

REGEN PROJECTS

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RACHEL HARRISON Regen Projects, Los Angeles

On a recent trip to Istanbul, I was bowled over by the sheer ubiquity of the city's selfie-stick vendors, each with their own hawk's cry. Most are pretty standard, streamlined and efficient: 'Get your selfie-stick!' or simply 'Selfie!' But one vendor outside the Hagia Sophia pinpointed the device's inherent sadness: 'Automatic friend!'

This strange, melancholy phrase leapt immediately to mind during my visit to Rachel Harrison's latest exhibition, 'Three Young Framers', in which selfie-sticks were wielded by a motley cast of vaguely anthropomorphic, stucco-slathered sculptures. Never have I encountered sculptures that appeared to need me less, that so vociferously announced their own self-involvement: a vastly different artistic attribute than self-reflexivity. Where the self-reflexive work beckons the viewer to appreciate its savvy self-awareness, the self-involved work preens, acknowledging the viewer only as a potential source of energy to power its narcissistic feedback loop. Harrison's selfie-stick works ask us to consider both the ways in which the narcissistic gaze has come to define our age and how it might re-contextualize ways of looking that defined the past.

In addition to the selfie-stick sculptures, the show was laden with historical references. Most explicitly, there was the thicket of exposed metal wall studs that recalled Michael Asher's 2008 installation at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. More subtly, there was a new iteration of her mutable work, *Marilyn with Wall* (2004/09/10/15), consisting of a framed photograph that shows a headshot of Marilyn Monroe partially veiled by protective tissue, which is placed atop a stack of roughly jigsawed sections of gallery wall. An even subtler reference came in the form of the title of the show itself, which refers to an iconic 1914 photograph taken as a part of August Sander's typological study of the German people, titled *Three Young Farmers on Their Way to a Dance, Westerwald*. As Harrison's punning title implies, each of these historical references relates to a specific method of framing a subject, and begs to be read in relation to the selfie-stick works.

It is tempting to interpret her allusion to Asher, the *éminence grise* of institutional critique, as a barbed one. Though the project of institutional critique had a radical flavour in its heyday, it has not aged especially well. Much of the work – and, especially, its mannered contemporary spawn – now seems somewhat too hermetic and self-regarding, like a high-minded, art-world equivalent of a selfie. Of course, in keeping with Harrison's general slipperiness when it comes to easy readings, it is impossible to call this interpretation definitive, though the little stuccoed forms with which she had barnacted her faux Asher did seem to improve the bone-dry structure to lighten up a bit.

While this juxtaposition appeared to invite a pointed reading of both institutional critique and the selfie phenomena, Harrison's references to Sander and Monroe appear to offer the inverse side of the interpretational coin, too. Both Sander's farmers and Monroe were subjects that ceded control of their representation. In front of Sander's lens, the farmers' individuality was folded into the photographer's broader typological project. Similarly, Monroe was transformed by the camera from Norma Jeane into the refractor of dreams and desires known as Marilyn, a process whose disastrous effects are hinted at by the veiled image of her face that Harrison has chosen to represent her, and the pile of rubble on which it rests. In contrast, users of the selfie-stick retain a certain amount of control of their representation, a form of potential empowerment pointed to – perhaps somewhat ironically – in Harrison's *American Gothic* (2015), a rickety wooden structure supporting a selfie-stick that is directed towards a bust of a Native American chief. Automatic friend, indeed.

This reading was further reinforced by a poignant series of photographs of criss-crossed footprints in dirty snow that Harrison tucked away in one of the gallery's back rooms. Entitled *FOMO* (2015) – internet abbreviation-speak for 'Fear of Missing Out' – the work points to the pathos underlying this seemingly frivolous phrase, which, like its cousin YOLO ('You Only Live Once'), is haunted by the spectre of death. This is the heart of Harrison's subversive streak, where we find that the serious might be better taken lightly, and the inane holds more power than we previously considered possible.

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SEXXXITECTURE CULT, San Francisco

When attending a show titled 'Sexxitecture', you know both what to look for and the danger of projecting too much onto what you see. Purporting to 'explore the complex relationship between architecture and people', this group exhibition featuring seven artists focused on how sexuality fits into and is affected by man-made structures.

While exploring how 'the built environment informs human sexual dynamics', the exhibition had the effect of highlighting the often comically antagonistic relationship between buildings and human sexuality. What can be the most sublime physical and spiritual experience available to human beings is, in fact, subject to sabotage by the discomfort and loathsome ugliness of the structures we have designed, built and furnished, presumably to soothe our souls and enhance our comfort. Daniel Gerwin's sculptures – for instance, *Leaving Home* (2012) and *Dress Up* (2014), jagged-edged and forbidding to the touch, suggests violently broken bed-frames and spiked peepholes. Two paintings by Roman Liska resemble magnified carpet burns, mounted like trophies on the wall ('Dazzle Paintings', 2015). The press release for 'Sexxitecture' rightly pointed out the aphrodisiac effect that balance, sleekness, harmony and luxury have on many. Alejandro Almanza Pereda trolled such sensitivities with his witty installation of chintzy shelves, barely supported by nonsensical totems of upside-down statuettes, assorted books, even thin glass bowls. In a smart use of CULT's dim and low-ceilinged middle room, gallery director Aimee Friberg placed

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