

GALERIE

HUBERT

WINTER

GUILLAUME BIJL

„Guillaume is an artists's artist,“ gallerist Hubert Winter said to me softly at the opening of Guillaume Bijl's solo exhibition in Vienna. Indeed, the Belgian installation artist walking (almost lumbering) through his own show that night seemed bemused by his audience. Viewers – including some local eminences, among them one of the guys from Gelitin – watched him watching them and turned back to the art, creating a gamelike circle of bemusement, before everyone, artist included, started talking about what they were seeing.

And a mind game this show is, of sorts. Along the side walls of the elongated storefront gallery are Bijl's wacky assemblages of objects – some that the artist titles *Compositions Trouvées* ('sketches' or 'archaeological still lifes'); others from his Sorry work series (in the words of the artist, “absurd extensions of my oeuvre”). *Compositions Trouvée* (2011), a lifesize horse covered in taped cardboard, is grouped with a suited male mannequin, an Iconic column and oversize letters on the wall spelling PAARD ('Prada', transposed). Twelve LP records, all displaying eye-popping photographic images – a tigers's face, a tropical sunset, a disco ball, a puppy – are made into clocks showing different times in a 3 x 4 grid affixed to a wall (*Composition Trouvée*, 2012). A female mannequin covered in tiny stickers and dressed as a dominatrix stands over several headless black torsos under a sign indicating, in French, that the carpet fair is on the fourth floor (*Composition Trouvée*, 2008). Strangest of all is Sorry (2010), the head of a white bison mounted on the wall, under a photograph of a mountain range and above a broom and dustpan. The bison's head hangs like a hunter's trophy, yet its features are sinister, a little human, and very artificial. The absurdities culminate in the *Transformation Installation* in the gallery's rear alcove (Bijl began 'transforming' spaces in the

1980s, installing, for example, a space resembling a lamp store in an Art Basel booth or, in 2003, a fake supermarket at Tate Liverpool). Here, behind a velvet curtain separating it from the rest of the exhibition, is a small 'museum' entitled *Die Geschichte der Erotik* (1996–2012), tracing the history of eroticism, with completely fictitious explanatory texts and sexy artefacts (such as rather unappetising fake body parts) displayed in vitrines on deep-green walls.

All of this 'tragicomic' use of everyday objects should be terribly and perhaps repelantly kitschy, but it somehow isn't. It rather evokes old-school Surrealism and a little Dada; the junkyard readymades arc back, of course, to Duchamp and other forebears. At the same time one sees that this artist's artist has clearly influenced, cross-influenced or inspired contemporaries and successors, like Maurizio Cattelan, Fischli/Weiss and Elmgreen & Dragset (who curated Bijl into the Danish and Nordic pavilions via their work *The Collectors* at the 2009 Venice Biennale).

Winter worked with Bijl once before, in 1991, when the artist created a death chamber for composer Johannes Vogl in Winter's former gallery. Bijl fooled people not only into thinking it was a real memorial (and not just an installation) but also that this composer had existed (he hadn't). The artist's long career of thought-provoking leg-pulling, as well as his intermittent appearances in high-profile shows, make me wonder why the Antwerp native hasn't found broader acceptance. Now that Cattelan has 'retired', maybe it's Bijl's turn to take a bit more credit as a contemporary joker, one who, for the past 40 years – and unlike Cattelan – has refreshingly steered clear of careerism and followed his own path.

Kimberly Bradley

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BREITE GASSE 17
1070 VIENNA, AUSTRIA

T. +43 (1) 524 09 76 / F.-9
OFFICE@GALERIEWINTER.AT
WWW.GALERIEWINTER.AT