

Jasper, Adam. "Review: Terence Koh," *Art Review: The Power 100 Issue*, November 2006.

REVIEWS
Terence Koh




LEFT: Terence Koh, *Untitled*, 2005, styrofoam, fiberglass, chocolate, paint, 374 x 200 x 180 cm. BELOW: *Untitled*, 2006, glass cases with objects of various media including porcelain, wood, metal, bones, skulls, plastic, bronze, plaster, paint, dimensions variable. Courtesy Weiss Projects, Los Angeles/Berlin

TERENCE KOH

KUNSTHALLE ZÜRICH
25 AUGUST - 29 OCTOBER

The first and most palpable thing that hits you (and this on opening night) is the smell. Sickly sweet, like that of a feverish child's bedroom, this smell emanates from two alpine monsters standing in the centre of the entry hall. Their torsos consist of over 700 kilos of white chocolate and more than a tonne of icing sugar. Sugar and egg white is an unstable building material, and so the mute amputees occasionally shed fragments of their flesh, peppering white shrapnel onto the gallery floor below.

The second realisation is the total absence of colour in the show: everything is white. Everything. Terence Koh raises Winckelmann's neoclassical doctrine of white as the only true lens of beauty to the level of an exclusive obsession. Not content with just any white, he wants the Moby Dick of whites; the unachievable perfect pigment. He pursues it so fanatically that he manages to turn the noncolour, ubiquitous in the art world, into a sort of brand.

Monochromania and the stench of decay have, of course, appeared in exhibitions before. Yves Klein had his signature blue and the garden gnomes that Dieter Roth set into chocolate in 1968 are still decomposing in the Museum of Mould in Hamburg. What is novel is that Koh combines this sensory bombardment with an overload of art-historical references. It's a style that has been referred to as conceptual bling: a glamorous hyperaesthetic exterior supplemented by a shallow murky depth. In an era in which installation art converges with the amusement park, it's sort of like being on a ghost train for grown ups. The foreground impression is reinforced by the necessity of queuing to get into the next room.

The floor here is covered in a layer of fine potato starch like drifts of powder snow. Potato starch is the whitest non-lethal substance in existence: so white that you can't actually see it properly. The standard fluorescent lights, bright already, have been taken out and replaced with brighter, harsher ones. The sum effect is akin to snow blindness, a sensory distortion that makes it difficult to judge the distance of other people on the thin gangway that leads us to the main hall.

The central, and enormously impressive, work of the exhibition is a labyrinth composed of 1,200 glass vitrines. Behind nearly every pane of glass is an artefact soaked in white plaster: a figure of the Virgin Mary, a bejewelled dagger, an owl of Minerva, a congolese nail fetish, a stillborn foetus, a cuckoo clock. It's a vast cabinet of curiosities, of objects shorn of context and meaning, that evokes Adorno's comparison of the museum to the mausoleum. But it is not completely still. Some of the vitrines have precipitation gathering on the glass, as if the objects inside were breathing. In others, spiders, intentionally trapped, begin to slowly spin their webs. This Wunderkammer could be read as a sort of institutional critique in the manner of Marcel Broodthaers – the archive as repository of cultural capital – except that the exhibition is so pretty that the arrangement comes to seem arbitrary, driven by external effect rather than internal grammar. It is perhaps this overriding aestheticism that forced Koh to be so obsessive on the eve of the opening, wandering about with a small can of white paint, endlessly retouching the works even as the first guests file into the room. *Adam Jasper*

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