



THORSTEN BRINKMANN
Palais d'Edelwall
November–December 2007



Drune Quoli 2007 C-print 50x38 cm

Where's Thorsten? Recognising the artist

I always found it astounding how Superman managed to elude recognition in his regular transformations from mild-mannered reporter to suave, spandex-clad flying man. How the blandest of heroes could, with a pair of black-rimmed glasses and a quick change of hair parting, become for all intents and purposes another person to his close colleagues and watchful enemies seemed a wilful misrecognition on their part. Being both a superhuman able to alter and determine the course of events, as well as a member of the media able to shape how these events were portrayed to the public helped I'm sure – the *Daily Planet* was apparently Metropolis's only newspaper. But only by a deliberate blind sighting could Clark Kent's bumbling deception be truly convincing. It's as if his forthright presentation of power and authority in bright red and blue divested those around him of their ability of identification; instead, invested in him was a firm belief that he would provide solutions and answers.

This transaction also hangs as a question over all artworks: the artist's act of presentation and the viewer's investment of authority can lead to a similar wilful misplacement. The degree to which we might read art as a direct imprint of the artist and identify a psychological fingerprint in their act influences how much we are willing to defer the activity of creating meanings to them. We now often cast the artist themselves as the site of meaning, the omniscient manipulator of a viewer's passive reception. If we believe J. L. Koerner's reading of Albrecht Dürer's *Self-Portrait at 28* (1500) in *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (1993), Dürer had pre-empted this view with a subtle commentary by a few centuries. Consciously casting himself as a Christ figure, complete with flowing locks and downy beard, and staring directly at the viewer while idly fingering the fur of his costume, he presents himself as a hero figure while at the same time drawing attention to his posture and pose as an artist in the act of self-depiction. While portraits traditionally implied a hierarchy, with a system designed to reinforce the sitter's social status, Dürer displayed his own ability to create and manipulate the signifiers of that hierarchy. Self-portraits implicitly foreground the relationship between the artist and the audience, and his at once patronises and makes a not-so-humble everyman gesture.

What Clark Kent (Superman) and Dürer (Jesus) have in common is a stance, a costume, a disguise through which people might (mis-)identify them. The construction of the self is a central human question, and their deliberate manipulations of how people read their selves comment on their own attitudes towards the possibility of mutual identification. An exchange of looks between individuals always holds the question: "Can you see me?" Superman, rather nihilistically, seems to simply say, "No: You see only what I want you to see." Dürer delves into the fraught territory of the reciprocal recognition of an exchanged glance, openly acknowledging that he can make himself be seen several ways: "You can see me, and look what I can do." Self-portraits are a particularly potent and poignant means of exploring this act of construction. Cindy Sherman exploited the technique by posing herself as a series of film character types and, more recently, Gavin Turk presented his own face imposed on iconic portraits of Andy Warhol and Che Guevara. Some artists have taken this exploration beyond the human figure itself:



Installation view

Mark Manders' *Self-Portrait as a Building* (1986–ongoing), is a set of work that includes drawing and installation referring to a building that does not exist and an elusive identity that is being described in abstract. Retaining a similar playfulness while drawing directly from classical figurative portraiture, Thorsten Brinkmann has constructed his fictitious 'Palais d'Edelwall' and peopled it with a cast of mis-shapen aristocratic ancestors in carefully posed photographic portraits that constantly re-stage the possibilities of self-portrayal.

A distinguished-looking figure sits in half view against a background of untreated wood. The sitter wears a royal blue cravat stuffed into a matte-grey polyester robe. It appears as though his chin is slightly upturned, giving the feeling that he is staring down at us, though the head of *Puschi Brown* (all works 2007) is entirely swathed in fake fur. Brinkmann's portraits consist of characters covered from head to toe in discarded clothes, handbags, lampshades, carpeting and other habitual detritus. Like a portrait by Renaissance artist Giuseppe Arcimboldi, who would compose a sitter's features entirely out of, say, vegetables, or fish or books, or the animated objects of Jan Švankmajer – particularly the humanoid shapes in his short film *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982) – it's as if these characters have called upon the materials of their immediate surroundings to build their own corporeal existence. In this case, discarded furniture, ski clothes and granny couture from the streets of Hamburg end up like a Frankenstein monster built on the set of *Are You Being Served?*

The gallery has been infected by this collage effect as well: the portraits rest on a wall whose very inch is covered with the wardrobes and bedstands that form the backgrounds of the photos. In each one the sitter appears to be composed entirely of these clothes and effects, human in form but faceless and featureless aside from their sartorial skin. You realise, however, that there is a human form under the layers of material, a consistent shape upon which the camouflage is re-applied. Despite being hidden from our view, manifesting in different lumpy shapes both male and female, the conviction arises that it is Brinkmann himself, constantly recasting himself in an incessant costume drama.

In denying us the portrayal of the human figure that defines portraiture, lacking eyes to return our gaze, Brinkmann's absurd creations make us consider the construction of characteristics with which we might identify. Towards this end, Brinkmann adopts and manipulates the posturing and lighting of Renaissance portraiture. The quarter-length portrait of *Joel Peter Oink* depicts a vaguely bear-shaped head made of a crumpled pink and purple material. It looks to the side in a stance and framing directly reminiscent of Piero della Francesca's *Portrait of Federigo da Montefeltro* (c. 1470) as he looks equanimously past the horizon. Several full-length portraits depict warriors standing legs apart with their chests puffed out, their muffled bravado still apparent in their angular poses and aggressive bearing. Soft light from the side accentuates their handsome features. *Metall-Jane von Rheinberg* sits magnanimously with his head held high, his left shoulder jutting proudly forward. In his right hand, he holds a grey metal rod that looks similar to a miniature telegraph pole. Von Rheinberg displays it as a weapon – both a brag and a threat – while Brinkmann winks from inside his imitation-snakeskin-handbag mask,



Puschi Brown 2007 C-print 83×64 cm

knowing full well how he has managed to imbue a piece of junk with such status.

We also know, though, that he can't see a thing from inside that bag. Many of the contemporary readings of self-portraiture, from Koerner to Harry Berger's *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt Against the Italian Renaissance* (2000), identify a performative criticality in the artist's paradoxical creation of a static image. In other words, the portrait is always a fiction, but a less deceitful fiction would present the artist in the act of making the image itself, rather than in serene repose; the artist's gaze out of the frame is, in truth, a gaze towards a mirror. Brinkmann's self-imposed blindness uses the camera's photographs as a mirror, turning the reflection instead back on the audience. His photos mock the personal prestige portrait, but by denying the identifying anchor of a recognisable face and by placing himself within this constantly restaged moment of presenting himself, he opens up the relationship between the sitter (the artist) and the viewer. In a manner similar to Dürer's gesture, Brinkmann is aware of the power of role-play in the portrait and foregrounds his own role as an artist in that act. But while Dürer ambivalently absorbed the identifying power of the artist-as-Superman, Brinkmann's ambivalent presence in the work itself emphasises the viewer's own role in this act of identification.

Where is the artist in the work? The outer, masking properties are all we can see of this cast of lords and ladies; Brinkmann's *mise-en-scène* deliberately draws on our anthropomorphic desires to empathise with them, to instinctually project characteristics onto them. He flirtingly disrupts this with consciously blind postures that draw attention to themselves and, in turn, to him. He is hiding in plain sight, aware that by simply placing a vase on his head we would still be able to recognise him. His theatrical gesture draws attention to this act of recognition itself, turning the pervasive surface of his work into an introspective act, emphasising the viewer as the site of meaning and the self seen in these self-portraits as composed entirely of our own making.



Installation view



Installation view



Metall-Jane von Rheinberg 2007 C-print 170x130 cm