

Klaus Weber
Kugelmensch

3rd June - 30th July 2017

The title of Klaus Weber's fourth exhibition at Herald St refers to a passage in Plato's *Symposium* in which the comedic playwright Aristophanes puts forward a humorous account of the origins of erotic desire. The rough English translation of the exhibition title 'Kugelmensch' is 'spherical human' and it plays on Aristophanes' assertion that primitive human beings were ball-shaped, graced with two sets of limbs and two faces looking opposite ways. As Plato's Aristophanes would have it, Zeus felt so threatened by their strength and their potential to overpower the gods that he decided to cut them in half. Since then, these enfeebled, split creatures have been perpetually searching for their lost unity with Eros, the force of sexual attraction.

Aristophanes' story serves as a rich point of departure for Weber's own playful tendency to use the imaginary as a platform for challenging society's restrictive systems. Entering his installation, we encounter the surreal scene of a gallery environment de-familiarised and distorted: rickety wooden planks have replaced the expected concrete floor, creaking and shifting, bringing heightened awareness of our new unsettling surroundings. Weber describes his method in German as 'Aneignung', an 'appropriating' or 'hijacking' of space which serves to suspend structures of hierarchy, authority and normality.

Formal allusions to globular shapes are omnipresent in Weber's installation. There is, in the artist's words, an 'empathy of forms' between the round glass balls of the *Snowwoman* and *Mechanics of Youth* and the bulbous cacti emerging from the floor as well as the policeman's hat. The *Snowwoman* embodies a primitive representation of the human form, conjuring our memory of drawing the human body as children. Countering the allusion to humanity's quest for wholeness, symmetry and balance, Weber embraces the unstable, the aberrant and the impermanent.

These themes are instantly recognisable in the precarious appearance of the two fragile fire-blown glass sculptures, stacked to look as if they may topple over at any moment. The disoriented viewer encounters the negative space of the inverted breasts and nose of the *Snowwoman* and realises that the corresponding bosom-shaped cacti scattered across the floor are in fact mummified. The emphasis on the perishable elements of nature marks a new steer in Weber's work, departing from past exhibitions where the vital energy of plants or fungus breaks through solid urban structures.

The threat of impermanence also prevails in the centrepiece, *Mechanics of Youth*, an eccentric sculpture resembling an anthropomorphic totem composed of translucent glass balls, reminiscent of Brancusi's *Endless Column*. Balanced perilously on top of the wobbly wooden planks, the sculpture is androgynous, simultaneously evoking breasts, a phallus and the process of ovulation. The boundaries between internal and external are blurred, the round components of the tower warped – both convex and concave – so that they fit together, entering and receiving one another. Using Freudian terminology, Weber has suggested that *Mechanics of Youth* contains two principal psychological impulses: Eros and the death drive. On one hand the sculpture represents union, sexual connection and reproduction while on the other it is tinged with Freud's theory of matter returning to its original state, in this case, towards the hot liquid origins of molten glass.

In the same 1920 essay, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud refers to Plato's myth of the 'Kugelmenschen' as proof that the death instinct was already being 'performed' in antiquity as the spherical people yearn for unity in their primal state. The shining domestic veneer of the brightly coloured glass orbs gives the disarming appearance of a collection of upmarket designer lamps, concealing the entropy of desire lying beneath the surface. Perhaps this is a metaphor for consumer culture's polished illusion of stability masking its sinister and vulnerable underbelly?

In *Eros and Civilisation* (1955), Herbert Marcuse equates social and political emancipation with the fulfilment of the erotic impulse, rejecting the Freudian notion that civilisation depends on policing the

pernicious forces of the unconscious. For Marcuse, 'art challenges the prevailing principle of reason: in representing the order of sensuousness, it invokes a tabooed logic – the logic of gratification as against that of repression'. Weber cites Marcuse as a key influence, his work exploring the same dialectic of law and sexuality. If the policeman-mannequin represents law and rationality, pitted against the disorder of desire evident in the *Mechanics of Youth*, this absurdist mise-en-scène is also tinged with slapstick humour. The policeman assumes the pose of an ostrich with his head hidden under the wooden planks, oblivious of the facts of life or searching for deviance as he adopts a distinctly sexual position. His hands are in fact moulds of the artist's own hands, the orange polyurethane reminiscent of the fragile coloured glass of the sculptures. His inward-looking posture echoes the ancient story of the divided spherical creatures and their craving for reunification. It may also refer to the resurgent nationalism and isolationism which defines today's politics of 'walls', blocking free movement and breaking trade partnerships.

Policemen have played a part in Weber's previous work, notably for his 2002 'happening', *Fountain Loma Dr / W 6th* in downtown Los Angeles. Here he set off a fire hydrant every ten minutes while a crashed car in front of the hydrant gave people the impression that the ensuing fountain signalled a riotous act of disorder. Weber used retired policemen to play the parts of officers arriving at the scene, simultaneously questioning the sovereignty of the order they represented. Much of his aberrant work emerges from a belief that disorder is not inherently bad. Indeed, the blue-tinted *Broken Window* – now a permanent feature of Herald St's architecture since it was installed in 2012 – is a critique of American sociologists Wilson and Kelling's 'broken window theory'. (It also demonstrates Weber's enduring fascination with the material qualities of glass). Their theory concludes that that leaving just one window broken will lead to the decline of an entire neighbourhood and therefore the zero-tolerance policing that necessarily follows. In these instances, Weber opens up an alternative realm which resists normative notions of social reality rooted in authority.

In 2016, Merriam-Webster Dictionaries decided that 'surreal' was their word of the year, defined as 'marked by the intense irrationality of a dream'. A spike in interest in the term is said to have followed the terrorist attacks in Brussels and Nice, the shootings in Orlando, Florida and the attempted coup in Turkey. Searches for the word rose most significantly following the election of Donald Trump, suggesting that in times of uncertainty and disbelief there is recourse to the surrealist probing of the unconscious and the rejection of rational thought. Weber's current installation captures an overwhelming unease that in today's society reality is being superseded by 'surreality'. The hallucinogenic space he creates, with its floating signifiers and displaced meanings serves to highlight this feeling of anxiety as viewers are forced to navigate his unsettling and dream-like world.

Text by Jessica Freeman-Attwood