

Anita Witek: How to ~~work~~ live better
l'étrangère, London
26 March - 2 May 2015
Review by Will Gresson



Taking its title in part from a work by Peter Fischli & David Weiss, Anita Witek's 'How to ~~work~~ live better' currently showing at l'étrangère in London addresses the way we try to create spaces for ourselves. Reaching back to the artist's arrival in London in 1997 from her native Austria, Witek's work combines photography, collage, photomontage and installation, echoing her quest to find a place for herself in her new environment and the somewhat illusory notions of home and personal space in such a vast and imposing location.

In an interview with Janet McKenzie for Studio International, conducted during the installation of the exhibition, Witek references a 1970s West German lifestyle magazine called *Shöner Wohnen* (Better Living) and David Hamilton's soft focus photography as influential in the way she creates the suggestion of atmosphere and mood in her works. Central to this too are the mechanics of the medium of photomontage itself, with the artist describing her process as "opening up a gap between image and reality and thereby exposing how these images that we consume everyday are full of gaps, ruptures, and possibilities."

The central works in the show are from the 'Best of...' series, and beautifully show Witek's reference points in their blurred lines and evocation of space. Also present in the main gallery space is a large wall-mounted installation, created using old billboard advertisements from a clothing store. In both cases, Witek plays with irony and cliché, subverting the commercial idealisation of place present in both the specific sources she has used and the idea of such images in general. Her works then take on this irony, confronting the viewer with the hollowness embedded in the promise of their subject matter and provoking a reconsideration of what results a more honest quest for personal space might render.

Included additionally in the exhibition, though somewhat awkwardly positioned around the corner in the gallery office area is the series 'Ordinary Subjects Larger than Life'. These smaller pieces are all created using darker photographs, where the edges of Witek's cuts and dissections create haunting lines between the spaces within the works. Their smaller size and darker colour give them a more ominous air, hinting perhaps at the less optimistic reality of Witek's searching. Even when seemingly relegated to a post-script these works maintain their conceptual weight.

There is a lot that could be said about Witek's attention to detail and the specific way in which the artist wields her tools to create these works. What really drives home their potency however is the personal angle extrapolated upon in some of the writings which accompany the exhibition. It is the familiar pursuit to build a safe and comfortable space in the city which resonates the loudest when looking at these pieces, and the sense of place slipping through the fissures in Witek's work which leaves the greatest impression.



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