

DAN FISCHER: DEREK ELLER GALLERY REVIEW

Katie Sonnenborn, *Frieze*, 7 June 2006



Dan Fischer, *Ana Mendieta*, 2005, graphite on paper, 40 x 29 cm (15.75 x 11.5 in)

A few months ago a drawing caught my eye at the NADA Fair in Miami. In such an environment it's often impossible to see the wood for the trees, let alone a small work on paper, but from across a corridor I was attracted to Dan Fischer's Jeff Koons (*Rabbit*) (2005), a graphite drawing only a few inches square, depicting one of Koons' iconic bunnies atop a pedestal. Fischer's extraordinary technical skill, his mastery of the grey-scale and his ability to mimic the tonal variations of the reproduction are only a starting-point. Just as Koons in the 1980s took the cheap generic mylar bunny as a ready-made to be reproduced as an exquisite limited-edition stainless steel sculpture, so Fischer takes the illustration of Koons' work as just another equally available ready-made, immediately removing any authorial decision-making from his table of options.

This kind of stringent formal and conceptual engagement is typical of Fischer's photo-based renderings. This was readily apparent when Jeff Koons (*Rabbit*) shared the stage with a plethora of other works in 'Strangelove', his recent show at Derek Eller's new gallery space (the rotund belly of the bunny reflecting a distortedly convex view of another unidentified commercial gallery, from some other period in the art market's cyclical ebbs and flows). The Koons picture, like the others on view, takes its subject from art history and is an example of what Fischer has termed 'Xerox Realism': a drawing derived from photocopies

of reproduced photographs that he finds in books and journals. Recent choices include: artists at work, such as Piet Mondrian (sitting stiffly in his studio) and Philip Guston (putting some finishing touches to a large ink drawing); portraits of artists, among them Anna Mendieta, Sol LeWitt and Ed Ruscha; and artists performing, including Yayoi Kusama and Hanne Wilke. Fischer selects a picture, photocopies it, overlays it with a tight grid à la Chuck Close and meticulously copies the copy of a reproduction, quadrant by quadrant, into a unique drawing. Worked with a mechanical pencil filled with thin HB lead and soft rubber erasers, the surfaces are worked and reworked until they have a velveteen richness.

The drawings suggest quiet devotion and painstaking labour. Although Fischer's own hand is regularly trumped by his technical assuredness, his touch is evidenced by the persistent presence of the grid. By leaving evidence of the purely systematic means by which his images come into being, Fischer makes it impossible for the viewer to ignore the process of their construction. Moreover, because the grid implies a gradual path from which a final form emerges, the experience seems similar to the process of developing a photograph. In addition, the grid guides the picture from abstraction to representation, a progression that is palpable in the images' final, coherent form.

The critic Robert Hobbs, in his intelligent catalogue essay accompanying the show, delves deeply into the writings of Walter Benjamin and the way that Fischer's work pushes and pulls at the auratic presence, or lack thereof, that Benjamin describes in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936). Indeed, it is impossible not to consider Fischer's work in the light of Pop's fascination with mass-produced imagery, the 1980s' Postmodern impulse to employ appropriation as a form of critique, or even 1970s' Photorealism. Yet while Fischer's works reflect the rigour of many of these precedents, it essentially lacks the ready irony.

The artist is reputed to be an assiduous looker, one who pores over historical reproductions with a passionate intensity. He speaks frankly of the joy he derives from art and the ways it is represented and disseminated. His passion is evident in the intimate and personal manner in which he creates. Although his subjects are recognizable, their selection is idio-syncratic, as are the images he chooses to re-create. There is a personal tenor to the work that is not much in evidence elsewhere today, and looking at 'Strangelove' as a whole is much like looking at a private collection of photographs or scanning a friend's bookshelves. Likewise, although his artistic process is systematic (an approach Hobbs connects to John Cage's pre-compositional strategies), the combination of patience, affection and determination recalls the sureness of purpose evident in other hands-on Conceptualists. The humbly scaled works on paper are as hot and cold as a Sol LeWitt wall drawing.