

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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TIRDAD ZOLGHADR

Speech Bubbles



ANDRO WEKUA, *NEIGHBOUR'S YARD*, 2005, video still,
35 mm color film transferred to DVD, 3 min. 16 sec. /

NACHBARS GARTEN, Videostill.

(ALL PHOTOS COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE

PETER KILCHMANN ZÜRICH)

Marc Chagall reportedly had a habit of judging his paintings by placing them next to trees and flowers, saying that if they "clashed," they weren't art. You may laugh, but this sums up the knee jerk ontology of much recent art palaver. If, today, no one would ever admit to such picnic naturalism, it bears men-

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tioning that Chagall's fairytale dreamscapes never strived for simple verisimilitude either. Likewise, in more contemporary venues, the idea is that the work and the real should interact gracefully either qua abstraction, thus keeping out of each other's way by transcending representation altogether, or by contextual engagement, thus explaining something within the real in some manner, be it a flower, a tree, or a political trauma. Most approaches try to combine the two and pepper them with disclaimers left and right. Either by being representational, to then quote Rancierian aesthetics ("autonomy and politics"), or by being post-figurative, to then coyly explain they're "allegorizing the art market." At the risk of making Andro Wekua sound like a one-man Hegelian synthesis, his approach is instructive in that it reveals the genuine Chagallism that lurks behind art discourse at large.

Wekua engages with a suspension of disbelief that is less fine arts—a place where realist impulses are broken a posteriori by aesthetic and rhetorical measures—and more theatrical in temperament. By this I'm not referring to some dramatic disposition but to the very question of referentiality, and to the fact that the stage is never indebted to the idea of naturalism in the first place, but, rather, even in its most conservative forms, persistently plays on the pleasures of a *mise-en-scène* that only eventually leads to a

Notes on Andro Wekua

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suspension of disbelief. Brechtian and other forms of alienation redefined the politics of on-stage reality effects that never attempted to transcend a stilted, partial notion of illusionism to begin with. And it is only if you confuse the two modes of storytelling that you begin to psychologize Wekua's work.

Therefore you could frame the discussion here as a question of referentiality in itself, pointing, say, to the human figures in his sculptural artworks that are

cast rather than sculpted, adopting an eerie, life-like veneer, or to the way Wekua's landscapes and leitmotifs are embedded within a bulky system of signification that strives to be strictly his own. But to appreciate the work's reception you would also need to account for the aura of sincere narrative intention projected into the work, particularly by virtue of the trademark "darkness" that pervades and characterizes it. Rather than a deliberate effect or strategy, pure and simple, this darkness in hue, tone, and content is widely and easily perceived as a (theatrical, dramatic) signifier of authentic depth of some kind. Which is why, even when it is at its most disjunctive, the complexity of Wekua's work, rather than point to ever more ambiguous shades of possibility, inadvertently runs the risk of discreetly flipping over into the very opposite.

Generally speaking, when it comes to certain artists, what is fascinating to behold is the impact they have on people who write about them. By this I do not mean the artist's popularity, or the ability to spark the odd art-world hysteria or scandal. But whether an artist brings out the best in the writers, or whether he throws them into an art critical *horror vacui* that can only be bridged with vague affirmations that, say, the oeuvre in question is extremely "poetic," or deeply "dream-like," or really "melancholic," often coupled with the most revealing indi-

cations of clueless abandon—the artist is a place where East meets West. At times, the art critical sleight of hand is to condemn the exoticization of Andro Wekua as a “Georgian exile” before immediately delving in mushy musings on danger, memory, pain, and travel, as if we’d never heard of Freudian displacements of sign and fetish. But then again, it is of course very hard to depart from these typecasts entirely. Since Wekua’s images are so obscure, grainy,

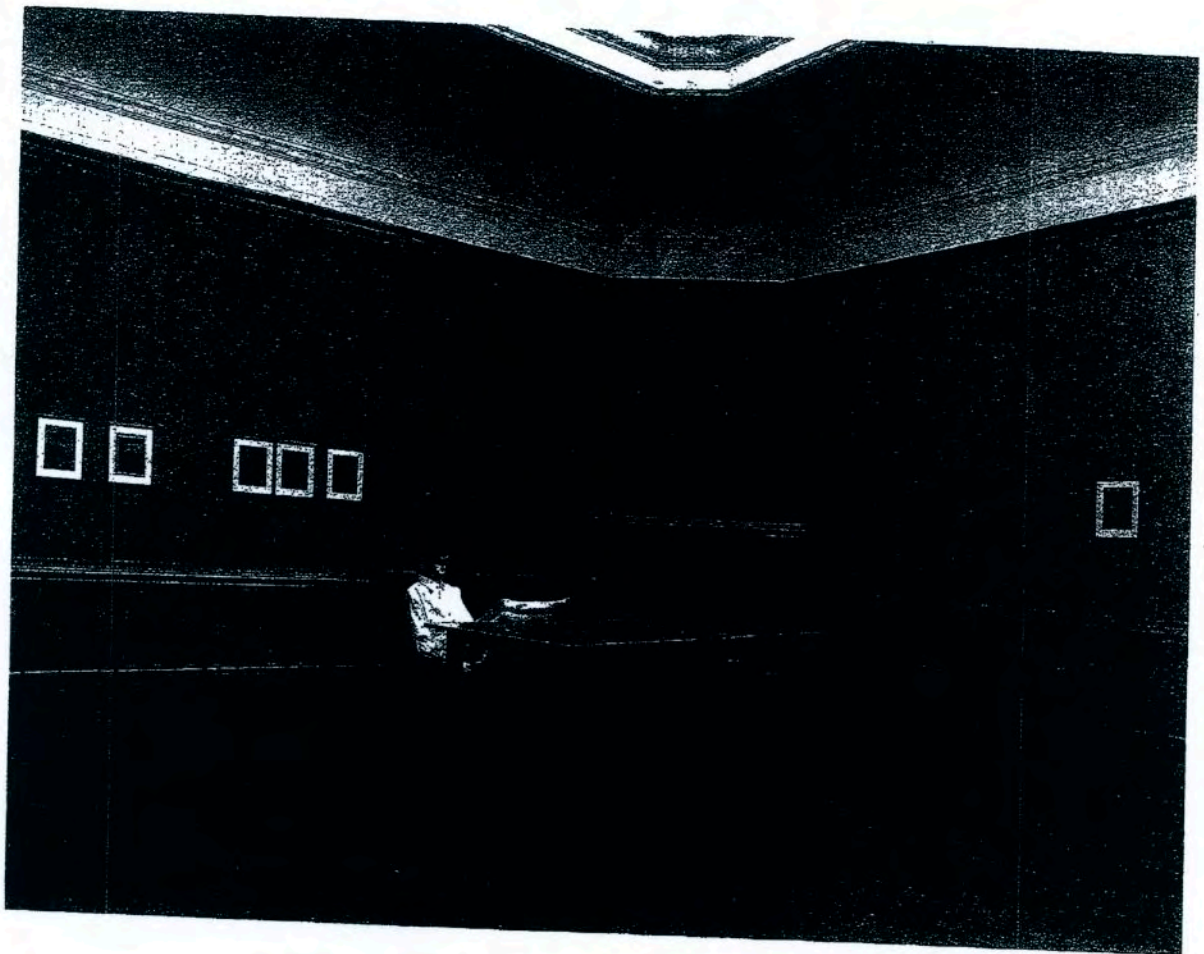


ANDRO WEKUA. *WHAT'S YOUR NAME MY CHILD?*, 2004. installation view, wax figure, fabric, leather and hair on ceramic base, painting (lacquer on canvas), size variable / *WIE HEISST DU MEIN KIND?*, Installationsansicht, Wachsfigur, Textilien, Leder, Haar auf Keramikuntergrund und Gemälde (Lack auf Leinwand), Format variabel.
(PHOTO STEPHAN ROHNER)

hesitant, or partial they may be located almost anywhere, from Oaxaca to the Schwarzwald (Black Forest), and much of the ensuing geopsychological guesswork is possibly prompted, even pursued, by the artist himself, with the help of his titles (BLACK SEA DWELLER, BLACK SEA SURFER), or his fragmentary prose in the catalogues, invoking many a youthful seaside disruption and more.

But surely there must be less predictable ways to underline a persona’s entanglement with his work if you were inclined to do so in the first place. You could, for instance, mention how Andro exudes the somber, winning charisma of the bad boy in class that everyone wanted to be friends with. Or you could point out that his quiet sense of despair and desperation possibly springs from nothing other than living and working in Zurich, a cutesy, well-mannered place where “strong work” is ultimately nice looking and a little bit ironic. Needless to say, at first glance, compared to the semi-self-deprecating glitter of Zurich, Wekua is about as ironic as a Swiss bank. But if you make an effort to look beyond the obvious poetics of quasi-Caspian *tristesse royale*, it’s not hard to identify a stylized smirk lurking just on the edges of his drawings, rendering the obscurity rather more playful and lithe, and far less Chagall.

Take the video piece *NEIGHBOR S YARD* (2005), a three-and-a-half minute motion picture that is as minimal in content as it is deliciously tortuous in questions of prop and backdrop, medium specificity, and the narrative consequences of color saturation and tastefully portioned kitsch. To the sounds of an outlandishly serrated musical soundtrack, a camera pulls back from a near-painterly panorama of a seaside sunset, into a luxuriously fitted living room, a bespectacled boy awkwardly scrunched into a sumptuous sofa, then moves slowly along, ending the indoor journey with the full moon framed by a window on the far side of the room. Both the sunset and the moon are filmed through window panes, reflecting barely discernable, ghostly movements within the room, just barely out of sight. Watching the film recently, I realized I’d forgotten the film holds a coda of two still images, one of a bedroom, one of a seaside house, imagery that is bizarrely, poignantly affecting without holding any narrative function, at least not in a manner that might accord it some mnemonic footing. Although Wekua has thus far spent most of his time cutting, casting, pasting, drawing, and installing, rather than filming and editing, the piece is a fittingly dense illustration of the Wekuan universe—not only by virtue of the leitmotifs, such as a portentous sense of the secluded and far-flung, the ominous beachhead, the adorable

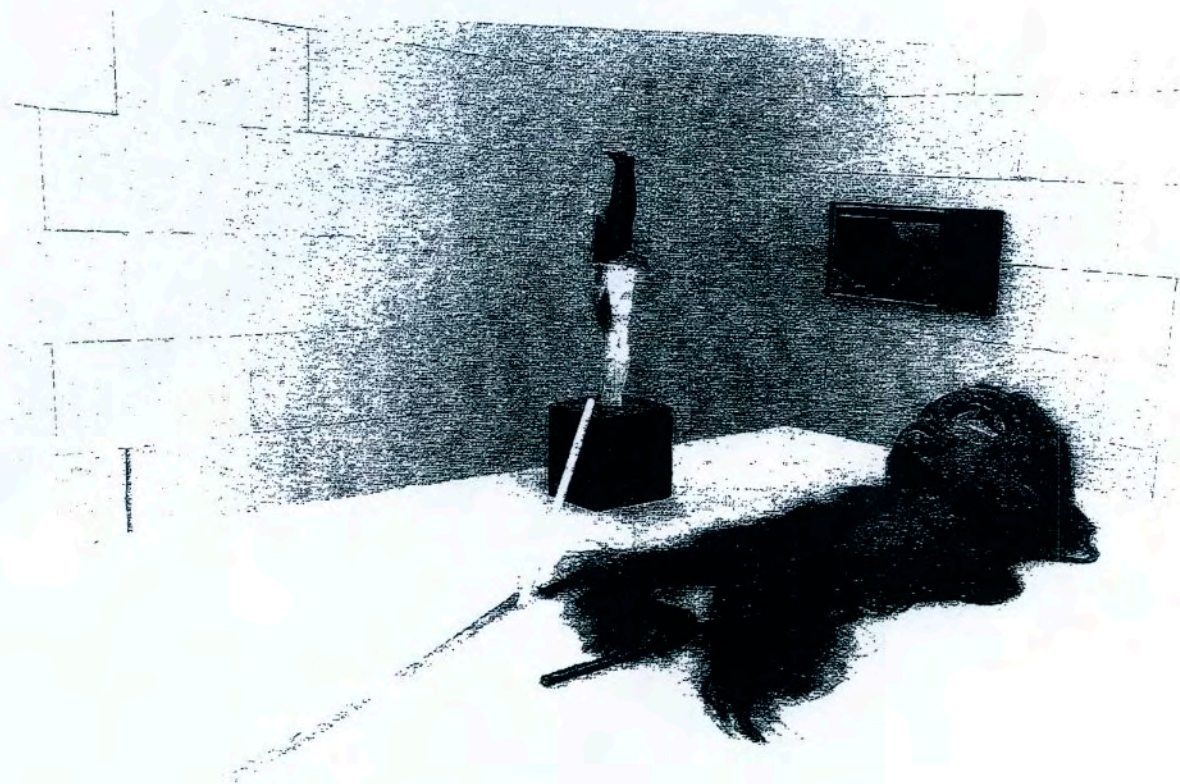


ANDRO WEKUA, *GET OUT OF MY ROOM*, 2006, installation view, wax figure, wooden table and wax, bronze chair painted with enamel, 8 silk screen prints, and etching / *RAUS AUS MEINEM ZIMMER*, Installationsansicht, Wachsfigur, Holztisch und Wachs, Bronzestuhl mit Emailbemalung, 8 Siebdrucke und Radierung. (PHOTO: A. BURGER)

schoolboy, the bourgeois setting, the thick sensation of darkness, and the plush celebration thereof; but also by virtue of a nominal, degree zero plot that still manages to trigger unwieldy narrative kinetics in the mind's eye, narratives indeed always skirting the said artist-biography-docudramatics. In other words, the film is also very Wekua in that it is an art critical booby trap.

By and large, Wekua's work in itself is flawlessly composed, even when it indulges in lovingly roughened, big-budget cut and paste, the kind of visual daring that takes buckets of hard talent to pull off.

Wekua's collages, if largely resorting to the strict panoply of leitmotifs, are intensely patchy rather than cohesive in character, with the respective cohesion summoned only by delicately traced lines, scrawls and smudges criss-crossing the work. Sometimes two images are aligned horizontally, the dissimilar halves brought to feed into one another without clarifying matters of depth and surface, before and after, or any other psychoaesthetic divisions of labor. Other pieces consist of a single found photograph graphically beset with Wekua's vaguely human figurines, or jagged constellations of rectangles and circles, or



ANDRO WEKUA, *BOY OH BOY*, 2006, installation view.
2 wax figures, ceramic figure, table (wood and plaster),
collage, house, concrete walls, wooden ceiling, size variable /
JUNGE JUNGE, 2 Wachsfiguren, Keramikfigur,
Tisch (Holz und Gips), Kollage, Haus, Betonwand,
Holzdecke, Format variabel. (PHOTO UWE WALTER)

marked simply by the trace of a folded crease. Much of the sculptural work, meanwhile, offers an exultant display of human heads and mutilated mannequins, almost always combined with a concerted study of the form and function of the plinth. Sometimes the dummies rest on platforms elaborate and massive, adorned with various geometric assortments of cubes and clutter, other times they're perched on pedestals that are flat and petite, though perhaps slightly tilted, or carefully careworn. It is particularly when it comes to installations combining his drawings with such three-dimensional work that Wekua becomes, quite simply, an obvious argument that more artists should be curating themselves rather than leaving this science to others, such as critics like myself, who rarely transcend the panicky discursive pyrotechnics outlined above.

But for all the hands-on artistic proficiency that is so immediately apparent, the work is obviously not so effortless a thing to write one's way into, and one

reason for this lies in the—at times overlapping—strategies of slapdash coincidence, on the one hand, and fine tuning of twilight *ambiente* on the other. Not only do the two strategies form an unlikely couple, the resulting atmospherics do sometimes get ever so slightly out of hand, tilting ever so slightly towards stagy overkill rather than handsome ease, and this arguably does make the work a little more of an enjoyable gamble for everyone involved. Another factor at play here is the fact that, like a joke's punch line spelled out for you, the distinctly Wekuan shades of gloom are rather hard to describe without obliterating their very attractiveness. Suffice to say that the dusky congregations of figure and backdrop manage to steer clear of the usual prototypical effects of doom and gloom, including even the standard stylistics of "human-condition" type murk (Georgia notwithstanding), offering a blend of obscurity that is mannered without being affected, excessive without being annoying, dense without ever being maladroit.

Rather less delicately and tenuously sculpted, perhaps, is the gendered subtext running through the oeuvre, the prim women in 50s outfits and the little kids in school uniforms, a casting exercise in the pris-

tine psychoses of house and home, thrashed and distorted into something very becoming, if blatantly and boyishly macho. This is not only prominent in the collages, but also in Wekua's texts ("she had a shothole beneath her eye"), and in the brutalized mannequins structuring the silent spleen of the installations. I have to admit, I've often stared at the beheaded women gracing the work thinking the day Wekua holds any extensive type of retrospective, it will be tricky to juggle the many mangled women in a single space, and the question of the womanly cadaver as depth or deco would need to be addressed more rigorously. However, to be fair, it is defacement in a broader sense which is at stake here, not only that of the Other sex, with Wekua's jubilant orchestrations of disfigurement offering enough material to fill several PhDs in many different disciplines, from the schoolboys happily caked in cream pie to more radical forms of facial disembowelment. Finally, to return to the drawings and collages, one decisive leitmotif among all these expressionless figures are the speechless speech bubbles, snakelike protrusions sprouting from their mouths, but left blank, as if the things they might tell us would amount to so much pain and trauma they're better left unsaid.

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