

Quaderna

Sunah Choi - Marcus Weber

after the butcher

16 February - 20 April 2019

The title of the exhibition is design history: in the early 1970s, “Quaderna” was the name given to a series by Superstudio, the Florence design and architectural group. The series, which is still available, featured tables and benches laminated in white, marked out with a grid of narrow black lines. For their first joint exhibition, Sunah Choi and Marcus Weber have borrowed the name of this signature piece of post-modern interior design. The word serves as a particularly concentrated example of their shared interest in systems of spatial order, both implicit and explicit. In Italian, quaderna is an invented word, albeit reminiscent of the more common quaderno (notebook). As a product name, it makes reference to a historically well-developed intersection between public architecture (an orthogonal, square-based spatial system), industrial product design (the square grid becomes a post-modern decorative surface pattern for furniture, “ornamentation” of the kind frowned on by classic modernism) and everyday consumption (the quaderno, the squared notebook, an ordinary consumer item, is transposed onto the surface of the Superstudio table). This area of intersection is of great interest to both artists, despite the apparent aesthetic differences in their ways of working.

In this way, a collaboration which began with no particular theme found clear common ground. Choi is an artist whose work – including sculpture and installation, often based on photographs – first focuses on developing an abstract-concrete idiom of objects and materials. These are then positioned as vertical structures and color schemes within the particular exhibition space. Weber, a painter and draftsman trained in cartoon and caricature, works quite differently: he operates, so to speak, a figurative image-creation machine, using it to create a frieze of landscapes, a narrative unfolding horizontally, comprised of several strands of subject matter. His landscapes are painted with oil on paper, which is then laminated onto nettle cloth. In the first instance, they consist of a tectonics of garbage and junk, both two-dimensional and ornamental, identifiable as contemporary images mainly by the brands and logos scattered within them. The underlying surfaces come in varying levels of detail, forming the ground for figures in a variety of proportions. Across Weber’s images, these backgrounds transform, ultimately becoming an artificial undulating landscape, comprised of layers of colored forms. Across this backdrop come hordes of cavorting uniformed figures, in pink, mint-green, lemon-yellow or light-blue, on bicycles or mopeds or in cars, or equipped with a variety of walking aids. A post-heroic, dayglo Battle of Alexander at Issus.

These are caricatures of food delivery couriers, an indispensable contemporary urban figure: this is clear from their bean- or golf-ball-shaped heads and schematic stick-man bodies, frequently groaning under the weight of their load. But it is also visible in their faces, fixed in a performance of bleak resolution. They are distributors, packed into the uniform color of their employers’ brand, very like commodities. Packages on a deadline and bodies pressed by time enter into mimetic relations of mutual dependence: ubiquitous delivery personnel make this relation an everyday sight in the urban environment, an entropic accretion within an urban space that was once public but has now been almost entirely privatized. Marcus Weber’s figures are simply a further concentration of this process, absolutizing the infinite circulation of the desire to consume. But one set of figures within Weber’s series forms an exception: while the golf ball heads also seem to have psychomotor functions, they do not appear to be reading the books, magazines and comics they hold. They are more like “scavengers”, disinhibited salvagers in a dystopian landscape of redemption. Ultimately, delivery can also mean salvation.

Sunah Choi places poles stretching vertically from floor to ceiling in both exhibition spaces. They come coated in either red, blue, green or yellow, reminiscent of the ergonomic pole grips found on buses and trains. These are, first and foremost, simple sculptural elements which lend the space an intuitive rhythm, while also, like Weber's delivery services, making reference to the logic of color coding. In various ways, however, they transcend the utilitarian color codes of urban planners: in this reduced scheme, the poles are individual and singular (every color occurs only once, whereas systems rely on repetition and re-recognition). Pieces of metal fence mesh, in various sizes, have been attached to two of the poles. The mesh is recognizable from the perimeter fences of construction sites, but here – in keeping with the “Quaderna” principle – it has been given a postmodern repurposing, misappropriated as a universal wall grid, onto which can be hung jackets, coats or umbrellas. Choi affirms the mesh's robust utilitarian aesthetic while simultaneously throwing it off balance. This unbalancing is achieved by making stepped outer edges which extend the grid logic (a combination similar to that of a pixelated screen), but above all by cutting round, organic shapes out of the inner grid, creating a series of “second order holes”.

These irregular round incisions in the right-angled grid pattern are a recurring motif in Choi's recent works. They were developed in response to, among other things, the surface-space paradox of a (painted) work by René Magritte. But at no point is the fixed grid simply a technical-functional form. Instead, the topological grid form is primarily recognizable as a remainder, in an almost discreet way; the accidentally expressive takes the upper hand. A third pole does not share this physiognomy – it is the closest thing to a pure basic form here. But then a fourth pole, in a separate space to the rear, again changes the frame of reference: from it hang lemons in an ordinary plastic supermarket net. This fourth pole may thus even approach the order of commodification seen in Weber's pictures; apart from this, the presence of lemons within a former butcher's shop has a certain coherence in and of itself. In the context of the double exhibition with Weber, Choi's verticals occupy a variously coded, aesthetically haptic meta-register. The poles, depending on their decoration and position, fall into different categories: at one and the same time, they are physical supports, a form of semaphore, a mode of spatial orientation, a system of suspension, and to some extent even anthropomorphic measuring devices. Where Weber makes morphological arguments at the margins of the topical, Choi takes the opposite approach, reclaiming something almost physiognomic in her reduced lines, stereometries and grids.

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(Translation: Brían Hanrahan)