

LIVING ROOMS

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Shortly before Marco departed for Rome last winter, we met up for coffee in Bethnal Green to talk about his exhibition in the flat. Before we went our separate ways he lent me a DVD to watch, Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Eclisse*. The film begins with a scene in which a man and woman, on the verge of splitting up, are arguing in the

ground floor rooms of a luxurious house. The break down in their relationship has left them in a state of torpor, enhanced by the heat of an Italian summer and the absence of day light in the building. Their elegant but listless bodies, lacking the verve to set them apart, have become indistinct from the stuffy glamour of their surroundings. At one point the man, whose home it is, stands in front of a large abstract painting. From the shoulders up his body is insinuated into its composition, his anguished countenance the perfect match for the moody expression of the brush marks upon the canvas. The scene is remarkable for the manner in which Antonioni treats each aspect of the interior equally, be it a lamp, a painting, the man standing in front of it or the tie around his neck. It is an approach which animates the objects in the room, as they are promoted from props to actors, at the same time that it reduces the lovers to a sub-human state. As they wander through the house their presence is that of a pair of floating motifs, existing not so much in the realm of the living but as a feature of the decor.

Artworks are rarely made with the reality of domestic life in mind, even if they do pertain to an idea of it, and they tend to

make for engaging but rather impractical house guests. For unlike us they are free to exist within their own esoteric, speculative worlds, unfettered by routine or the requirements of the body. They belong to an order of existence quite different to the corporeality in which Melissa and I reside. And so, with every exhibition we stage in our flat, we must negotiate a way to live with our new companions. Sometimes, this means temporarily relinquishing our possessions. Household items slip out of reach and into the world of the work; in the blink of an eye our coffee table becomes a plinth, or our tea towels are removed from service by an artwork nestling amongst them. And just as we are subjected to their habits, the works on show are subjected to ours. We take great pleasure in instigating relationships between visiting exhibits and our belongings, drawing out associative meanings by placing, say, a ceramic piggy bank next to a ceramic sculpture, or a Matisse calendar on the wall beside an oil painting. Artworks that stay with us must be prepared for the contingencies of everyday life: the stray sock dropped on the way to the washing machine, or the drying rack erected in the middle of the room, interrupting them as they hold court. And, of course, they must be prepared for the

impact of our bodies: the movements we make, the spaces that we fill.

When Alice Channer installed the work *Ultra Low* in our hallway, she did so directly in front of the clothes rail under the stairs, temporarily blocking our access to it. During the time the show was up, in order that I might get dressed, *Ultra Low* and I became dance partners, practicing our routine in the early mornings. With my feet splayed around its marble base, and my arms encircling the delicate aluminium section that hung from the ceiling, I carefully rotated my body, squeezing through the gap between the work and the wall to get to my clothes. And when Damian Taylor hung his solemn, paper prints on our bedroom and living room walls, we had to learn to change our bed linen without disturbing the air, for fear of wafting the paper off its fragile perch. Such encounters as these, although not directly visible to visitors, are at the heart of the shows we have in the flat. For when we open our doors at a private view it is in to a shared house, a negotiated landscape, which people enter.

Over the winter Marco had four suit jackets made by a Roman tailor in towelling fabric.

On his return to London Melissa and I went to visit him in his new studio to catch up with what he was working on, and he talked us through these jackets, which were hung above his desk on coat hangers. The first two he showed us were brightly coloured, one canary yellow and one royal blue. They had a pronounced shape to them with angular lapels and a fitted waist, and Marco told us he found them overly cartoonish, and too current looking. The other two jackets were an improved design. Their colours were muted - one coffee, one blue - and they had that classic, timeless look which is the hallmark of Marco's practice. His work seems always to bear the distinction of bygone eras, but resists being pinned down, definitively, to any specific period. There is a sense of lightness to the things he makes, a particular way he has of breezing between histories all the while exuding an elegiac, sophisticated charm. We spent some time discussing how the towelling jackets might be displayed in the front room, whether hung from the wall or affecting a more casual pose, slung over an item of furniture or other structure. Either way, he said he would need to position them so that the detail and the structure were visible but not overly demonstrative. Much time, it seemed, would

be spent on perfecting the impression of effortlessness. The tailor had shown Marco the best way to fold a suit for travel by tucking one shoulder inside the other, thus strengthening the jacket and protecting its shape by doubling up the structure. When Marco demonstrated this technique to us, it occurred to me that the jacket was wearing itself: no longer an empty shell, but something with its own physique.

A few weeks ago I accidentally knocked over one of Jesse Wine's sculptures, *Equal Creativity 4*, as I stepped backwards trying to photograph another work in the front room. It was one of four free standing ceramic pieces, inspired by Canary Wharf, which Jesse had made for the show *Real Texture*; a jaunty looking tower with a pointy roof, finished in a multi coloured glaze. I didn't feel it when I struck it with my slipper, but I heard the crash, and turned to see the work in pieces on the floor. Prior to the breakage, *Equal Creativity 4* was all thumb marks and spirited activity. You could see where the clay had buckled under its own weight, and where the tools Jesse had used had left their mark, a biography turned to stone in the heat of the kiln. The work had its own way of facing the world, shaped by its

formative relationships; I found it deeply unsettling that a moment's indiscretion on my behalf could shatter, irreversibly, the existence of such a characterful thing.

For the exhibition, Jesse and Jackson Sprague had both produced a number of sculptures for us to integrate into our lives in the flat. It was largely left to Melissa and me to decide their fate: some we ate off, some we filled with fruit, others we put on display and left to behave like 'real sculptures'. Jesse in particular was keen for his sculptures to come back from their time in the flat changed, as if the experience of being lived-with constituted another layer in the work's production, and the title *Equal Creativity* referenced our participation in the final outcome of the show. I had not imagined, when the work was first dropped off at the flat, that living with me would prove so brutal, and so absolute. Jesse, thankfully, was very understanding about the breakage. He said that he wasn't upset, and that he considered what had happened as part and parcel of the show, which was a great relief to hear. While the drama of that day's events has long since died down, I can't help but feel that I have gotten away with murder.

On a recent trip to Paris Melissa and I visited Maison La Roche, a house designed by Le Corbusier in the 16th Arrondissement, a wealthy and rather soporific area in the west of the city. La Roche, we found out from the pamphlet we were handed on arrival, was a Swiss banker and art collector. In the early 1920s his collection grew too big for his apartment, so he commissioned Le Corbusier to build him a house-gallery with room enough for him and his artworks to reside. Maison La Roche is now almost completely empty, stripped back to its coloured floors and walls and in-built furniture. A few black and white photographs hanging in the cloakroom show what it looked like when La Roche lived there, but other than these there is no trace of the house's former occupant. Every artwork from his collection has been taken down and bar the building itself, which is now the property of Fondation Corbusier, not one of his possessions remains. It was raining when we arrived and we had to put on disposable forensic-style shoe covers, so as not to damage the floors. As we quietly shuffled around I got the eerie sensation that La Roche had been eradicated from the building, and the house, now free from the contamination of human occupants, had

been returned to its purest form.

While artists may 'finish' installing their work before a show opens, in our flat, curation is constantly in flux. New objects pop up, disrupting the constellation of forms that have been carefully set in place. One of the repeat offenders is our computer monitor, through which the fictional worlds of television programmes are regularly spirited into our front room. Melissa and I have a soft spot for crime drama and we recently finished watching the final series of *The Closer*, a show set in the Major Crimes division of the LAPD. I am particularly fond of the show's protagonist Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson, a Southern daddy's girl with a heart of gold and a will of steel, who works crime scenes in pastel trench coats and stiletto heels. *The Closer* takes its title from Chief Johnson's ability to close a case and each episode follows a standard format, beginning with the body and ending with a confession. As is typical of the genre the body is something of an exalted prop, entered into evidence along with wallets, weapons and any other items found at the crime scene. It features not so much as a human character but as an encoded object, able to tell the story, to

those who speak the language, of how and by whom it was made. And Chief Johnson, as is only natural for one cast in the mould of the preternaturally gifted TV detective, is an authority on the dialect of murder. Once she has put this gift to use, untangling the story of the crime from its object, the body's hold on the narrative weakens. The plot moves on to a battle between the criminal and Chief Johnson, between evil and righteousness, and there are bigger, loftier fish to fry than a single putrefying corpse. For when Chief Johnson gets her confession - and she always does - authorship is wrested from the hands of the murderer, and what began as a horrific tragedy is rewritten as a triumph of justice and retribution. *The Closer* is seven series long and has played out hundreds of times in our front room, alongside every show we have had in the flat in the past six months. A whole host of artworks have been distracted by the flickering lights and southern drawl emanating from our monitor, and confronted by the story of the object-body: its production, interpretation, and its role as a pawn in a narrative much grander than its own.

For Marco's show in the flat, he will construct a new interior in our front room,

one whose contents - clothing, decor, artworks - are also its primary occupants. Instead of pertaining to an absent owner the things he will be showing have their own sense of character, as if the body has been sublimated into objects and motifs, and expressed through a series of rarefied gestures: the cut of a jacket, a paper type, or the stylisation of a drawn line. Marco's work seems to belong to a world in which the things designed to entertain and aid the human form have come to replace it; a world in which the body, in all its barbarism, has been usurped by the tropes of a civilisation built on its behalf. What need has the perfect jacket, after all, of an imperfect body to wear it?

When Marco's show opens our front room will be set apart from the rest of the flat. The façade of a fireplace will cover the existing electric one, replacing our familiar council issue heater with a large, white structure. This fireplace, totally indifferent to the concept of heating, will set the scene for a show with far grander designs than the practicalities of domestic life. Our front room, in its new and idealised incarnation, will drift from the everyday reality of the rest of the flat like a ship from its anchor. Into this landscape Melissa and I will

enter, with mismatched clothing upon our bodies and towels wrapped around our hair, directed by the rumblings of our stomachs and the alarm clocks on our phones. We shall bring to Marco's static interior the colourful, the mundane, the unpredictable jingle-jangle of lives in motion, finding a way for our bodies to occupy its figureless terrain.

This text was produced as part of the exhibition *Living Rooms* with Marco Palmieri at Hobbs McLaughlin, May 2013.

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