

frieze

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Nick Mauss

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'Lymph Est', the first solo show in Berlin of recent work by New York artist Nick Mauss, brought a broadening of scope and scale to the intricate, allusive drawings and paintings first shown in New York some four or five years ago, with their swirling marbled surfaces like vintage endpapers and graphic renderings of turn-of-the-century cultural dandies. Here the seduction factor was turned down a notch or two in favour of an expansion of the white space between pictorial fragments, but the framed works on paper and delicate new sculptures in this exhibition still reeked of another time.

Any number of media may occur within the works on paper; a tissue of watercolour, acrylic, pastel or pencil marks accumulates, suggesting a time of ornate skirting boards and picture frame mouldings, curving banisters and lampposts, black frock coats, white dress shirts and earnest conversation. Claude Debussy is here, as is George Sand, but more often than not the period is conveyed in passing by a jumble of details set adrift amid white expanses, on sheets of paper that are considerably larger than in previous works. While this hasn't led to a change in the scale of the motifs themselves, they pool together, rising like bits of debris to the surface. Sometimes they remain half-submerged: all we can make out is an undulating line, shadowy brushstrokes that suggest a face or a half-formed letter, but it is nonetheless clear that every mark here is a quotation. They may turn up again across the room in another work or be repeated within one drawing. Frame-like devices come up repeatedly and, often incomplete,

suggest a tentative relationship between the marks and their paper support, an awareness of centuries' worth of other such marks – drawings, words, photographs – on similar paper supports. 'I work to put the formation of my sensibility and a trail of influences in the foreground', Mauss has said. But where does this trail lead? His borrowed fragments do not fuse together to form a new whole; they remain independent and mute. The effect is like Cathy Wilkes' elaborate sculptural arrangements, which almost dissolve in attempts to decipher them, or Wade Guyton's paintings, where aesthetic effects are blamed on random technical accident and the artist's self-conscious neutrality constructs a distance from the historical images he borrows.

Mauss' sculptures are materially a mere side-step away from his works on paper, but they not only open up another physical dimension but also enable a conceptual expansion, smartly transforming an elegant drawings show into something less definable. Large, flimsy sheets of aluminium, silk-screened with a convincingly grey-white 'paper' colour and appended with fragmented line drawings or photographic images, are propped up against the wall, roughly folded to stand upright, lie on the floor or are cut and their corners folded over to reveal more imagery printed on the reverse. They behave like paper, and their insubstantiality echoes the drawings' pictorial fragility, but more important is the subtle move away from the walls they enact. Although their three-dimensionality is almost notional, they pick up on the interior spaces represented in the drawings, of staircases or corners, more stage sets than the solid Parisian drawing-rooms they picture, to suggest a theatrical space for the staging of recollection.

On one of the sculptures, lying on the floor, a textual fragment is printed: the first line, printed on the reverse of the aluminium, has been cut around and folded over like a book page to reveal the words – a thin strip undulating like the drawings' many loose lines. The text is taken from a short story by early 20th-century British writer Denton Welch and refers to the exhibition's obscure title: 'I cannot, of course, explain what the words mean. They just came to me one day, and I repeated them over and over again, until they turned into an incantation.' Of course, we apply this quote to Mauss' own work: a dream-like, incantatory, mechanistic approach to art-making where ideas, memories, influences float inadvertently to the surface. An unusually messy drawing hanging nearby, seemingly dragged straight from the studio floor, substantiates this. Brushstrokes try out different paint colours; a schematic scene is repeated upside down; a pencil staircase leads nowhere. By playing the daydreamer, a doodler afflicted with a dandyish ennui, Mauss assumes a detachment from the decisions that occur within his work. A calculated vagueness is at play. In this way his role is as theatrical and self-consciously 'framed' as the works' imagery. Their plucked references call on history to provide a backdrop for an artistic practice now, while the white void in which they float conveys the temporal breach of their impossible cross-century straddle. **Kirsty Bell**