

EMOTION OVER INTELLECT

The pornography of trauma in pastel shades

DShK, an exhibition of eleven polychrome fiberglass sculptures by Stefan Blom at Commune. 1 gallery until July 25. LUCINDA JOLLY reviews.

WHILE researching Stefan Blom's exhibition *DShK* for this review, I came across some amateur film footage in which a group of young civilian men in an open, unspecified field fired what would be considered a large calibre machine gun.

The weapon, an oblong contraption with a long perforated muzzle stood precariously on a spider legged tripod. It shook and rattled shooting out flame with the force of each emission. Each man was given a chance to shoot. And intoxicated with the power of it all, they sprayed round after round of bullets into a targetless distance like rogue tom cats on a steroid rampage, falling about with laughter, whooping with pleasure as they egged each other on. Their weapon was a DShK, the acronym for "Degtyaryova-Shpagina Krupnokaliberny", the name of a Russian heavy machine gun invented in the 1930s.

Blom titled his exhibition after this piece of weaponry. The irony apparent in the weapons nickname "Sweetie", after the phonetic sound of the abbreviation – similar to the Russian word "dushka" – and one that runs through Blom's exhibition. It starts on the surface.

Blom's sculptures have a pastel palette of lemon curd yellow, ice cream pink and baby blue; a palette at odds with the hard core subject matter of the eleven fiberglass



'BIG GIRL': Stefan Blom's sculptures channel his experience of psychic wounding inflicted by personal trauma.

sculptures they colour.

Although the young men operating the DShk harmed no one, their orgiastic delight in this weapon is bound up with the godlike power to potentially destroy or maim at very least that this weapon can provide. It's the same pornography of violence between perpetrator and quarry which Blom explores in pas-

tel shades. The cracker of the Enigma code Alan Turing who was bullied as a child is quoted as saying: "Do you know why people like violence? It is because it feels good. Humans find violence deeply satisfying. But remove the satisfaction, and the act becomes... hollow".

It's been 10 years since Blom had his last solo exhibition in Germany.

Although he has added new work Blom regards this exhibition as "reworking older work" and "a culmination of my technical skills, knowledge and maturity". His aim is to promote an emotional rather than an intellectual response to his subject matter in an atmosphere that at first invites the viewer in and then shifts to discomfort.

Blom's work looks at the victim and perpetrator continuum

As the press release suggests, Blom's latest sculptures continue to channel his first-hand experience of psychic wounding inflicted by personal trauma, around themes of sexuality and gender – into the more impersonal and largely unstable area of political and social forces.

His work investigates the victim and perpetrator continuum bound together as one entity in an eternal symbiosis. His current sculptures may still show his concern with the dark side of sexuality and gender but his modus operandi has as moved light years away from the drama of raw, cathartic blood-letting – ashy and scabby bandaged surfaces – that characterised his earlier work. In its place are the highly polished surfaces that have more in common with the slick duco finish of a high end sport car. Not a speck of dust in sight. It's the pornography of trauma in pastel shades.

Apart from three figures, *Egress* and *The Orchestrator* which are both self-portraits and *Varaahi* a pig like creature with a blunted face, all the sculptures involve the manipulated, amputated female form as victim and conduit.

The sculpture *Egress* could be

interpreted as the portrait of the artist as a child. His little sputnik shaped body is armless and supported by the spindly legs of a tripod. His face is tattooed with the dark glyphs of Blom's symbolic language only known to him, his mouth is plugged closed with a perforated nozzle. Speech is not Blom's natural metier. The capsule of his body is crowded with warring toy model soldiers. We catch a glimpse of them through the sputniks fogged walls.

Ironically *Egress* – which means to leave a place – will never move from its fixed base and some unseen vital essence from a steel pipe in the child's middle will continue to drip into a drain in the base of the sculpture carrying the words "exit only".

If Blom were to be a creature he would be a pale gecko, gentle and extremely sensitive, so transparent you could see his inner organs and hyper vigilant, looking at the world through the palest of glass green eyes. The sculpture *The Orchestrator*, is an adult self-portrait of the artist. Here the child has grown into yet another bound figure encased in a pale cocoon – like sarcophagus inscribed with his secret writings. It's back scored in an open wound in the shape of a long cross shape, his arms ending in two Berettas.

In the treatment of the female figures there is some reference to comic strip characters and the mannequins from the 1950's departmental stores. All contain elements of both victim and perpetrator. Proportionally they may have much in common with the ideals of fashion but the sculptor has turned these fig-

ures into cyborgs by including bio mechatronic parts associated with transhumanism. Yet unlike the purpose of transhumanism whose aim is to improve the organic nature of the human being, these so called improvements compromise the humanity of these figures. And each contains both the roles of aggressor and victim.

Fly by night girl has stunted aircraft wings instead of arms that will never fly, *Beretta* and *Dushka* sprout the perforated barrel of a heavy duty machine gun. The arms of other figures end in chrome yellow boxing gloves to defend and Diana of Ephesus breasts to nurture an infant and provide pleasure but they will struggle to hold another tenderly.

Perhaps the most disturbing piece on exhibit is the sculpture called *Dushka* (Russian for sweetie). In it a woman's form lies slightly tilted in a prone position on the base of a tripod similar to that of the DShK weapon. It's a vulnerable position one associated with intimate medical procedures. Instead of ending in hands the ends of her arms merge with her lower body and she has no lower legs. She births the perforated muzzle of a machine gun from her thighs and from her head emerge two metal handles with grips for her handler to guide her.

One of the highlights of this exhibition is the high standard of craftsmanship so often missing in the more conceptually focused work.

It's not a comfortable exhibition, but go see.

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