

A Scratching Not a Biting *Bureau, New York 10 January – 14 February*

The words *A Scratching Not a Biting* evoke wilful action and physical sensation. Picture a dog scratching purposefully at the ground, creating both a performance and a visible mark. 'Not a biting' suggests an avoidance of direct aggression, however; despite their expressive or sensual tenor, the works in this exhibition – which encompass performance (captured on video), painting, sculpture and photography – don't force their presence or stray far from a sense of humour or self-effacement.

Like that scratching dog, the motivation behind Aaron Garber-Maikovska's movements in the video *Kitchen* (2011) remains unclear. Nonetheless, the fervent gestures he performs in a nondescript kitchen are highly compelling. He homes in on the bare countertop, slapping it with his palms, plotting swiftly with his fingertips and bouncing his hands as if following an invisible plan, almost as if the surface were hot to the touch. In this wordless demonstration one senses that the strength and determination of his actions, which flow without pause, are born not of forethought but of an obsessive compulsion he has come to accept and to use. These movements appear refined by the force of habit and repetition; the sound of his gasps and short breaths adds to this atmosphere of urgency and dynamism.

Garber-Maikovska's performance is echoed nicely in three of his ink-and-pastel compositions (all 2015), whose coloured patches and black swipes testify to the energy that drives his artistic

output. Two oil paintings by Charlie Billingham, *Strike 1* and *Strike 2* (both 2015), express a similar expressive force, though this time it is contained within the subject matter and its implicit narrative: in each painting a figure in profile, the head and legs of which have been strangely cropped, hugs its torso tightly, giving off an air of stubborn anticipation; the paintings are hung next to each other so that the figures appear to be standing back-to-back. What looks like a truncheon is thrust beneath their arms, and the unruly, outdated clothing combined with a certain cartoonish handling implies that these are characters culled from nineteenth-century satirical drawings. The paintings are compelling not least for this unusual air of anachronism and the swapping of colours between them: denied any background context, one figure wears a blue shirt and is placed against an emerald green field; the other sports a shirt of the same green against a background of the matching blue.

The work of the other three artists in the show is loosely conversant in a different way. Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicquel work together, often learning a new craft technique for the purpose of making something as a combined effort. Their humbly titled *Stoneware Mural with Pipes No. 2* (2015) is an uncanny piece. From a roughly two-metre-wide landscape panel composed of fired ceramic tiles in varying shades of yellow and light brown protrude ten curved or comically straight-stemmed pipes attached to the tiles by their bowls. Their placement is odd,

and without apparent reason, reminding one perhaps of crustaceans that have affixed themselves to a sea wall. They point across the room towards two sculptures, demurely titled *Stoneware Vessels* (2013), also by Dewar and Gicquel, which are modelled on a toilet bowl and bidet. The wall flanking the *Stoneware Vessels* displays two untitled photographs by Carina Brandes, in each of which two naked figures recline and slide over a bronze bear statue. Slightly blurred, the people strive to cling to the polished, rounded body of the animal (a form slightly echoing the *Vessels*), while each person's gender is kept hidden. We see only their forms in profile, torsos curled over with their behinds facing each other (echoing Billingham's figures), or holding on by the hips, legs bent with hair falling over their faces. One detects a deliberate play by the exhibition's organisers here between phallic pipes, bathroom-related sculptures and these slippery, noir-ish bodies.

In tune with its title, which conveys expressive curiosity over conclusive action, *A Scratching Not a Biting* assembles a group of works that might at first seem ambiguous in their intentions. As one explores the show, however, subtle connections – between figures who don't face each other, for example, the shapes of bathroom ware and bodies, or movements exacted on a kitchen surface or canvas – reveal simultaneously the strength of each artist's work and an intriguing cadence of sensations among them. *Iona Whittaker*



Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicquel, *Stoneware Mural with Pipes No. 2*, 2015, high-fired stoneware, 224 × 85 × 19 cm. Courtesy the artists and Bureau, New York