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Michele Rushfeldt: *Rakish Exhibition(ist)* with a Photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe at Cathouse Proper (Review)

02/23/2021 by JONAS ALBRO

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As COVID-19 forces us all to remain separated from our social lives, the desire for convivial interaction grows ever stronger. While not a perfect substitute, sometimes this author finds a gallery visit to be a balm for this state of affairs. Such was the case with my visit to *Rakish Exhibition(ist)* at Cathouse Proper @ 524 Projects, a second-floor space off Court Street in Carroll Gardens. After ascending a narrow staircase and entering a darkened hallway, two pieces greeted me, similar in aesthetic if entirely different in disposition. Squirt resembles the end of a sofa arm, except that exploding from its dimpled black surface is a neatly arranged forest of nails. The nails have been



Rakish Exhibition(ist) sculpture by Michele Rushfeldt with a photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe. Image courtesy of Cathouse Proper and Dario Lasagni.

hammered into the object, but not too deep, suggesting the curve of an abdomen undergoing acupuncture. Meanwhile, its colleague Bit Player hangs from the ceiling across the hall, imposing at first glance but less so once I noticed the bedazzled leather gimp tongue attached to its spindly contours. These pieces and all the rest of the work in the show save one are the creations of Michele Rushfeldt, whose humorous and elegant sculptures engage the aesthetic language of kink and exhibitionism.

Each of these “figures” exhibits a different attitude, evoking scenes of intimacy and provoking slightly guilty feelings of voyeurism in the viewer. Material such as bondage tape, rhinestones, and sex toys are combined with wood, iron, and copper to create sculptures that hint at bodies and wink at the suggestion of

BDSM. *Bi-Catch* leads this motley crew, with its scene-stealing drama and intensity controlling the installation. By contrast, *Balled* is remarkably dainty, *Hooked* seems a tad sinister, and *On All Fours* tends toward morose. All of these works converse energetically with one another, aided by the sensitive and thoughtful curation of Cathouse’s David Dixon. The exception is the one-piece not by Rushfeldt, Robert Mapplethorpe’s *Tulips* from 1988, which sits in the corner emanating razor-sharp melancholy. A brave curatorial choice by Dixon, the inclusion of this work from the late master lends a sense of poignancy to the exhibition. The boundaries of “respectability” Mapplethorpe



Rakish Exhibition(ist) sculpture by Michele Rushfeldt with a photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe. Image courtesy of Cathouse Proper and Dario Lasagni.

crossed have been fully and enthusiastically cast aside by Rushfeldt, who exploits their absence in her work. Sadly, Mapplethorpe is not here to see these revelations, having died young a victim of malign federal neglect in response to a deadly virus. This sadness does not outweigh the slightly awkward joy of Rushfeldt's sculptures however, which are as human as any classical bust (perhaps more) that I have seen. They express themselves well in the airy, light-filled space of Cathouse Proper, which as the setting for an imaginary leather party gives these sculptures the space they need to sparkle. Creative lighting choices further add to the exhibition by maximizing the shadows these works cast, upping their impact and flair. *Rakish Exhibition(ist)* utilizes the sex act as a site not of transgression, but as a reminder of the humor, joy, and trust inherent to human connection.



(R-L) *Squirt*, 2020, nails, rhinestones, liquid rubber, stuffing, on panel, 18"x8"x7" and *Bit Player*, 2020, rhinestones, bondage tape, leather gimp tongue, rubber, steel 12"x2'x1'. Image courtesy of Cathouse Proper and Dario Lasagni.

