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Sebastian di Mauro

S K I N

IPSWICH REGIONAL GALLERY

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The architectural references the human in these massive felt forms. They resemble ancient Greek amphitheatres, shrines or temple ruins - places of human gathering and ritual. The works emit a dank, slightly pungent odour, which permeates the nostrils and transports the mind to some distant, half-forgotten memory. It is a smell both familiar and unplacable. Silent and still, their presence is deafening. These works are not about monumentality, despite that which their substantial size and scale suggest. Presence suggests absence. And it is what is unseen, invisible, rather than what is visible, that the artist intends for us to realize. di Mauro is concerned with the spiritual or metaphysical, rather than the concrete.

How to transform the concrete (physical/corporeal) into the immaterial (spiritual/ethereal)? The undeniable physicality and sheer scale of *SKIN* renders this an almost impossible task, but one which di Mauro achieves with seemingly little effort. The apparent simplicity of the installation does not belie the mental and physical challenge of its creation. These are works of a capacious nature, both in the physical and mental sense of the word. Metaphors of their own construction. In *Conduit* and *Interval*, the works are composed of layers of carpet felt underlay, a material inherently suggestive of an underlying meaning. As an insulating material, it is ordinarily concealed rather than revealed, hidden beneath a cosmetic veneer of 'cut and loop' or 'shag-pile'. In di Mauro's works, the internal becomes externalized and laid bare.

The large felt sheets have been deliberately maintained in close to their original condition, raw and unfinished. In this way, the material is left to speak for, and of itself. Layer upon layer of the dense fibrous matter has been assembled into two large felt beds, whose fabric and form suggest warmth, comfort, shelter and protection (qualities presupposed by the material's intended use as carpet underlay). The contrasting surgical precision of the cut is thus heightened for dramatic effect. Each incision is a precise and delineated one, cut to reveal, like a wound exposing the interior. However, the contour creates a gradual incision, rather than a gaping wound. Likewise, the meanings implicit in the works are subtly revealed to us through a gradual process of enlightenment.

Two large voids, flooded with light. It is no accident that the viewer's eye is drawn inward, down deep into the centre of these structures. The artist intentionally directs our visual response. In so doing, he elicits from the viewer, a meditative, spiritual response to the works. Almost subconsciously, we are centering our focus inward. The multiple layers of felt, we begin to see as skin. The cutting away of layers, then, may be interpreted as the gradual revealment of our inner selves.

In *Reflect*, the artist further encourages us to look inside, to meditate (*reflect*) upon the subject. di Mauro's choice of medium for this work is a highly original and quirky one. Four electric blankets are stretched and mounted across the gallery wall - gaudy, plaid evocations of benign domesticity. As underblankets, they provide hidden warmth and comfort. Recontextualized in the sanctified space of the gallery, they become instruments of quasi-religious revelation. The choice of domestic electrical appliances to signify the spiritual in the everyday, must be viewed as comical in the extreme, yet the artist succeeds in convincing us of this quality of otherness.

di Mauro works on a human scale. The intimacy of *SKIN* is created by the choice of materials which are physically close to us in our lives. Insulating materials for our comfort and protection. Materials which we touch and are touched by daily. Three of the four electric blankets are used. In this way, they reference their historical relation to people's lives and to identity. Each blanket evidences its individual history, with its edges stretched to fit the bed beneath. Stretched taut upon the gallery wall, the distorted edges cause these woolly underblankets to assume the quality of animal hides or *skins*. The placement of the electric blankets on the gallery wall is a device used to maximize the viewer's physical proximity to the work. The obvious tactility and radiating heat and warmth of the blankets are invitations to touch. Likewise, *SKIN* is an invitation to respond, to touch, and be touched by, the spiritual element in the everyday experience of life.

No attempt is made to conceal the electrical wiring and circuitry that connects each piece. Instead, this becomes an integral feature of the work, representative of the tenuous interconnectedness of all things. It also signifies the power/energy/life source, and references the preoccupation of society today with 'plugging-in' to the system. di Mauro encourages the viewer to remember to 'plug-in' to the spiritual element in the everyday through the use of ordinary and familiar objects and materials. The light globes in the eliptical cut-outs of the blankets acting as a kind of revering focus. Shrines to the void.

di Mauro has a particular interest in the spiritual dimension, having had a 'near-death-experience', or 'NDE', after a car accident in 1981. This is critical to his art practice, with the impact of the experience permeating all of his work in one form or another. Like other accounts of NDE's, di Mauro recounts his, as the experience of entering a cavernous, dark tunnel and of being drawn inexplicably toward a glowing light at the farthest visible point of the tunnel. The light, di Mauro describes as incandescent, penetrative and seductive. The dark tunnel, as comforting and familiar. Interestingly, the experience of death bears an uncanny resemblance to the journey into life. We enter life through the mother's birth canal (vaginal passage), a long, dark journey through a tunnel of sorts, and emerge into the glowing light of the world. di Mauro's works are the embodiment of this life cycle.

It is in this context that we come to appreciate the incised, internal curved contours of *Interval* as vaginal, female and womb-like. In *Conduit*, we see the recessive form as more of a funnel or passage. In both, we sense the lack, or what is missing or implied by its absence. The process of cutting involves the removal of material, and the void which remains speaks of this missing part or parts. The cut marks the point of (our) separation. In the context of di Mauro's works, we come to see this separation as being that from which we have come, and to whence we will eventually return. We are acutely aware of this sense of otherness; of an experience beyond the visible.

It is from this almost poetic, essentially metaphorical demarcation, that *SKIN* derives its true source of power. di Mauro slices through the superficial layers to bring us a rare glimpse of the space between two realities. The subtle interplay of elements transports us from the corporeal into the ethereal. *SKIN* calls on the participation of the senses, and of mind and memory to decipher its code. The titling of the works providing another vital clue to their interpretation. *Interval* is a word used to describe a break or gap in the space-time continuum. It may also be used to describe an opening or void (absence) or likewise, a cut, slit, gash, scissure, fracture or split. A *Conduit* is a channel, funnel, tunnel, or other instrument of passage. To *Reflect*, is to meditate deeply upon a subject. These three metaphorical components work together, conjuring potent images of transcendent force. Together, they resonate with the distant recollection of our pre-natal conception (primordial memory) and of the post-mortem condition (experience of the after-life). di Mauro envelops us in his experience of the spiritual dimension, gently initiating us into the realm of understanding.

Tracey Smith