

Banish the world

The misanthrope wants to banish himself by banishing the world. One underplot of Shakespeare's play *As You like It* concerns arch-misanthrope Duke Frederick and his attempt to remake the Royal court after his own image. Frederick's first move is to exile his major political opponent who also his brother, Duke Senior, to the Forest of Arden. With his brother gone, Frederick becomes intoxicated with his purging power and proceeds to send every other character to the forest too. Soon, he has totally depopulated the court. All that is left to do now is to banish himself, a task easily achieved by declaring himself a "convertite" or a hermit thereby relinquishing his personhood to a religious order. What was the densest space of social and dramatic life in the play has been successfully remade by Frederick into an empty room of self-banishment. Cleansing the court has allowed Frederick, finally, to dissolve himself and achieve pure misanthropy: this is an account of culture from which the human has been subtracted. Has he succeeded? Maybe. On the one hand, Shakespeare's play presents an extreme demonstration that it is only possible to banish yourself, to leave society, through an attempt to violently delete that society. On the other, the play makes it equally clear that to do this is also, necessarily, to remake that world somewhere else as something new. In the case of *As You Like It*, this remaking is represented by the Forest of Arden, where all the other characters from the old court are hanging out and constructing new lifeways together after being exiled. The success of the misanthrope's gesture of withdrawal is ironically marked by the creation of more worlds and more collectives to which he denies himself membership, but from which he cannot quite obliterate the traces of his refusal, that is, of himself. This is the punishment reserved for the pure soul.

In *Punish a pure soul; House room for the presentation of shallow-form behaviour* Alexis Kanatsios presents a world vision born in the breach of withdrawal and punishment. The exhibition consists of two drawings on paper and a sculpture. All three are technically animated by the tension between gestures of self-effacement and the persistence of subjective trace-residue. So, from a distance the A0 drawing 'Untitled' one might be reminded of Peter Halley's 'cell' paintings and the cynical late-modernist simulated abstraction of which they became representative. But on closer inspection one notices that the work has been constructed by taping together A4 panels of tracing paper hand shaded in block colour. The genre context of the large flat abstraction gives Kanatsios' choice of such a labour-intensive method a perverse flair. But it is by drawing attention to the artist's hand in exactly the place you'd expect it might have finally been given a rest that Kanatsios is able to inbuild the picture with an edged surface texture bordering on low-relief, undercutting the iconography of computerised late-modernism with a sculptural agenda and also confusing the floating theoretical mood of the diagram with the messier life-realities of the model diorama. Similarly, the 'User' disk sculptures have been hung horizontally so that they jut out of the wall like alien conveyor belt "Rotoreliefs" from outer space. But the wear-and-tear of their white acrylic coats which conjures this atmosphere of disuse and deracination seems to have been achieved by the intensely involved frottage rubbing technique pioneered by Max Ernst. This tension between the alleged autonomy of the art object and the labour of the artist is further heightened by the cylindrical parallelism established between the 'User' sculptures and the architectonic shapes in the smaller blueprint-like drawing. The reciprocity between these works raises the possibility that the visitor finds themselves standing in the ruins of a failed design, a possible world that has been banished by the artist, but which retains everywhere the energetic traces of his technical ambition.

Shakespeare's Duke Frederick arguably did not find a true successor until 1957 when Yves Klein presented a cleaned, empty, whitewashed Galerie Iris Clert as 'the pure atmosphere of the painter' in 'Le Vide'. Three years later, however, it seemed Klein was not satisfied with his self-banishment, throwing himself out of the window of the same gallery for a photo which has become an icon of art modernism's central preoccupations with abstraction, void, origin, self-obliteration.

One significance of this exhibition, and indeed of Kanatsios' practice in general, is to highlight that if those modernist fantasies of self-effacement and neutrality are exactly that, one need not throw the baby out with the bathwater and renounce the (much longer) historical project which attempts an articulation of non-subjectivity or, in different terms, an account of culture from which the human has been subtracted. Instead, his work makes clear that it is possible to refit the residue which this attempt inevitably produces as productive aesthetic technique and effect. Embracing your punishment is part of the point. It is by trying and failing to banish yourself that you create the world.

Jeremy George