

About the Artist

Paul Pfeiffer

Born in Honolulu in 1966, Paul Pfeiffer received a BFA in printmaking from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1987 and an MFA from Hunter College in 1994. He also participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program in 1997-98. Now based in New York City, Pfeiffer is represented by The Project in Los Angeles and New York.

His works have been included in solo and group exhibitions in the United States, Europe and Asia. Recent solo shows include UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA (2001); *Sex Machine*, The Project, Los Angeles, CA (2001); Kunsthaus Glarus, Glarus, Switzerland; Kunst-Werke, Berlin, Germany (2001); *Orpheus Descending*, The Public Art Fund, New York, NY (2001); and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2001).

His group exhibitions include *Tempo*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (2002); *Miami Currents: Linking Collection and Community*, Miami Art Museum, Miami, FL (2002); *Special Effects Media Art 2002*, Daejeon Municipal Museum of Art, Korea (2002); Startkapital, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (K21), Dusseldorf, Germany (2002); *The Americans*, Barbican Arts Center, London, United Kingdom (2001); *Loop*, Kunsthalle der Hypo-kultursiftung, Munich, Germany; PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, NY (2001); *Race In Digital Space*, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA (2001); The 49th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2001); and many more.

Pfeiffer has received numerous awards, including a Public Art Fund commission in 1999-2000, and a Fulbright-Hayes Fellowship and a project grant from Art Matters both in 1994-95. As a participant in the 2000 Whitney Biennial, he received the inaugural Bucksbaum Award to honor a living American artist whose work demonstrates a singular combination of talent and imagination.

Public Programs

ARTIST'S TALK:

Paul Pfeiffer
Saturday, February 8, 1 PM

CURATOR'S TALK:

Jane Farver
Wednesday, March 19, 12 PM

LECTURE:

Mutant Beauty and Ghostly Perception: Remediating Horror in the Works of Paul Pfeiffer and Matthew Barney.

Henry Jenkins
Thursday, March 13, 6:30 PM

GALLERY TALKS:

Bill Arning, Curator
Friday, February 21, 6 PM; Friday, March 14, 6 PM

Hiroko Kikuchi, Education/Outreach Coordinator:

Wednesdays, 12 PM; Sundays (February 9 and 23; March 9; and April 6), 2 PM

GROUP TOURS

Group tours are available by appointment. Please call 617-452-3586 for inquiries.

Paul Pfeiffer was jointly organized by the MIT List Visual Arts Center and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. This exhibition has been generously sponsored by GUCCI and ArtPace, A Foundation for Contemporary Art, San Antonio. The Cambridge presentation is made possible by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and the Council for the Arts at MIT, and Hotel@MIT.

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GUCCI



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Paul Pfeiffer

February 6-April 6, 2003

Curators:

Jane Farver

Dominic Molon

Corporealities

Organized by the MIT List Visual Arts Center

by Dominic Molon
Associate Curator
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

Corporealities

Through acts of erasure, camouflage, displacement, and reconstruction, Paul Pfeiffer deals with presence, absence, and physical and psychological estrangement. His computerized video manipulations of figures reflect a cultural context in which the body is routinely and strangely transformed and augmented through plastic surgery, pharmaceuticals, bodybuilding, and other means. In his mini-dioramas, uncanny arrangements of furniture and altered objects from famous horror films are transferred from the screen into the third dimension and presented in vitrines, creating unsettling and irreconcilable gaps of space and scale between viewer and structure. Paul Pfeiffer's work ambivalently foreshadows a future in which the representation or removal of the figure and the transformation of space suggest grave philosophical, social, and political consequences.

Pfeiffer's use of film and television clips and preexisting photographs focuses on latent meanings and manipulations of the physical human form in recognizable examples of pop culture. His frequent use of clips and images from sporting events is concerned with the available and extreme forms of physicality in a dramatic architectural arena. Thus, Michael Jordan is shown endlessly writhing on the court in Pfeiffer's work *Race Riot* (2001) not as a reflection on the fragility or framing of celebrity, but rather to present a particular bodily contortion that suggests both agony and ecstasy.

Pfeiffer's photographic works, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (2000-2001), use either digital erasure of a figure or modification of the surrounding space to create a conspicuous sense of absence or an intensification of presence within an image. Some are abstract, and feature the removal of American icon Marilyn Monroe from photos of the actress on a California beach taken shortly before Monroe's death in 1962. Pfeiffer has converted the original photographs into Rothko-esque abstractions, satirizing the notion that moody washes of abstract color plumb mystical depths of human existence by demonstrating how the effect can be produced through digital manipulation. Pfeiffer's erasure of Monroe shifts the focus toward unconsidered backgrounds, and the anonymity and placelessness of the locations emphasize the frustrating withdrawal of a body once desired and envied the world over. Others in

the series are digitally-enhanced images of basketball players that allude to allegorical figures from the Biblical Book of Revelations representing Conquest, War, Famine, and Death, as well as to Albrecht Durer's 1498 woodcut depiction of them. In the basketball players images, surrounding figures in the original photographs are removed or certain aspects of the arena are intensified: for instance, a bright light shining from the arena's ceiling appears to obliterate a player's head in one image. Suggestions of absence and loss in the Monroe photographs and the physical, emotional, and even spiritual, intensity in the basketball player works resonate with their title's allegorical evocations of extreme states of being.

The viewer seems to be erased in the video projection and mini-diorama, *Dutch Interior* (2001). The video projects live surveillance footage of a middle-class American home interior onto a wall. As one moves towards the wall, a bright hole appears, revealing the location of the projected interior from a different angle. Pfeiffer's conflation of the physical and represented space makes a simultaneous view of both perspectives impossible, resulting in a frustration of a satisfyingly "total" visual understanding of the space. The shift in scale—from cinematic projection to dollhouse-sized construction—further throws one's perspective and physical relationship to the space into disarray. The room in *Dutch Interior* is a reconstruction of a set from *The Amityville Horror* (1979), a film in which an "average" American family moves into a house possessed by demons. Physically and visually unable to "possess" the miniaturized space, viewers are similarly consigned to a ghostlike state of wandering within the false space of the projection and hovering outside the real space of the diorama.

A series of works made from 2000 to 2003 are based on a scene from the 1982 horror film *Poltergeist*, in which spirits occupying a typical American suburban home make their presence known by noiselessly rearranging a kitchen table and chairs in a gravity-defying configuration. Pfeiffer's first *Poltergeist* work recreated this structure in miniature through computer technology. A computer interpreted the digital file of Pfeiffer's drawings as an object by running two lasers over a cube filled with dust-sized particles of plastic. Where the lasers met, they

generated enough heat to fuse the particles together. While this object was made with extremely advanced technology, other versions of *Poltergeist* were fabricated by other means: a wax version was made by a husband and wife from Thailand, while a Bangkok-based itinerant worker whittled another of soap. A third version was made from grass by one of Pfeiffer's former students. Pfeiffer's new objects transfer this uncanny arrangement of objects from the movie screen into our space, taking a supernaturally-created structure and recreating it using human handicraft and computer-based technology.

Two recent video works push the manipulation of human form into new spatial dimensions. In *Corner Piece* (2003), footage of a boxer being treated in his corner between rounds is digitally reconstituted to create an illusion of infinite spatial recession where the fighter should be. *Live Evil* (2003) presents a shadowy image of a dancing Michael Jackson split in half and reflected into himself, producing a figure resembling a skeleton or a Rorschach test pattern. This figure is overemphasized and dissolved at once, creating unsettling corporeal entropy. *Corner Piece* intensifies the claustrophobic and frenetic close-up of the boxing corner (with trainers preparing the boxer to return to the ring) with a figure that vacuums space while expanding into it. Jackson's refracted, robotic glide similarly emits bursts of reflection and light that ultimately collapse back into the dark "center" of the figure. The ecstatic body, the agonized body, and the disappearing body coalesce into a single spectral form in Pfeiffer's new representations of the human form.

Paul Pfeiffer's work uncovers and displays a new human being, an entity there and not there, represented yet absent, perpetually on the verge of being uncomfortably present or imminently extinct. He provides a timely reminder that developing and retaining a sense of bodily humanity is critical as we move further into a world of technological facility and representation. Pfeiffer's new bodies morph into one another, mirror themselves or their surroundings, and quiver relentlessly to suggest alternate perspectives on corporeality to correspond with this moment of intensified mechanical progress. Picturing the body in space as an absence or as an over-determined and negotiable presence, he recognizes the human contingency that must exist in even the most hyper-mediated visual forms.