CCA Wattis // Markus Schinwald // By Jackie Im

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Slung around a brass pole, a leg motions coquettishly. Curved and angled just so, the dark wooden leg flirts and beckons. At the CCA Wattis Institute of Contemporary Art, a transmutation takes place. Table and chair legs seduce and 19th Century figures sport metallic appendages and prostheses, wearing their anxiety and neuroses. Markus Schinwald's exhibition at the Wattis is a decidedly bodily affair. His work boldly imagines a kind of animism that blurs the perceived separations between man, object, space, and emotion.

The site-responsive installation stretches across the Wattis' gallery. Divided by pillowy, pristine white "walls" and benches, the room recalls the clinically protective walls of a padded cell. Despite that image looming in the mind, the divisions did not feel overly oppressive. The space they took was enough to disrupt and remind one of one's body moving through space; it is the space insisting upon itself. The walls and the brass poles that accompanied them forced a maze-like navigation, causing some doubling-back to take it all in. There is an overwhelming temptation to reach out and touch, run your hands over the poles and walls, as if a means to encompass space. Politeness and an ingrained sense of gallery decorum kicks in, but I harbour a small regret that I didn't do so anyway.

At a talk recently, San Francisco-based artist George Pfau spoke about zombies as symbolic of man's fear of the failing body. Of a body whose boundaries are not immutable. Through a loss of self, the zombie becomes a replaceable member of a horde, and the decay of the body oozes onto and mixes into its surroundings, becoming permeable.

This notion of the boundless body seems an apt comparison for Schinwald's work. The works in the exhibition encourage contemplation of a body without borders. Or maybe more to the point, a body that is not just human - the body in a headgear, the body in a brass pole, the body in a wooden chair leg. Schinwald's works ask us to consider how we project onto objects personalities, emotions, and significance. Yet these objects are not sentimental. They are not dear because of a former owner or because they symbolize a rite of passage. Rather, there is an unshakable strangeness. These works are at once enticing (seductive, even) but there is also an element of the grotesque - chair and table legs hang out of bags, faces are restrained by head gears - that push and pull to a strange contemplative space.

A text accompanying the exhibition outlines Schinwald's interest in prostheses - in its most basic definition "a technology that joins two disparate parts to create something new." This interest manifests itself perhaps most prominently in a series of altered 19th Century paintings. With a deft eye for detail, Schinwald has painted piercings, surgical masks, orthopedic apparati, neck braces, and so on, onto acquired portrait paintings. The originals have within them a rich history but also a sleepiness, maybe a memory of viewers walking past them in museums in order to get to "the good stuff." But Schinwald's careful appropriation, alterations and additions bring out possible backstories that disturb the buttoned-up figures - to what were these women and men bound? What were their anxieties? The paintings prompt an imagining of these people's psyche and by extension, our own and of those around us.

While the paintings are technically breathtaking, I found myself frequently returning to the table and chair legs. Unlike the paintings and walls, the wooden legs seemed to have a sense of humor about them. Arranged in tantalizing motions, the warm wood of the legs have an easy sensuality. Their personalities are so effective that once you take a few steps outside of yourself, the absurdity of it becomes funny; like that moment when a childhood crush on a cartoon character becomes silly and slightly

embarrassing. The inclusion of this body of work does a great deal, adding a levity that is refreshing and was, for a time, missing from the Wattis' previous programming.

Markus Schinwald's exhibition marks a new trajectory for the Wattis Institute and it's a bold step. Collaboratively organized with SFMOMA's Jenny Gheith for their *New Works* series, the show presents a clarity of vision that is lacking in the Bay Area's institutions. I have often remarked that the best thing about art is its ability to be strange, to do unexpected things. This ability is not often pushed enough, especially within institutional contexts, but I was pleased to see such confounding works at the Wattis.

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