

**Luke White, “Sublimity, Beauty and Decorum,” in *Decorum: Richmond Burton and Maisie Kendall*, ed. Michael Petry (London: MOCA / Royal Academy Schools Gallery, 2007). Published in conjunction with the exhibition “Decorum: Richmond Burton and Maisie Kendall,” at the Royal Academy Schools Gallery, Sept 9th-Oct 28th 2007.**

ISBN: 978-0-9552577-9-7

The material is copyright the author and the Royal Academy Schools Gallery/MOCA.



Installation view of *Decorum* in the Royal Academy Schools Gallery. Pictured left is Richmond Burton, *Untitled Tarp Painting 1*, 2007, acrylic on tarp, 10' x 25'. To the right is Maisie Kendall, *Brigade*, 2007, acrylic and ink on canvas, 260 cm x 226 cm. Photo courtesy and copyright of MOCA London.

## Sublimity, Beauty and Decorum

The title of this show, which brings together the work of two abstract painters, Maisie Kendall and Richmond Burton, is 'Decorum'. This word's rich complex of connotations opens up what it is, beyond the very obvious, which these two artists share. However, this is not to say that the work of either painter is simply 'decorous'. Rather, in both, decorum is entertained as a problematic matter, as something troublesome. We are faced, ultimately, with something more like a 'decorous indecorum', or an 'indecorous decorum'.

The notion of decorum in art is clearly a legacy of classicist rhetoric. The word itself enters the English language in the sixteenth century as a literary term, denoting stylistic suitability. It speaks of propriety and *politesse*, of the harmonious and the fitting, of elegance and balance. The grids and systems of repetition around which both Kendall and Burton structure their compositions might recall such calls to order.<sup>1</sup> Such ordering devices lend these paintings an air of the stability and symmetry of the façades of Greek temple architecture. Certainly, elegance and balance are concerns in these works, although this has its counter in the restless, occasionally violent, and often joyous rhythms which constantly overflow the paintings' grids. Order often seems on the point of being entirely overwhelmed; the sense of the stability of the classical façade slips away from a viewer, and we seem to be dealing more with the 'painterliness,' dynamism and instability of the Baroque than the calm order of the Classical.<sup>2</sup> Apollonian decorum is countered with Dionysian frenzy.

The word *decorum*, however, is nowadays also loaded with decidedly modern conceptions of 'decoration' and the 'decorative'. The meaning of these terms in turn relies on their relation to *décor*, with all the implications this word carries of domestic space. There is a significant disjunction between the high value which was placed on decorum in classicism and the pejorative function which the notion of the decorative has taken on in contemporary art discourse, bespeaking something 'feminised' and made superficial and trivial through contamination with the domestic. Whatever core of semantic content the modern *decoration* and the Neoclassical *decorum* share has gone through a profound reevaluation. This reevaluation was the result of a historical sea change in ideas about art, and a fundamental shift in our relations to the sensory and sensual, one in which gender relations are profoundly implicated.

This change is rooted in the transformations in thought and art of the eighteenth century, during which it became conventional to divide aesthetic experience into two opposing kinds: the sublime and the beautiful. The sublime, an often-martial aesthetic of power and transcendence, was gendered masculine, whilst beauty, thought of as a matter of sensual pleasure, and of delicacy, harmony and softness, was closely associated with femininity. In line with the ideas of the time about gender, and in line with the 'Cartesian' dualism around which these ideas were articulated, the masculine sublime was elevated – as a matter of mind or will – above 'feminine' beauty, which was distrusted for its seductive appeal to the body.<sup>3</sup> Though we are not so likely to be concerned nowadays with such polarised theories of the sublime and beautiful, the dualism which they introduced nonetheless continues to structure the institutional or disciplinary boundaries

within which visual culture is produced, distributed and experienced by viewers. The fine arts, with sublimity as their highest goal, were split from the 'decorative arts'. For modern art and architecture, ornament famously becomes a crime.<sup>4</sup> Decoration becomes a matter of anxiety for modern art – carrying as it does connotations of the feminine, the body, sensuality, beauty, the domestic. Decoration is something, in Freudian terminology, to be repressed or disavowed: to be excluded from fine art. But as we know from Freud, that which is repressed always returns to haunt us.<sup>5</sup>

It is ironic that the decorous and decorative – which in the discourse of Neoclassicism once constituted a mechanism of aesthetic regulation – in their pact with the sensual now become carriers of excluded erotic, sensual and somatic energies, and hence become in and of themselves indecorous, disorderly, threatening, and in need of policing.

Burton and Kendall both mine those traditions of decoration which have remained marginal to the history of modern art, but which nonetheless have haunted it with obdurate insistence. In Burton's work, critics have found echoes of Art Nouveau, the Viennese Secessionists, Matisse, Georgia O'Keefe, and Lee Krasner, but also the less 'authored' or conventionally 'high art' traditions of textile design, Islamic art and psychedelia.<sup>6</sup> This range of references marks his work not just with the 'feminine', but also with a series of the sexual, ethnic, and classed 'others' that have provided figures for the projection of Western rationality's counter-images of itself.

Kendall's paintings are no less packed with references, though the precise decorative tradition in question is a slightly different one. Paul Klee often lurks in her paintings, but the overwhelming reference seems to be to a history of modern pattern design, as it moves from the Bauhaus school towards the thoroughly vernacular mass design of today. I find them particularly evocative of the products of that utopian moment just after WWII, when in Britain designers such as Lucienne Day looked forwards to the democratisation of the pleasures of consumption, and hailed the liberating role of modernist design within this. Kendall also gestures to older traditions of pattern design, and talks about an attempt to evoke the kind of 'faded splendour' of the sort of old hotel that will have a name which (like the décor of the hotel itself) will inevitably invoke the exotic reaches of a bygone Empire. Like Burton's, then, these are works which draw on a series of marginal 'others' (consumers, the professional design practices of women, colonial subjects) and counter-images to Western reason.

In quite deliberately bringing this normally-excluded or disavowed material back into the centre of the concerns of their art Kendall and Burton do not simply play out the automatic return of this repressed content. There is an *anamnesis* (i.e. 'un-forgetting') going on here, in which the binarism of art's gendered terms is challenged, and made to unravel or 'deconstruct'. Of course, this staging of the return of the repressed is not without its affects of unease and ambivalence. Hence the complexity of both artists' works, and the fact that it is not something 'merely' or safely decorative which they recover from their excursion into decoration. Yes, there is play, sensuality, joy, energy – beauty even – but this is a pleasure which is also haunted by a negativity and apprehension which would more traditionally have been associated with the sublime.

The works sometimes teeter on the edge of violence. There is a sense of loss and longing and of ruin or decay in their worried surfaces and fractured forms. Burton's and Kendall's works are beautiful, but it is a peculiarly anxious beauty they present. This anxiety expresses our alienated modernity, in which, as we have seen, beauty presents itself as uncanny return.<sup>7</sup>

The work of Kendall and Burton plays out the paradoxical logic of quite how indecorous decorum itself has become, when harmony itself strikes a discordant note.

---

NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Myths*. (London and Cambridge Ma.: MIT Press, 1985), 151-71. For Krauss, the repeated motif of the grid in modern art retains the ghost of the more literally classicist spatial order of single-point perspective.

<sup>2</sup> The terms of this opposition are those famously laid out in Heinrich Wölfflin's seminal *Renaissance and Baroque*, trans. Kathryn Simon (London: Collins, 1964).

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [1757] (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958) is particularly indicative of these attitudes.

<sup>4</sup> Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime," *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, ed. Adolf Opel, trans. Michael Mitchell, (Riverside, Calif.: Ariadne Press, 1998), 167-76.

<sup>5</sup> This exclusion is even at work in the 'dematerialisation' of art in the late twentieth century, with painting itself, for example, appearing too contaminated with femininising sensuality or materiality to be respectable as an intellectual practice. But art, definitively an aesthetic, and hence sensory, material practice, remains irreducibly dependent on sensuality, even in its more 'conceptual' manifestations.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Chambers, "Richmond Burton," *Flash Art* (Sept 2001): 121-2.

<sup>7</sup> In both Burton's and Kendall's works, the anxiety is also a matter of the expression of the particular tenor of anxiety which colours our turn-of-the-millennium times, characterised by a globalisation which has brought us not just the paranoia of terrorism and the war against it, but also has fractured space and history alike. These anxieties surely find their place within Kendall's and Burton's works, and inflect the visual logic of their anxious beauty.