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ROSS HANSEN LIVE RECORD

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Stephane Simoens Contemporary Fine Art is proud to present *Live Record*, the first solo exhibition in Belgium of work by British artist Ross Hansen (1973). For a number of years now Hansen has been developing a singular practice that challenges and questions our relationship to and understanding of representations. Here he presents a group of new, realist and hyper-realist paintings and drawings that pursue his preoccupation with recording cultures and modes of representation; a fascination born of a self-reflective examination of his own instincts to make paintings and drawings. For Hansen the desire to record, consciously exercised or not, is part and parcel of the human condition, an innate, defining characteristic of humanity.

"To record is to be present. When we take a photograph or make a drawing we affirm our own existence. Recording is the action of a species uniquely aware of it's own mortality, and a future that may not contain them. To record is to be human, to be alive. A life lived without record, without history, is here in the present, a life un-lived."

- Ross Hansen

The title for the show can be read both as an instruction, a mantra, and a description of subject matter. In the second instance the title is an oxymoron, a self-contradicting statement. It is impossible for something to be both *live*, of the present, and a recording, although the desire to capture and preserve life-like images of the living world for posterity is ancient.

Paradoxes such as this abound in Hansen's work. In the hyper-real drawings he tries to remove all traces of the artist's hand, to record as objectively as possible, to disappear. Ironically however, in attempting to do so, the artist has to give more of himself, investing ever more time and labour in the surfaces of the works. On a reproducible level the resulting artworks are almost indistinguishable from their photographic models, even when stood directly in front of the drawings the impacted surfaces appear *photographic*. These objects belong to a fundamentally different order however, to that of their photographic models: low-tech, hand-made, they vibrate with hundreds of hours of labour. They are drawings. Hansen's art is an art about the way things are, the irrefutable, although the viewer is made to challenge these *'truths'* at every turn.

The intrinsically human nature of representation is here revealed in images that explore the relationship between man and the natural world. Hansen's subject matter ranges from taxonomic forms of documentation through to casual snapshots, although he favours formulaic images that reveal or represent wider cultures of document making. Posed hunting photographs are a good example and two drawings of such trophy images are included in the show. The ironically titled ***Great White*** (2006) shows a carp fisherman with his prize catch. These fish are hooked out of the water – held aloft in the hands of their conquerors, photographed, and then returned. Only the photograph remains as a kind of mediated hunting trophy. This recording impulse can be seen as the manifestation of a vestigial hunter-gatherer's desire to control and contain nature. The threshold moment, when a child comes of age, ***His First Buck*** (2010), providing a particularly poignant example of this primal trophy taking.

The appropriation of the natural world as a backdrop against which man asserts his primacy is again evident, albeit in a different kind of photographic representation, in a third hunting themed image, ***Frontier Girl – Miss Andrews*** (2010). A classically composed image, constructed from a series of s-shapes, triangles and golden sections, a bikini-clad girl is pictured full-figure, one hand on hip, the other holding a gun. Both hunter and trophy, the girl looks confidently back at the viewer. Behind lie the forested hills of the American mid-west, controlled and managed, carved up by diagonal lines created by the angled gun and the vapour trails of fighter jets. A contrived image, the title is a reference to the equally artificial rural idyll depicted by Thomas Gainsborough in his portrait of *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (1749), Hansen's 21st century construction a contrivance of digital images where Gainsborough worked with model landscapes and mannequins.

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The show proceeds from images of hunters to images of the hunted. The subject matter for these 'capture images' range from a camera-phone snapshot of a whimsical grouping of pedigree toy dogs, **Designer Dogs** (2010), to the staged dislocation of a zoo exhibit, **Zoo Monkeys** (2008), to a camera-trap photograph of a sub-species of Cheetah, yet to be seen by human eyes, **Spook** (2010), the big cat's presence triggering the camera's shutter.

Each work in the show is a reconstruction of a photographic model, however the media, scale and process of manufacture are carefully selected to draw out a particular resonance or association for each individual image. In translating the images from the source photographs into different media, and removing them from their original contexts, Hansen can be seen as stepping outside the photographic medium in order to comment on it. A distance is created between the viewer of the artwork and the ostensible subjects of the images. The artist describes seeking, "a small delay in the reception of these images, a small space within which the viewer has the opportunity to consider the different recording processes at work".

Hansen believes that much photography is motivated by 'an impossible desire to create living images', or at least an image 'containing life'. A theme explored in the hyper-real works displayed in Perspex vitrines. A photograph of a baby's birth, the moment that life is given, forms the model for one drawing, **First Breath** (2010). In the **Suspended Animation** (2009-10) series of drawings, hummingbirds appear to hover in photographic stillness; their beating wings a blur, as if clasped to the wall mid-flight. The images hum with the tension of a photographic instant, literally drawn out. The cases, like bell jars or incubators, vessels to contain life.

The artists' own recording instincts, also come in for close scrutiny. Hansen spent his childhood drawing pictures of animals and birds from the photographs in natural history books. In **Memento Mori** (2007-8) the artist re-visits this act, magnifying the process a thousand-fold, literally, he spent an estimated 2000 hours working on the piece. Rendered in an impacted layer of Caran D'Ache colour pencil, the drawing is a minutely detailed transcription of a photograph of a Great Horned Owl. The photograph is enlarged in the drawing to match the size of the bird itself, the resulting image uncannily life-like yet strangely distant. The viewer starts to question what they are looking at: live specimen or taxidermy model, photograph or drawing, fact or fiction.

Our belief in images and artefacts is tested further in three oil paintings depicting Victorian taxidermy displays and collections. Executed on aluminium panels and incorporating different degrees of brushwork and mark-making, these paintings can be seen as an examination of the medium of painting itself. **Potter's Lamb** (2007) is based on a postcard from a museum of curiosities that appears to show a chimera, a two-headed lamb, mounted in a display case before a *painted* backdrop. Hansen's brushstrokes therefore read both as direct strokes and as reproductions of brushstrokes. The line between the physical painting and the subject matter is blurred. Taxidermy and painting are here presented as equivalent *representations* of the world, as objects appearing to possess one 'reality' whilst simultaneously creating another. The *likeness* of one object is preserved in another, a likeness of which is then taken. The likeness evolves- it becomes an image of, and about, the preservation and display of images.

The final two paintings included in the show are based on very different entymological displays. In the first, **Painted Butterfly Case** (2008-9), an image of an aesthetic arrangement of colourful but fragile, disintegrating butterflies is 'preserved' in a tangible layer of paint, applied in reductive, literal strokes. Taxidermy is painting and painting is taxidermy. The second, **Unpainting** (2009), is a monochrome image of a collection of Deaths Head Moths arranged in grid formation. The image is painted on a floated aluminium plate in translucent sections of black oil paint, and was produced by repeatedly working through the image, systematically adding and removing layers of paint, losing and then re-finding the image each time. The resulting artwork has the appearance of an x-ray photograph, both a painting and its own excavation- a spectre lies within!