

Anthony Luensman Explores Carnal Delights in “Taint”

October 22nd, 2012 | Published in “, October 2012

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by Maria Seda-Reeder

Anthony Luensman’s first major solo exhibition in five years, “Taint” at the Alice F. and Harris K. Weston Art Gallery was supported by a \$20,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant—one of only seventeen such grants chosen out of 1,624 eligible applications by arts organizations commissioning the creation of new works in the state of Ohio. To say that the exhibition engages the space within the unusual architecture of the Weston’s various galleries would be an understatement. Luensman busts through drop ceilings, employs a storage closet, and reaches dizzying heights in the Weston’s tricky street-level floor gallery.

In the internationally-known multi-media artist’s idiosyncratic, polished yet playful style, Luensman for the first time combines photography with sculpture as part of the city-wide FotoFocus biennale. The show consists of eighteen photographs, fourteen sculptural installations, and several video installations, but it’s difficult to quantify the media employed by an exhibition like “Taint” because the line between materials is constantly being crossed.

Photographs picture other works of art created by Luensman for “Taint”. Freezer Curtain for example, is a sculpture installed on the first floor but also included in several photos in the galleries below. But he also photographs artwork created by other artists: a painting and drawing that Luensman “lived with” for many years are featured in four different photos. One of the artist’s “video installations” is actually an animated photo projection of nearly 300 still images, and a good number of the photographs in “Taint” contain three-dimensional elements.

For instance, Luensman “tattoos” two photographs with simple tactile components: Candy Spine (2012) is a photo of the fair-skinned back of Alex (Luensman’s favored model who, according to the artist became a “focal point” for the show), with a grid of candy buttons adhered to the glass frame down the length of his back. In another, Happy Trail, (2012) Luensman affixed rose thorns upon the glass atop a photograph of Alex’s torso, where the model’s proverbial “happy trail” would be.

But this is not the extent of the artist employing photography for sculptural purposes. In Kentucky Falls (2012), Luensman reframed an older photograph, [emptysign #1 (2008),] setting it behind two panes of glass that he coated in dripping K-Y Jelly lubricant so as to look like the view from a window on a rainy day. As such, Luensman connects Kentucky Falls to a similar visual aesthetic of the aforementioned Freezer Curtain and its corresponding photographs, Rosebud (2012) and Whistling Boy (2012), which also feature the shower curtain-like sculpture.

In AKNEEBETWEENKNEES (2012), the artist created a three-dimensional installation of seventeen unique black/sepia toned images stitched together side by side, mounted on PVC board and affixed in a corner between two walls. Because of the way it was mounted, the ten-foot long piece required focused lighting, which was accomplished by pulling out several squares of ceiling tile and resting the light track above the metal ceiling frame—lending the piece a triangular shadow on the walls below.

There are serendipitous moments like this that happen throughout the exhibition—although don’t be fooled into thinking that Luensman left any of the details up to chance. One eye-catching example is how (when seen in the right light) Luensman’s three top-floor neon halo sculptures, Spiracles (2012) appear to reach down into the galleries below, due to their reflection in the floor. These neon “blowholes” mirror the ladders the artist employed to break through the drop ceiling in the lower galleries.

From the scatological origin of the exhibition’s title, one might assume that “Taint” is charged with corporeal fetish—and make no mistake, it is. But there is also a physical preoccupation with the body and the ways in which it might transcend its earthly limits. These include but are not limited to sex. According to the exhibition press release, Luensman “draws upon themes of childhood, loss, and the evanescence of life.”

Bodily orifices are a recurring image and used as pattern and texture throughout “TAINT”—although gender identification is purposefully left ambiguous. Both 45 – 45 (2012) and Stud Finder (2012) feature circular openings that provoke the urge to touch. In 45 – 45, Luensman applied pink eraser grounds [a highly tangible material he’s used in past works like Self-Reliance – Buddha (2009)], to 7” discs—the color and texture of which evoke reference to the flesh.

Certainly, one would draw a line between carnal sensations and Sleeve Totem (2012), a shaft of clear rubber sex “sleeves” on a vertical acrylic rod that emerges from the gallery floor and literally penetrates the drop ceiling. Another glaring example is Luensman’s black and white photograph, Foot Hole (2012), which combines two fetishes (glory holes and feet) into one.

But while fleshy delights might be proffered in “Taint” as a sensation of physical transcendence, Luensman’s preoccupation with death as the ultimate “offing” is also a common thread throughout. The photograph cloudhead (2012) relates to the artist’s previous artificial landscape works like Grassland (2007) or his Self-Reliance photographic series, in which Luensman interjects the human body (his own) into manipulated environments.

In each, the artist creates a kind of visual trick. Clearly, we know that Luensman's cloudhead is just a fabricated assemblage of white feathers made up to look like a cloud. But set against an azure sky in bright daylight, the head cover becomes a metaphor for the evaporation of the human spirit. We see no identifying facial features upon the head—the seed of reason and conscious control, according to artists like the Surrealists—and without it, the unconscious is liberated to pursue purely physical impulses.

Lasersute (2012)—a titular reference to hirsute (or hairy)—is an installation of crisp white dress shirt hanging on the wall with a pattern of red lasers emanating from the chest. When the viewer approaches, one hears an electric buzzing from somewhere above their head, and the red lights disappear. Luensman said that the impetus for the work was hearing gunshots in his neighborhood and wondering how being shot would feel.

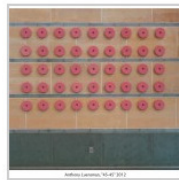
Just as he easily traverses boundaries between artistic media, Luensman's sexually charged content of "Taint" walks the line between attraction and repulsion, perversion and sweetness, innocence & experience. The three animated projections in the street-level gallery demonstrate this flirtatious dance that Luensman is so fond of limning.

The photographs in ASFALLSBUKAKKESOFALLSBUKAKKEFALLS (2012) are of the artist's white-gloved hand moving along the bare-chested models' bodies and faces. Buried within the title is a slang term for male ejaculate, which one can assume is represented by Luensman's white glove. Such work can seem like masturbatory naval gazing—despite Luensman's singularly creative approach—and the fetishization of the young male body feels solipsistic at points.

Clearly, physical transcendence (whether by sex or death) is a topic of concern for Luensman, and "Taint" underscores the artist's interest in the tangible paroxysm connecting the two. Although his preoccupation with male sexuality can be heavy-handed, Luensman's work is expertly executed. Fleshy goose bumps (both literal and metaphorical) throughout delight the eyes while lending depth, color, and texture to photographs, sculpture, installation, and every medium in between. Although Luensman's themes are overt, his slick production and clean aesthetic create a bold assertion of self.



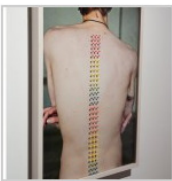
Anthony Luensman, "Freezer Curtain" 2012 photo credit: Tony Walsh



Anthony Luensman, "45-45" 2012 photo credit: Tony Walsh



Anthony Luensman, "Eye, Ear, Arm" 2012 photo credit: Tony Walsh



Anthony Luensman, "Candy Spine" 2012 photo credit: Tony Walsh



Anthony Luensman, "AKNEEBETWEENKNEES" 2012 photo credit: Tony Walsh

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