

ȘTEFAN BOTEZ

BETWEEN THE FOREST AND THE SEA

Text: Teodora Dinu

Between the forest and the sea is Ștefan Botez's first solo show of in Romania, exhibition which brings forward seven of the artist's works. The scenography envisioned for this show reveals the artist's background as an architect, and without eluding the artistic approach, he stimulates the audience to enter a universe generated by chaos and order, noise and silence, reality and fantasy. Ștefan Botez's recent preoccupation regards the human body with a focus on the male body and the way it reveals itself through unaffected, natural instances, questioning the dualism of the male body - how it looks and how it is seen by society.

The emergence and evolution of the feminist movement emphasizes and in the same time employs the female body as an efficient instrument to provoke a dialogue concerning sex and gender differences, and also to question the traditional methodology regarding sexuality. The criticism of patriarchy and male domination plays down the male body minimizes the anthropological value of studying it, so as not to be seen as another confirmation of male dominance. However, the necessity of a debate structured around the female/male dualism is essential for the development of gender studies, as gender is proved to be a cultural and social construct, justified to a small degree by the biological differences. All these considered, we should not interpret Ștefan Botez's exhibition as a means of reasserting the male preeminence. The artist tries, in fact, to visually translate the contemporary perception of the male body as a sum of historical, cultural and social factors which in time molded this image, and to subject the body to a reflexive process of deconstruction. The self-reference elements delicately inserted by the artist in the exhibition authenticate the artistic endeavor and transfer the concepts discussed from the theoretical level to an empirical one.

Exhibited in the show are works such as *A room with a view*, *Fitness sequence*, *On how to become a Film Maker*, *Swimming sequence* and *Tritons*, which bring forward two different sociological theories regarding the male paradigm. The theory of absent body developed by Drew Lader discusses the interesting phenomenon of ignoring the body and the internal processes which, in fact, translate every action, movement. The self-awareness occurs when the body experiences a certain physical or psychological trauma which in return connects the being with the interior rhythm of this machinery called body.

At the same time, the video works are an answer to another theory regarding masculinity, proposed by several sociologists, among whom Raewyn Connell¹. She states that masculinity is directly related to the aesthetics of the body and greatly influenced by the perception of society and the degree to which the body relates to a certain standard created by the cultural context.

This hyper consciousness of one's body unfolds in a context of increased consumerism and individualism. The balance between what the body can do and how it looks loses its equilibrium².

¹ Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, Cambridge, Allen & Unwin, 1995.

² Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London, Routledge, 1984.

Now, the male identity and self-esteem are not only influenced by social status and financial stability, but also by the aesthetics of his appearance. Hence the body is seen as an instrument which responds to external and internal stimuli, shapes and is shaped by culture.

The video works develop into a kind of anthropological study, a result of voyeuristic recordings of different mundane activities such as practicing a sport or playing a game. The artist becomes a scientist who analyses his subjects without interfering in their activities. Isolating the movements of the individuals from any sociological theories, and interpreting them only from an artistic standpoint, the unstudied gestures of men become an impromptu performance. The involuntary artistic action has with the same purpose- to highlight the body as the subject of self-criticism, the main medium of expression which enwraps the subconscious, the instinctive, and the irrational. The body is simultaneously both the object and the subject of the artistic endeavor. It is the process of becoming, transforming, maturing, both physically and morally. The artist's decision not to interfere in the natural development of the activities recalls the experiment conducted by the artistic collective Fletcher+Rubin, who placed a video camera on top of a bicycle helmet and recorded the daily activities of an eleven year old boy.

In his attempt to develop a critique of masculinity, Ștefan Botez retrieves the historical argument and its importance in defining the contemporary perception of masculinity. The aesthetics of classical statuary is deeply ingrained in the traditional perception of beauty. This is most frequently embodied by the idealist nude, by physical harmony and perfection, and ignores the Christian paradigm of ephemerality, degradation. This memento deliberately featured by Ștefan Botez in his video work *Dematerialization of Prophecies*, is auditorily accompanied by Morton Feldman's piece *Palais de Mari*, in the interpretation of pianist Ivan Ilie. Visually and auditorily, the two instances are separated by ages of history. A XXth century musical piece, voided of conventionalism, suggesting creative liberty, intuition, is connected with rigorously constructed images of classical perfection, of body-spirit harmony, and so becomes the perfect artifice to transfer the audience to a timeless, synesthetic moment.

The artist crosses the limits of reality, of verity and completes this portrait of masculine multiplicity by resorting to classical or medieval myths. The fortuitous appearance of a bull on a beach makes us contemplate a modern iteration of Europa's abduction by Jupiter transformed into a bull, and *The Beast* references the medieval stories of man becoming a wolf. The succession of scenes from the horror movie *An American werewolf in London* with the ones from *300*, casts light on some traits frequently ascribed to men, namely animalism, instinct, even savagery. The violent transfiguration of man into wolf is paralleled with the instinctual brutality of the soldier at war. To further amplify the sensation of tension created by the video, the artist adds a soundtrack, transforming the preview in a psychedelic experience.

All these elements purposefully integrated by the artist emphasize the equivocal, undefined, contradictory character of body perception, body seen as a cultural product in continuous transformation, a result of constant collision of forces. Ștefan Botez succeeds in visually shaping this ambiguity of the body, poetically synthesized by the sociologist Bryan S Turner, who defines the body as "the most solid, elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphoric, the most present and distant thing."³

³ Bryan S. Turner, *Body and Society. Explorations in Social Theory*, London, Sage, 2008.

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The artist takes advantage of the exhibition space and converts it into a labyrinth of solid light sculptures - a reference to Anthony McCall's works, of contrasting sounds, of mysterious corners and passages. The envisioned layout builds up the conflicting state, augments the senses, and creates confusion, enabling the audience to travel without moving through times and places.