

A few notes on Benoit David
The Petrified Forest Gallery

I have been looking at Benoit David's work for years. Although we both lived in Montreal and used to shoot the same model, we never had the fortune to meet. Writing about his work is something I've always wanted to do. Yet, whenever I look at it, I find it too difficult. I spit out clichés. This is bad, so I stop. But maybe this is also good. There is a kind of babbling that goes on in his images. The whole body becomes a set of lips sputtering, spitting out the oesophagus and lungs, then using them to wrap a tourniquet around the torso and twist it.

I have always considered him a great documenter of skin and the possibilities of skin. What he presents are two different ways of understanding it. First is the skin as a surface: a wrap that can be pulled tight or sag as it hangs on a skeletal tent. While the body exaggerates itself through the mutations of its frame, the skin binds it. Second is the skin as a heap: a piling up of decompositions, each of which is raised to the point of articulation before being cycled back into the mass. Although the monstrous figures he creates sometimes appear organic, their seams tend to show. They are monstrous because they are monstrative: showing both the process of their creation and the remainders. Their dynamism is drawn from this.

Each layer which he builds up leaves remainders. Some of these skirt to the corners. They appear along the bottom as isolated splatterings of paint and flesh. Seemingly flat at first, they are revealed by a shift of light to display relief effects. The sometimes harsh silhouetting of limbs adds to this. This contrasts with the fading remnants of former aspects of the image, only vaguely present after being hacked away or covered in a blob of digital paint. Often crude, these elements find a surprising counterpoint in his use of noise. Sometimes embedded in the skin, but often isolated around the peeks of the image, one finds surprisingly delicate pockets of digital noise, softened and highlighted with pastel blues and pinks.

This softness is further buttressed by both a quiet and a disquiet, each of which serves to frame the dynamism of the figure. There is a quietness to his work which allows for them to make every movement they contain, every straining of the flesh, every splintering of the wall be articulated. This is an amplification of the skin as a vast and porous zone of sensation. Arising from this amplification is not a general and overwhelming din, but a tide of minutiae. It is from this acute sensitivity that the image is slowly built up through a series of tense and dynamic integrations. Sometimes the body parts are seamlessly melded. At other times they are smeared together. More often they bare the traces of their surgical removal, collated at the point that they force a response from the artist.

One of the most disquieting things about his work, however, is not its excessive quality but the opposite. There is an extraordinary banality to many of his images and it is this, to a large degree, which makes them successful. The bodies appear in the corners and along the walls of quotidian life. David's studio and home are glimpsed. His parquet flooring and the drawings of his children become another character in many of the images. In fact, the formal attributes which the body takes on find a direct parallel in the buildings which house them. If the body is more sculpture than house, the setting is less grounding than record.

What he records is a *hurlement*, a howling, a yowling, a screeching or a cry. He prefers the words *hurlement* or *cri* when discussing what his bodies do as he subjects them to *des déformations peu subtiles*. Presented here is the process of birth as deformation. Every birth he triggers serves to demonstrate the capacity to be more subtle, which results in a challenge to become increasingly articulate. Each upping of the ante makes the figure denser but their space flatter. Such balancing gives his images the power of an acrobat.¹

- matthew purvis

¹ It is no coincidence that one of his photo books is called *Acrobates*.