

By Ruslana Lichtzier

## Fleshed Out Bodies

Devening Projects, *Never Not Looking*, April 9 – May 15, 2021

Human touch is a scarce resource in our pandemic-ridden times. Being caressed, poked, brushed against, pushed; all those seemingly quotidian choreographies that bodies perform on each other in dense spaces have become alerting gestures. Devening Projects, which features *Never Not Looking*, a survey exhibition of Kevin Wolff, provides one with a temporary retrieve from our physical deprivation. The exhibition presents a segment of Kevin Wolff's oeuvre; ten mid-to-large scale oil and acrylic paintings are spread between the two gallery spaces, fourteen small photographic and graphite studies hung in a salon-style on one wall in the main gallery space. In Devening's possession are also mid-size unframed graphite drawings that one can see upon request.

The work unveils Wolff, who passed away in 2018 at the age of sixty-three, as an artist who was deeply preoccupied with the human figure. Wolff painted fractured, bound, collapsed, and fleshed bodies and body-like forms in an exquisite manner. His technical mastery over the oil and acrylic paint is perceptible in paintings from the eighties as well as in his final work from 2015; all appear so fresh that one is tempted to smell the works and see if the paint is wet. The technical mastery, which is also present in Wolff's graphite works on paper, does not exude fetishism, despite what one may expect. Wolff treated the surfaces with a certain distance, with chillness that cooled down any presumed gestural gush.

The paintings presented in the exhibition can be divided, roughly, into two groups: yellow and magenta. The yellowish tint brings to mind Gerhard Richter's paintings from the 80s; think of *Candles* (hint: it is the cover of Sonic Youth 1982 album, *Daydream Nation*). The magenta hued paintings give away the feeling of arriving late, too late, to a party that has ended. The space is empty, silenced. In it, a nude male figure is hunched on a stool that fails to hold their weight; in a different painting the figure is suspended from the ceiling, amateur Kinbaku style. The floor caresses the male model's head, that, in response, is shifted to the right.

The yellow and magenta hues denote two photographic gels or filters and not by chance. Though Wolff wasn't a studio photographer, the practice of photographing in the studio was an integral part of his process. The photographs, of models (mostly male) and flesh-colored clay maquettes, initiated a serial, multi-media investigation. The studies trace a circular movement from 2-D to 3-D; a photograph morphs from a graphite drawing to clay maquette to a photograph, then to a drawing and to paintings. In every stage, Wolff unbounds the body from the confinements of the skin, fracturing it, and freeing it from the sealed unity of the human form.

Often, Wolff photographed a male model holding a mirror against their body. A black and white photographic diptych (*studio reference photograph*, digital photograph, 8.5" x 11", collection of David Scott, undated) depicts a man holding a life-size mirror. The resulting picture presents a nude—due to the mirror's angle—is freed from his likeness and his genitalia. Later (or before? It is unclear, Wolff returned to the same subject-matters throughout his career while a substantial number of his studies are undated), in *Man With Mirror* (graphite on paper, 18" x 14.75", 1989), the same figure is represented in a drawing. While the graphite work

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presents technical dexterity, it also reveals its 'smoke and mirrors,' the scopic techne that aided the work's composite: the mirror and the camera.

Three midsize paintings present arms that cease to be tied to a torso (*Outstretched Arm*, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 52", 1991; *Pointed Arm*, acrylic on canvas 36" x 52". 1990; *Salute*, acrylic on canvas 36" x 52", 1990). Instead, they become objects of their own, strange serpents pointing to east and west or past and present. These studies are reminiscent of Claude Cahun's photographic work, where she did not only revolt against the confinements of her verisimilitude and gender, but also fractured and extended her own body (one notable example is *Untitled* (Surrealist hands) from 1939, a photograph of two feminine hands holding two artificial hands, one of a doll the other of a mannequin).

The reference to Cahun is only one of many that one can draw to Wolff. His work cruises freely between different artistic times and spaces, collecting and exuding what it desires. In short, his work is queer and anachronistic. On one hand, it is profoundly modernistic; an orphan child to DADA and surrealism; on the other hand, it is outside of its own time, queering the progression of linearity (it is impossible to draw a linkage between him and the main actors the 1980's, such as Basquiat or Longo; Mark Tansey does come to mind, but the link is faint).

Wolff was not a major figure in the American art scene, perhaps, it is due to him being out of his own time. Nowadays, because of that, the work is in danger of soon to be forgotten; it is doomed to slowly begin to accumulate dust. For us, the gallery-goers, the artists, the curators, the critics, the collectors, and the historians, the exhibition should be read also as a demand to keep artists in the present, past their lifetime; for works of art to keep talking to us from a future that is yet to be unfolded. Arriving too early and too late, the work speaks with patience and demand, despite our current failure, to hear it and write it into history; that is also its fragile force.