

The Miniature and the Model, On the Paintings of **Jochen Klein**

by **Douglas Ashford**

New York. Winter 2009.



▲ klein_3: Untitled, 1997; oil paint on linen; 30 x 40"
Courtesy of: Feature Inc., New York.

Do you remember the time we saw that young boy in the park at the English Garden in Munich? He made such an impression on us. We both realized it would be inappropriate to confuse his delicate and reflective features with something else - as representative of something that you said we each wanted in our lives in different ways but couldn't yet have. The way he seemed to shine reminded me then that being overwhelmed with duty can afford a kind of pleasure - like when you work real hard to make a nice house or a nice dinner for others so your own image can shine a bit more in their minds. I thought that I could shine like that in producing things for other people, like that boy did, or in achieving something with other people. I guess I felt that day in the park that the boy could have been my friend even without knowing me or I guess I dreamt right then that we had a life together or at least would be able to work together to make something really great even if it would last for only a short while. Remember how silly we felt projecting onto him, a total stranger, all the idiosyncratic fantasies we held about our private and public lives?

Well, that boy came to mind again for me in thinking about how I've spent years making art with other people, either as critical renderings of museum policy or as interrogations of urban life, in the form of exhibitions or writings. Public discussions on the policy of culture are so hard to compare to the intimate things that we really value. Like those things we want enough to wake up and see placed next to our beds. But these days I feel a need to

think of activism in relation to intimacy: a need based on all the things in the newspapers and from in past, things that approach me when I can't sleep. Anyway, the reason I'm thinking of all this again is because I saw someone just like that boy, or I should say a rendition of someone just like him, in a painting by Jochen Klein. He left a number of paintings behind that are beautiful and important. They're important to me today because they reflect on the dilemma of reconciling my work on public issues with my fascination with intimate pictures. Such a dilemma is complex and worth telling you about, because I think it points to a fundamental fiction in our art industry: namely, that the desire to describe a radically sentimental subject and the need to address institutional hegemony are incommensurable.

The dream of the Surrealist could be a template - a dream in which the process of mental association and construction become the basis for social action; where eidetic example helps us to deconstruct the false reality in which we habitually perform. It may seem paradoxical, but I have been noticing an essential rapport between these paintings and the work that Jochen produced with Group Material. Finding affinities between pastoral figurative paintings and a collective project-based art practice that appropriated museum galleries and public spaces may seem a ridiculous task; the two seem so incomparable in appearance. What do images of men with baby tigers, sad geese, ballerinas, and boys lying around with sleepy rabbits have to do with institutional critique? They don't resonate with the

converting of advertising space, the exposure of museum authority or the reinvention of collecting impulses and rigid archives. But these paintings do connect to the actual working process that comes forth in laboring collectively. Collaboration presents a critical inclusiveness of divergent processes that allows a resistance to languages presented as fixed and owned. Instead the practitioner and viewer are given a forum of possibilities about which to think. I believe that Jochen's paintings are artworks that help someone imagine him - or herself - opposed to purity and embracing complexity. More specifically, they remind me of the concern for a particular collective voice that Jochen brought when, together with his friend and collaborator Thomas Eggerer, he joined Julie Ault and I to work on the last projects of Group Material. His effort to represent the possibility that shared pleasure has in transforming subjects was a great influence on us and, in many ways, this concern underlines a structural imperative of the work we did together. You see, our inclusive and collective exhibition practice, which positions artists as producers of social and not just cultural meaning, came out of a process that depended on friendship, rapport, and affection.

For me, Group Material in all its manifestations since 1983 had a profound sense of origin in the excitement that accompanies the identification of friendship with production. It seems that maybe the most transgressive possibility for an individual faced with the tyranny of confession and trauma may simply be to have a friendship. Even with all the disappointments that may come along with intimacy and affection, as a projection friendship still seems an effective way to think about the work that Group Material



klein_6: Untitled, 1997; oil paint on linen; 24 x 18" ▲
Courtesy of: Feature Inc., New York

did together. Our discussions on the choice of themes, sites, objects and artifacts, and in planning models of address and structures of display were fundamentally about projecting ideas we had of ourselves, which were dialogic and inclusive, onto art institutions, which appeared myopic and falsely neutral. The possibilities for art were made real in the relationship between collaborators first, then exported in the form of a model. The juxtaposition of artworks and artifacts on the wall of the museum represented, at least in part, our own dialogue and discussion. Our process and our product were inexorably linked to the idea that collaborative attention can open institutional dialogues

Group Material, "Market" ►
1995, installation view,
Kunstverein München.
Courtesy of the artist.



to the specific representations of marginal and difficult ideas. Each exhibition and public project was a model then, a “miniaturized” presentation of a social possibility that was different than the gargantuan forms of persuasion and regulation that surrounds us; a modeled representation of something we experienced in working together.

Jochen’s paintings seem to provide a similar proposal in that subjective change, like social change, is dependent on physical models, i.e., artworks. I think people these days often see the idea of modeling radical subjectivity as complicit with corporate culture’s narrow Surrealisms - and a good deal of the time they are correct. But the figure-in-the-landscape images that Jochen produced are subjectively oriented extensions of social inquiry because they reflect the way that all imaginings of different futures are also ideal projections of the self: models of what we could be. Like the miniaturized projection of an exhibition as a model for the deconstruction of official culture, Jochen’s paintings show figures that are miniaturized in relation to the gigantic and perfect natural sites that they occupy. Models are always smaller than the real space they concern. They have to be in order to project in miniature a picture of a tentative, possible future that many audiences could see as a usable, experimental experience. Or better, in showing us models of people that can perform like these tiny fairies or nymphs, Jochen shows figures from the past, from childhood or fantasy, that are presented as an alternative, Surrealist refigured present. The boy in the grass is representative of an ideal subject, what we would want today if we could use our memory and history in some more effective way.

There is no more time for heroic and strident discussion from all points in the ideological spectrum that reduces marginal identity to a public distortion of the body. A culture of spectacularized perversity exposes the body by turning it inside out into a carnivalesque display. I can acknowledge the way that the free zone of a carnival turns the world upside down in order to posit new and radical roles for it’s subjects. These are what Susan Stewart calls “bodies in the act of becoming,” but as useful as they may be in countering the spectacle of submission to violence with a spectacle of opposition, I am filled with doubt in their presence. The body torn and remade, presented as grotesquely resistant to the view of a political majority, provides a chance for subjects to imagine themselves as different, as freaks, outside of and liberated from the oppressive norm. But in replicating or constructing the forms of the spectacle of public distortion without attending to its context, such grotesque bodies seem less and less able to act radically.

Jochen’s project in these paintings appears to me to be very different. The body that he is proposing is more perfect, both more distanced and domesticated at the same time. Unapproachable but familiar objects, the figures that inhabit these paintings are bodies frozen in an ideal time. They are shiny to the extent that they can reflect our will and desire in the abstract. They are colorful enough to allow us to place them in relation to some public fantasy that we have entertained at some time, but not enough to become or replace that fantasy. This is certainly a type of objectification, but one that is based on experience and imagination not trauma. It proposes possibilities that are





▲ klein_4: Untitled, 1996; oil paint, collage on linen; 30 x 40". Courtesy of: Feature Inc., New York

klein_1: Untitled, 1997; oil paint on linen; 40 x 54". Courtesy of: Feature Inc., New York ▼



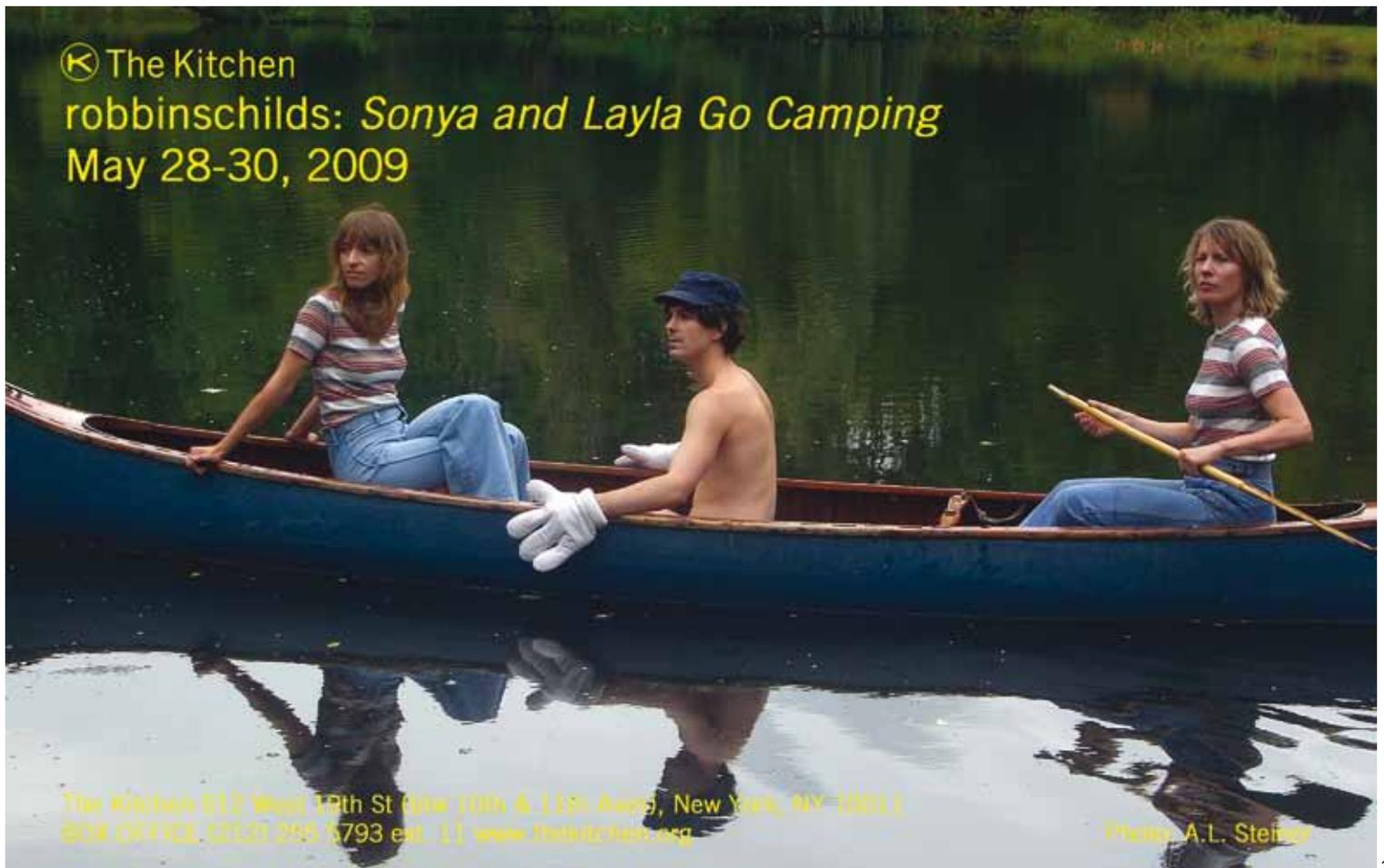
intimately interwoven with ideal figures of everyday life and the paths these figures take through and against our lives. The colors and surface of these pictures, like the skin of the ballerina in one of them, reflects a story that we can only fully identify with as a kind of frightening, delicate, and reflective perfection. This skin of a miniature always appears true because, like a model, it exists in the form of an abstract proposal, without contingency and purely representative of something we can project onto but never into. In a constructed world where the skin is so reflective, this mad wounded culture we actually live in cannot reach us. These little figures are models of a different subjective possibility for a viewer, one based in memory and fiction at the same time, a model that we can play with so as to imagine ourselves differently.

If artists have a dilemma between exposing our ideal figurations as grotesque, all orifices and turned inside out in grand display, and of miniaturizing ourselves into a perfect model of a self or selves, then Jochen and Group Material probably fall into the latter position. Together we wanted

to make models of a deconstructive cultural forum that would act as a translation of artistic examples of human life. Jochen's voice in Group Material brought an insistence on subject positions that would allow and even encourage the radical objectification of other people. He said to me once that he wanted a public monument to provide him with the possibility of walking into a stranger who he could really fall for. Whether this stranger is an ideal rendition of the self or an other, it hardly seems to matter. In both cases it is an undifferentiated alien, someone that either you or I could mistakenly identify as a friend, a companion, a collaborator. Which brings me back to the boy we saw in the English garden. You see, that boy was an emblem of Group Material's process, Jochen's figure, and our young ideas in the park that day, all echoing how great it can be to make fantastical investments onto other people. In imagining ourselves as the perfect companions for a stranger, we were and still are making models of an alternative future. Such sentiment, I think, is a guide to the radical potential of intimacy. And a guide to our memory of it. ■

© Doug Ashford

Altered version of essay originally published as "A Boy in the Park, or, The Miniature and the Model", in Jochen Klein; Tillmans, Wolfgang, ed.; Verlag der Buchhandlung, Walther König, Köln.



⌂ The Kitchen
robbinschilds: *Sonya and Layla Go Camping*
May 28-30, 2009

The Kitchen 512 West 17th St (btw 10th & 11th Aves), New York, NY 10011
BOX OFFICE (212) 259 5793 ext. 1 | www.thekitchen.org

Photo: A.L. Steiner