler’s centrifugal method of composition is at its most eccentric. Here too the figure’s facial features have been folded over the edges of a central vacuum, so that blown-up, horizontally flipped ears appear on either side; upside-down, bulging eyes on top and inverted full lips below – all rendered in a caricaturesque, hyperrealist style. Most bewildering of all, the painting’s fish-eye-like perspective shows diminutive frontal and posterior views of the nude woman’s body, unfolding from her gigantic chin and forehead respectively. The result is a grotesque doubling of the body, front and back facing each other with the pierced, Janus-faced head acting as an elastic bridge, flesh stretched over the skin of the canvas like a drumhead.

Such bodily contortions should not surprise anyone familiar with Euler’s paintings of the last five years, which have often featured hyper-flexible, airbrushed figures trying to squeeze into serpentine architectural models, as well as disparate body parts coalescing in inchoate anatomies. This plasticity partly reflects the malleability of the image in

today's digital culture, but the currency of the thirty-something, Brussels-based artist's work is mostly circuitous, made up of quirky and anachronistic references rather than the sleek surfaces commonly associated with post-internet art. At any rate, the aim that Euler sets for herself in the exhibition leaflet smacks of an existentialism at odds with the cynicism of our times. There she explains that in the series " " she 'tried to visualise a void or a feeling of depth in the nothingness', a procedure offset by four framed paintings, hung alternately with the others, depicting objects with 'the potential to fill the void'.¹ The dialectic between nothingness and fullness inevitably evokes one of modern art's best-known before-and-after pictures: the single, empty vitrine in Yves Klein's 1958 *Le Vide* exhibition at Galerie Iris Clert in Paris, followed by the same gallery's waste-filled shopfront windows in Arman's 1962 riposte, *Le Plein*. Yet Euler's nod to her avant-garde forefathers soon unravels, for spirituality and materiality are muddled up across both series of paintings rather than split into neat categories. This becomes most apparent in the paradoxically shallow depiction of fullness in the four paintings titled *Filled*, each with a parenthetical subtitle identifying its allegorical object: (*capitalism*), (*health/beauty enhancer*), (*religion*) and (*minimalism*). In the first, a nude female figure kneeling on silky crimson bedsheets stretches her arms at the viewer and back again towards the black ground of the painting, as if imprisoned in the glass cage of the canvas – or, as the title suggests, in the false depth of a capitalist economy of desire. The Alex Katz-esque female protagonist of another portrait falls into a similar painterly trap. Sporting matching pink lips and hairband, she is shown placing cucumber slices on her eyelids, her

image filtered, in turn, by a close-up view of these watery green goggles. Looking both at her and through her, or possibly at her image through her own eyes, we are let in on a solipsistic encounter between self and image. Elsewhere, the fillings reveal themselves to be ever more vacuous: religion is represented by myriad ear-winged feet set against a backdrop of psychedelic, rippled gradients, while minimalism is portrayed as a garbage bag overflowing with what could well be the artist's everyday waste: crumpled receipts, empty coffee cups, discarded magazines and that most painterly of litter, orange peel. 'There is no emptiness in the trash can', Euler laconically remarks.² But it is depth as much as emptiness that is lacking in the painting. Pictured from above, the creased bin liner and its contents appear compressed against a pale brown, monochrome ground, as if we were looking at a picture of a picture of garbage, such as one of Arman's assemblages. Fullness, in other words, is once again deflected by the materiality of the canvas, its proverbial flatness.

The irony oozing from these paintings notwithstanding, there is something remarkably earnest in Euler's regurgitation of dusty dialectics. In her allegories of both fullness and emptiness, we are confronted with a similar experience of vacuity ensuing from the wilful misalignment between literal and figurative meaning: if the canvas's flatness reveals fullness as myth, so is the literal emptying out of the centre of the painting's surface utterly inadequate to contain the metaphoric decentring of the gaze that she, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, claims for her work. Ultimately, the paintings' virtuosic doublings and broken symbolism transport us not to the heroic mythologies of the neo-avant-garde but to the emblematic language

132 OBJECT

of the Baroque, with its penchant for optical aberrations, tormented embodiment and self-deprecating hopelessness. In this light, the exhibition appears as a vanitas of sorts for the information age: a depiction of the slippage between the cosmic and the comic

that has come to dominate our world in collapse.

¹ Jana Euler, *Jana Euler*, London, 2017, p. 1.

² Ibid.

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