



SALON 94

ARTFORUM, October 2013

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REVIEWS

Jimmy DeSana

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At once anonymous and familiar, the figures populating Jimmy DeSana's performative photographs are stripped of identity, their faces either cropped out of the frame, turned away from the camera, or obscured by objects both commonplace (gauze, motorcycle helmets) and of a

more exotic variety (leather s/m masks). A sense of alienation pervades these images. Yet in this loose survey, the first exhibition of DeSana's work at Salon 94, the inclusion of his portraits of downtown habitués—ranging from such notables as Debbie Harry and William S. Burroughs to more obscure denizens of the scene—adds a foothold of accessibility to his more curious output, and gives today's audiences a sense of the now-faded East Village milieu in which DeSana worked.

Skilled in the art of negation, DeSana staged intimate scenes that tease out the erotic—in *Pants*, 1984, a model arches his muscular, shirtless back under bold lighting—yet the artist routinely undermined and lampooned this sexual content: The model's extremely large pants are filled with stuffing, comically emphasizing his ass and thighs. In this sense, DeSana's work seems to parody Robert Mapplethorpe's deadpan oeuvre. In 1979, DeSana published *Submission*, a photobook poking fun at notions of the body as a sexualized, gendered object. As the title implies, a power dichotomy is at play in the series—the camera assumes the dominant role, forcing the models into the passive “sub” position. The photos—five were on view here—are black-and-white, giving them a self-serious quality, yet, as in his other work, DeSana punctured that effect with dark comedy. In *Masking Tape*, 1978, a latex bodysuit is traded for the household adhesive, with which a male model has been mummified head to toe—scrotum, penis, nipples, and nostrils excluded. Despite occasional comic absurdity, the photographs still retain a beguiling frisson. DeSana also ably mocked the supposed dangers of sexual alterity by allowing it a certain humanity—a melancholy picture of a hog-tied woman in black lingerie and high heels crouched in a refrigerator (empty save for a dozen eggs) exudes pathos and surprising sophistication. In *Television*, 1978, real danger in the form of electrocution threatens the supine and masked nude performer (DeSana himself) balancing a TV on his feet. Through this action, DeSana drew out the allure of mass media but underscored its potential for propagating constricting ideologies.

The introduction of beautifully jarring, chromatic lighting to DeSana's post-*Submission* scenarios amplifies their urgency and defines his work's signature aesthetic: slick and otherworldly yet proudly homemade. Thrown against domestic spaces and active bodies, strawberry reds and lysergic greens reverberate wildly. One such multi-hued image, *Cowboy Boots*, 1984, depicts a nude man in the midst of a one-armed handstand, his four splayed limbs straddling a corner of an apartment, feet and hands covered in tooled-leather cowboy boots. This hybridized body à la Hans Bellmer, not quite an object but a morphing being, defies the behavioral dicta of society. Representing a poignant act of shape-shifting, *Bubblegum (Self-Portrait)*, 1985, an image printed with light-pink dye and made five years before the artist's AIDS-related death, shows DeSana with his cheeks puffed up while blowing a bubble, his oversize shirt and pants bursting at the seams from stuffing. Such a transformation wryly suggests our physical mutability and the unknown extent to which our bodies and selves might evolve—grossly enlarge, wither away.

—Beau Rutland



Jimmy DeSana, *Bubblegum (Self-Portrait)*, 1985. C-print, 16% x 14%.

