

SAN FRANCISCO

Mathew Hale

RATIO 3

In 1974, while Brian Eno was producing the album *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)*, he and artist Peter Schmidt devised “Oblique Strategies,” a set of aphorisms printed on a deck of cards and intended as a resource to guide one’s working methods under the mandates of “productivity.” Anyone who has ever felt creatively blocked will appreciate these prompts, which cultivate the intrinsic unpredictability of intuition and chance—“Honour thy error as a hidden intention,” “Ask your body,” and my personal favorite, “Do the washing up.” In “MA THE WHALE,” British artist Mathew Hale (mounting his first solo show at Ratio 3) embraced such unruliness and its capacity to challenge rational, received forms of knowledge. Like Eno’s dreamy, proto-punk pop, Hale’s work brims with uncanny juxtapositions, Freudian slips, and double entendres. (The exhibition’s title is itself an anagram of the artist’s name and also happens to call to mind Eno’s song “Mother Whale Eyeless.”)

The collages that were on view, all from Hale’s ongoing “MIRIAM” series, 2000–, are densely layered with texts, objects, and images revolving around maternal themes, which are irreverently détourned by way of pornographic imagery and allusions to incest and bestiality. Indeed, nearly every cultural taboo related to the female body is here



Mathew Hale, *Page 71 of MIRIAM'S BODY (detail)*, 2013, mixed media, 61 x 41 x 7". From the series "MIRIAM," 2001–.

desublimated. Yet Hale’s project is more than a mere indulgence in heterosexual male fantasy for its own sake. Employing multiple layers of metaphor, the artist delves into the valences of montage as an inherently “allegorical procedure” (as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh once termed it). Birth is here repeatedly equated with the practice of collage itself—a practice that entails (per Buchloh) the cleaving of signifier from signified, allowing the sign to take on a new life. In *Page 192 of MIRIAM'S BODY*, 2013, we see graphic images of a birthing strewn over a worktable with paper clippings and an X-Acto knife seemingly poised to cut the umbilical cord.

One of the most striking things about these works is the way in which they represent the artist’s mental (and often insistently physical) engagement with his source material. Several of the assemblages show a tabletop view of collage in process, including the standard implements (rolls of tape, Post-it notes, magazines), at once literalizing Leo Steinberg’s notion of the flatbed picture plane and signaling a metaphorical perspective on the medium itself. The act of destabilizing and liberating meaning—a kind of Barthesian *jouissance*—is not pictured here as glibly celebratory; rather, Hale searchingly reflects upon the complicated status of collage today.

Homage to Hans Haacke's Mother, 2013, restages Haacke’s *Oil Painting: Homage to Marcel Broodthaers*, 1982, replacing that work’s painted portrait of Ronald Reagan with a Dada-esque typographical picture of Queen Elizabeth, which is superimposed onto a salacious crotch shot, which is, in turn, topped with the cutout head of a teenage Princess Diana. Hale thus seems to challenge the once-radical uses of montage/collage not only by Haacke’s generation but by subsequent groups of artists who came to the practices of Conceptualism and institutional critique belatedly, and skeptically, only to find themselves likewise assimilated. It is from this doubly removed vantage point that Hale’s ironic “homage” (really more of an antagonistic “yo mama” joke) takes place. And one can’t help but read the artist’s obsessive treatment of the female body in relationship to feminist collage/montage practices in particular. If artists such as Martha Rosler and Dara Birnbaum appropriated stereotypical images of women to critical ends, Hale asks whether strategies derivative of their function today as anything other than another form of repressive desublimation in our hypersexualized media environment.

Similar issues are taken up in the video *Die Münze (The Coin)*, 2009–11, a lyrical slide show of present-day West Berlin (with a voice-over by former Red Army Faction member Astrid Proll) that meditates on, among other things, the obsolescence of both painting and photography within a new digital economy of images. A quote from Herbert Marcuse’s 1955 *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* flashes on the screen, touting the progressive function of memory, especially concerning “forbidden images and impulses.” If Hale mines the repressed histories of technologies and mediums, he refuses the nostalgia that often attends such projects, instead turning the allegorical dimension of collage back on itself—not to shore up the past, but to further fragment and disrupt its freighted history, so that its legacy might be considered anew.

—Gwen Allen