

MCAD

MUSEUM OF
CONTEMPORARY
ART & DESIGN

VITRUVIAN FIGURE

What makes beauty? Is there a secret equation for perfection? And if the rules are replicated, will it be brought forth or remain an idealization? Such are the questions that surface in the recent works by Filipino-American artist Paul Pfeiffer.

The source material that form these can be as disparate as much as the ideas they invoke. They range from old celebrity photographs to footages of the natural world to performative gestures by artists. Nevertheless, a leitmotif can be drawn. Much like a melodic set of chords that run the length of a symphony, a distinct preoccupation for perfection resonates through the art works.

Vitruvian Figure, Pfeiffer's solo show at MCAD, gives us a revelatory sampling of this pursuit. Assembling commissioned and existing works, the exhibition lays bare Pfeiffer's continuing exploration of the various systems that give our world aesthetic order.

The work headlining the exhibition is a nod to the classical principles of proportion espoused by the Roman architect Vitruvius. These rules observed during the antiquities were revived during the Renaissance, and survives in some form today, the most recognisable of which is the modern stadium. But whereas we see stadia as sites of glory, spectacle and leisure—places where men and women compete and exert status—Pfeiffer's manages to diminish our presence and direct focus on the architectonic gravity of the building itself. Nevertheless, the presence of the crowd, the masses, reverberate across the quiet of the amphitheatre.

Such tendencies, which can appear reductive or straightforward abstractions, are evidenced in the other works in the show. In *24 Landscapes*

(2000/2008), Marilyn Monroe is digitally erased from the Santa Monica beach where she was last photographed before she died. Larry Johnson and Tom Cruise both appropriate new forms as film splices of their images are separately re-imagined. In *Boomerang* (2015), a commissioned work made with speech students from Manila, we home in on sound and text.

In two other works Pfeiffer makes use of time-lapse and digital manipulation as a way for us to tunnel in. In *Morning After the Deluge* (2003), a New England sunrise and sunset are combined to become one, a continuous sphere that neither sets nor rises. With *Empire* (2004) on the other hand, one witnesses the slow, systematic construction of a wasp's nest. The artist views the video as a 'visual hook to draw the viewer into the contemplation

of insect behavior, and an invitation to project an anthropomorphic narrative onto the nestbuilding activity of wasps." (Lee, Filmcomment)

Pre-empted by the decision to part from the problematics and limitations of identity politics, the artist makes use of an architectural context as a prism through which he can pursue projects that allow for the critique and commentary on a variety of interests. Pfeiffer presents us with an exhibition that invites and challenges us to look and explore ideas of spectacle coupled with the production and consumption of mass media; of crowds and spectatorship; religion and identity; scale and the politics of fabrication; and not the least, the exploration of technology, made through various entry points of development and possibilities.

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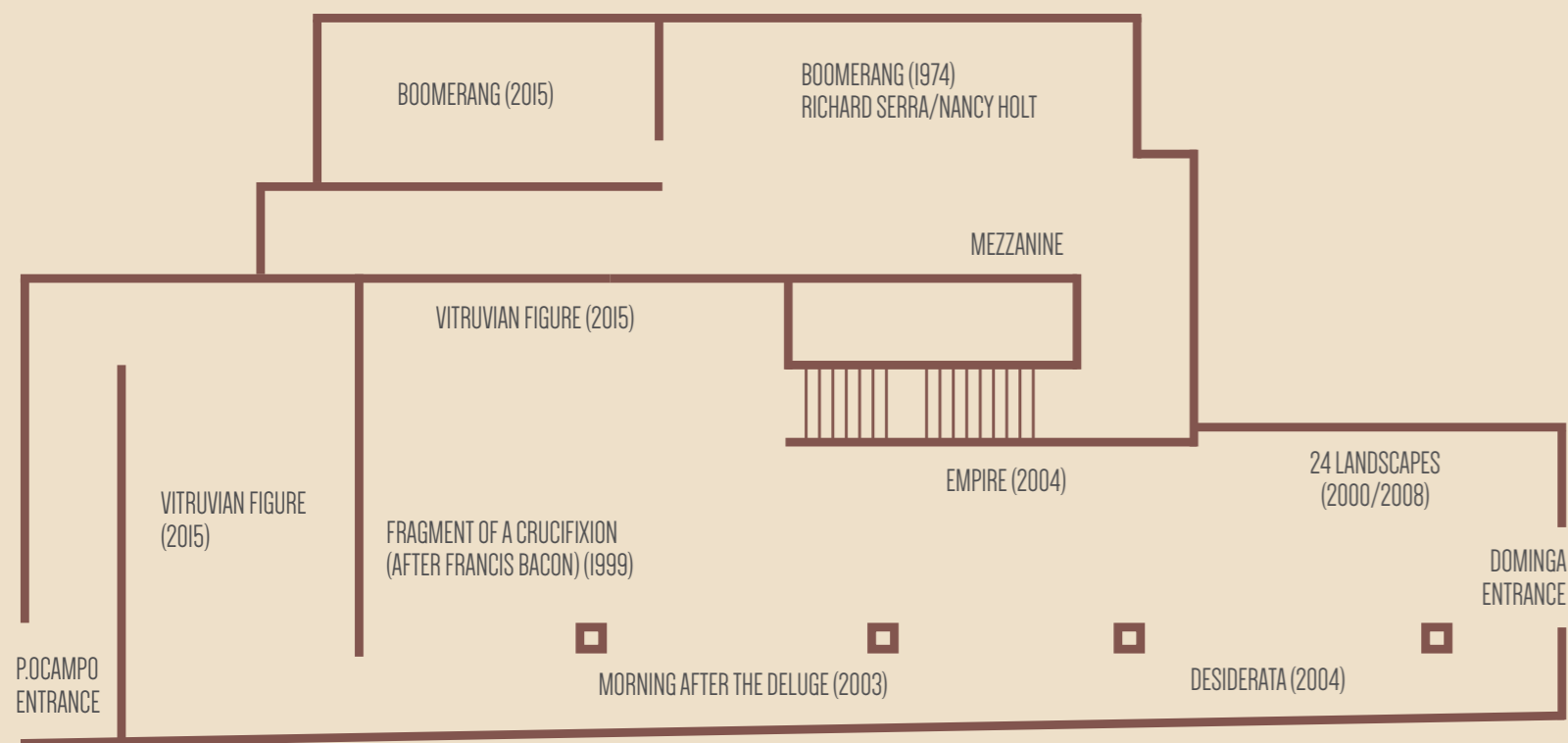
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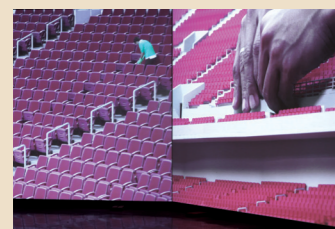
VITRUVIAN FIGURE

6 FEBRUARY 2015 - 16 MAY 2015



VITRUVIAN FIGURE (2015)

2015
plywood sculpture
960 x 500 x 210 cm
two-channel synched video
30 minutes, loop



Vitruvian Figure (2015) consists of two elements: a large abstracted sculpture based on the Philippine Arena, and a two-channel video of the arena synched with the construction of a miniature model using a 1:60 scale.

This work presents an aspect of Pfeiffer's exploration of scale, as well as his engagement with the process of fabrication and production. Both the sculpture and the video were the result of months of research, finding the best fit of fabricators for each component: skilled artisan-carpenters, trained model-makers, and a specific set of filmmakers and photographers specifically identified to put together the material. The *Vitruvian Figure (2015)* sculpture was produced to precision and detail by local master carpenters, craftsmen who worked under a specialised fabricator.

The artisan-like production of this sculpture is strikingly different from its previous iteration of *Vitruvian Figure (2009)* which was cut using a high-powered computer-controlled cutting machine.

The fabrication of the miniature stadia, the set produced for the video, was no less daunting despite its relatively small scale. Whereas the sculpture bordered on industrial assembly (the pieces are all unique and were designed and cut precisely to fit the structure, they are meant to be taken apart and put together easily), the model produced for the video was fabricated by working with a professional architectural modeling company. More than a team of 20 specialists and dedicated workers were necessary to produce both works. However, from the artist's conception to its realization at the hands of these fabricators, the discussions were intense, constant

and very detailed. As Michelle Kuo points out: "Crucial disturbances persist in the lag between thinking and making. And as that delay has only grown more elastic and complex, industrial fabrication is now hardly recognizable in its breadth. Plunged into a murky postindustrial bathwater, it is a rubric that currently encompasses both the crude and the custom, both the serial production of multiples and the highly circumscribed, often absurdly expensive one-off work of art. It is the logic of clumsy tinkering and perfect gloss, of the hand-wrought and the algorithmic. (Kuo, 2007).

In fact the method used to produce the work is layered with complexities—questions of single or shared authorship, labour, administration and management are raised—none of which have easy answers. These become

especially highlighted when working in a context ill-equipped and without an understanding of the practice of fabrication companies who produce, i.e working with artists' work. Thus the production for Pfeiffer's works have had to become more inventive and less straight-forward, with the artist opting to go straight to the source and work with fabricators closely, thus generating conversations which were key to the manufacture and installation of each piece. With *Vitruvian Figure (2015)*, the process of fabrication was not simply reliant on the utilization of machinery for prefabrication, but the fashioning of systems to arrive at the final product.

The thinking behind the work has also been partly about the exploration of scale. Because of the variations of the sculpture and the movement of images between

MORNING AFTER THE DELUGE

2003
single-channel video,
projector, screen, media player
20 minutes, loop

Courtesy
D. Daskalopoulos collection,
Athens, Greece



Morning After the Deluge (2003) references English painter William Turner's work *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory)—The Morning After the Deluge—Moses Writing the Birth of Genesis*. In Pfeiffer's work, two halves of the sun (images of sunrise and sunset in Provincetown, Massachusetts)

are put together to produce the one image. The unity is slightly disrupted by the movement of the horizon line down the frame. The speed within which this occurs and the appearance of the sun as a static object exhibits the video's ability to enhance the exploration of time.

EMPIRE

2004
single-channel video,
computer, external storage drive,
projector, equipment rack
three month duration

Courtesy
Julia Stoschek collection,
Düsseldorf, Germany



Empire (2004) is a video showing the lifecycle of a wasp's nest. The work's length enables the exploration of narrative as in the "myriad connotations for humans in the collective energy on view, analogous to that required for erecting grand buildings, organizing societies or establishing far-flung

empires—though those will pass" mentioned by Gregory Volk. It also enables the deconstruction of narratives because despite the surveillance quality of the work, one can only see segments at any one time. The entire film is indigestible in its entirety. In this context the symmetry

of a wasp's nest echoes the symmetry of a stadium's architectural precision. Wasps, as with most insects who build their nests, produce constructions which are organic to their nature while using available materials and adjusting each hive in response to their specific environment.

24 LANDSCAPES

2000/2008
24 digital C-prints
dimensions variable

Courtesy
Thomas Dane Gallery, London
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



24 Landscapes (2000/2008) appropriates the photographs taken by George Barris of Marilyn Monroe in Santa Monica beach with the image of the actress removed. Though the photographs which were taken in 1962 are famous for being the last ones taken of the star before she died

in the same year, Pfeiffer's choice to erase her image and leave us with landscapes belies his practice of turning cliché into curiosity, of re-producing mass media elements into signifiers by removing central elements that make them recognizable to a society saturated by an

accumulation of images. He turns a typical Hollywood portrait into typical landscape. The loss is therefore not simply that of the central image, but our ability to instantly recognise and assign meaning. The authenticity and authority of the photographs as such are overturned.

FRAGMENT OF A CRUCIFIXION (AFTER FRANCIS BACON)

1999
single-channel video,
metal armature, projector,
DVD player
5 seconds, loop

Courtesy
Julie and John Thornton collection,
Austin, Texas, USA



Fragment of a Crucifixion (After Francis Bacon) (1999) shows an echo of painter Francis Bacon's image of a screaming mouth through the figure of Larry Johnson after making a successful slam dunk.

All the other figures on court are removed, what we're left with is the single image set against a spectacle of people witnessing that moment of rage or triumph. Through the re-framing and looping of the figure, Pfeiffer creates both

movement as well as a kind of stasis. The brief clip denies us knowledge or recognition of what happens before or after, but for Pfeiffer the single image is part of the network that construct images for mass consumption.

DESIDERATA

2004
single-channel video
portable DVD player
3 minutes, loop

Courtesy
Zabludowicz collection, London



Sarah C. Harwell's ekphrastic poem *Desiderata (2004)*, based on this work seems to focus on the alienation felt by an individual. Seemingly disoriented and uncomfortable, the images of contests lifted from the gameshow *The Prize is Right*, shuffle their feet, fidget, twist their

hands, stare anxiously at nothing; in other frames they look intently with strange anticipation or detachment at large fabricated game sets of spinning wheels and boxes with hidden objects later to be revealed. With its colourful, blinking sets, the fantasy and escape offered by the gameshow,

is accepted by the contestants at the cost of removal and dissociation from the crowd. Encouraged by mass media to take part by entering the spotlight, individuals place themselves at the center stage (and at the mercy) of the crowd, and become objects which can get the support or derision of the crowd.

BOOMERANG

1974
Richard Serra/Nancy Holt
video
10 minutes, loop

Boomerang (1974) is a work by artists Richard Serra and Nancy Holt which took advantage of the ease of production provided by the medium of television as it was becoming more important to society in general. Broadcast

on public television is often cited as an example of video art's capacity to provide simultaneous reception and projection of an image. However, the disjunctions

BOOMERANG

2015
single-channel video,
one-way mirror, 5.1 surround
sound, media player
10 minutes, loop

Boomerang (2015) is a documentation of a speech choir performance by students of the De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde's Oral Communications and the University of the Philippines-Manila's Speech 11 classes. Using the text from Serra and Holt's *Boomerang (1974)*, the students perform as one mouthpiece. The use of infrared camera make it difficult for viewers to see the students, and the sense of

a disembodied voice (as in the original *Boomerang*) produce a removal of the image. The artist goes a step beyond (or before) the 'removal' of the image by creating the situation wherein it is already 'erased.' By filming in the dark, any sense of place is removed and what's left are the echoing voices, mere outlines, shadows and glowing eyes. Pfeiffer bypasses the visual formation we are familiar

with in video, and leaves us with the sound of echoes. The words recited by the speech choir being an echo that reaches poetically back to Nancy Holt's strange experience: 'I can hear my echo, and the words are coming back on top of me, the words spilling out of my head and returning to my ear, it puts a distance between the words apprehension or their comprehension...'

