

l'étrangère, 44A Charlotte Rd, London EC2A 3PD

Karen Tang & David Ben White: it's for me, it's for you



Title : Installation view, Karen Tang and David Ben White: it's for me, it's for you, 2017.

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l'étrangère

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Review by Piers Masterson

There is something about the acidic, mashed up retro-modernism of this joint exhibition by David Ben White and Karen Tang that seems to resonate with the current spate of 1980s nostalgia. Possibly having recently overdosed on Winona Ryder in 'Stranger Things' the serpentine loops and fluorescent stripes of Tang's work, seem to recall the living sculptures that attack their wannabe collector owners in 'Beetlejuice' (1988). The colour palette of White's interiors is straight out of 'Edward Scissorhands' (1990). Peter York described the 1980s as the decade with no style of its own as it borrowed from all periods and 'isms'. Revisiting this we see in White's painting 'Undivided Attention 4' (2016) a green wedge of 1950s high modernist flooring on which sit two Ron Arad-style armchairs pushed so close together that they can no longer be occupied, manifesting the 1980s mantra of form over function/style over content. The ultra-square television given centre position sits on its coffee table looking like a leftover from a Richard Hamilton pop interior, while on the right familiar gestural brush strokes of blue suggest a swimming pool escaped from a David Hockney California scene circa 1967. Even the pot plant has a geometric abstraction on its leaves turning it into a spoof of Gabriel Orozco's 'Moon Trees' (1996).

White's paintings make the whole exhibition like a mock up from an Ideal Home Show. Standing immediately next to 'Undivided Attention 4', Tang's 'Magnetic Combo' sculptures act as a series of modular display cases for undefined coloured foam and fibreglass blobs. These emphasise the impression that the sculptures and paintings are curated as an ensemble ready to be set up in one of the super cool show flats documented in Amie Seigel's film 'Quarry' currently on show at South London Gallery. Tang's anonymous blobs are modelled just enough to give them the same effect as the ersatz contemporary 'objet d'art' that litter estate agents display board photos. A playful disposable quality is added by the objects being attached by magnets so the audience can remake the display as they wish like a giant Fisher Price play set. Tang's work, intended to be interactive in a very low-tech way, mocks the tendency for interactivity in art to be driven by a technological experience.

Tang's 'Magnetic Combo 10' carries over from the artist's experience with public art commissions – the synthesis of gallery art with everyday living. The blotches of colour on the surface look like the residue of spray paint and the pebble-like forms look like one of those stone carvings by Peter Randall-Page in corporate plazas but is here pulled back into the safety of the gallery. White includes his own bits of kitsch art with the 'pictures with pictures' that pop up in several of the 'Undivided Attention' and 'Not at Home' series. White's miniature expressionist blobs framed within his uninhabited modernist interiors are a sign for the absent occupant being someone of taste and distinction. This becomes self-reflexive with the implication that whoever possesses them will acquire the same values and discernment. White has even worked up full-size versions of the insert pictures as their own series titled 'Esperanto'. The collision of what at one moment might be considered tasteful and the next tacky within the rapidly shifting current of art world fashion hits home with references in Tang's sculptures to the colours and forms of Memphis Group furniture. For a time in the 1980s Memphis style was synonymous with the excesses of the decade and is coveted by Patrick Bateman in Brett Easton Ellis' 'American Psycho'. The downside of the 1980s playfulness was a dark sarcasm towards those who were not in on the joke. At least White and Tang are managing to have some fun.

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