

Noah Becker's

WHITEHOT  MAGAZINE
of contemporary art TM

Justin Matherly: Sunrise at Johann König



Justin

Matherly 'sunrise'
Installation view, Johann König, Berlin
17 January – 21 February 2015
© Justin Matherly - Photo: Roman MÑrz
Courtesy the artist and Johann König, Berlin

Justin Matherly
Sunrise
[Johann König, Berlin](#)

By JEFF GRUNTHANER, FEB. 2015

The practice of Brooklyn-based Justin Matherly hinges on artifice - this is a deliberate move on his part. In his current show at Johann König, Berlin, bearing the wry title of "Sunrise," you will find an installation that includes a fractured allusion to Renaissance sculpture, a lazily atmospheric monprint of a sunrise, and a kind of

medical table supporting a rock. This is the whole of the exhibition. As an artist, Matherly's pseudo self-indulgence doesn't deny the obvious so much as cultivates it, especially when it comes to his choice of materials. "Ambulatory materials" figure heavily in descriptions of the media he uses. But is the obvious as Matherly situates it really worth serious attention?

Consider a typical Matherly sculpture: a large-scale mound of misshapen stone threaded by geriatric walkers. Where does this work go formally? How should it progress? I picture an enormous mound of stone and "ambulatory materials" formed to the scale of a brownstone. Matherly certainly chases after a singular vision: the failure of art to become great, to become vitally integrated with everyday aspects of life and thought. But I'm not particularly interested by this. Despite the highly wrought, and even highly skilled, intensity of his sculptural work, there's an appeal to the lowest common denominator of aesthetic perception which doesn't serve his vision well. It makes it a little too clear, too heavy-handed, like mingling an allusive reference to classical sculpture with instruments reserved for the frail or diseased.

Of course, this is exactly what Matherly does, and it's just too quick, despite his emphasis on the brute materiality of the found (unquestionably the fundament of his creative activity). On the surface, one might mistake his maneuvers for nihilism; but nihilism longs for an authenticity it finds impossible to achieve. Matherly, by contrast, settles for the inauthentic, as if to celebrate the rather absurd insight that art is nothing if the artworld can't afford to sponsor it. The inadequacy of such an idea is rather pathetic, and not entirely in a manner commensurate with Matherly's aspirations. To be sure, inaccuracy is the overarching *telos* of his work, which loves to figure distortion, ugliness, even sentiment. But Matherly doesn't seem to want to push his work past being a higher form of entertainment—"higher" on account of its institutional sanction.

Imagine Hans Bellmer without any political conscience whatsoever, just mutilated, rape-hurt dolls haphazardly splayed out in the white-walled setting of a gallery—this is what it feels like to take in Matherly's current show at Johann König. Something about the way Matherly makes all-too-synoptic allusions to classical sculpture makes this viewer wonder what is to be gained by such a practice, relying as heavily as it does on mock recreations of classical motifs formed out of materials as ubiquitous as cement. The outright denial of beauty as an intrinsic value trundles too heavily into the realm of pseudo-revelation. Matherly's willful disruption of contemplation, using as templates forms originally rooted in a contemplative ideal (i.e. Classical sculpture), feels stilted and effete. **WM**

Jeff Grunthaner is a poet and art-writer based in Brooklyn. You can find his work in BOMB, artnet News, The Claudis App, Emergency INDEX, and elsewhere. His chap book THE TTTROUBLE WWITH SUUNDAAYS was recently published by Louffa Press.