

of the businesses typical of each community), they are also about both telling and concealing. I might read Grace Chung's Financial Consultant sign as Chinese-ish, as a Chinese person might also; we both might see it as stereotypical, but he or she will know something about it that I don't. Nevertheless, there is order in this; you sense a surface of things working, of assimilation.

The rogue elements in these objects, however, are the letter-boards, each containing a slightly cryptic message that suggests that not everything is fine and dandy in this multicultural streetscape. The one on Grace Chung's warns: 'Please leave my family alone/whoever you are/deal with me.' Such a message glosses the generic authority of its more fixed counterpart. It is also hand-made, indexing the voice of an individual, some specific person with his or her own trouble. The law firm's sign on one side advertises its practice in family and immigration law, and on the other posts a message, presumably by its proprietor, Mike: 'Leaving law/there is/no love/left'. A comment that says lots about the apparent conflict between private and public spheres.

Lum is now well-known for his rejected billboard piece that deals overtly with immigration, 'There's No Place Like Home', which had been commissioned by the Museum in Progress in Vienna, cancelled because of a political brouhaha, and re-sited on the façade of the temporary building used by the Vienna Kunsthalle. It has now travelled, amongst other cities, to Venice this Summer. Like Lum's earlier works, this one sets simple texts against photographs of people; in this case the juxtapositions present the idea that home is where you are; in effect, the texts give a public voice to individuals. It is hard to see why this would be seditious other than it being simply an issue of who is controlling public dialogue. Lum has made a smaller but similarly interventionist gesture on the board at the Lux Cinema nearby that runs concurrent with this show.

As important as it is that Lum's work is so relevant and able to engage successfully in such a big and current issue, it would be a mistake to read all of it retrospectively through this particular lens. While his own identity as an immigrant-citizen is central to his practice, these things are, by nature, shifting. On some level, we should resist the pull of the topical, and remember the more general – and perhaps more radical – stance his early

work took: Lum's work began as sculptural critiques of Minimalism and its evacuation of content. His so-called 'Enclosed Sofa' pieces from the mid and late 80s made the point that sculpture had cultural as well as aesthetic values; he effectively presented an alternative voice to the dominant one. The really notable thing about Lum's work might be the fact that we can talk about it today almost entirely on the level of subject matter. ■

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■ Dan Flavin

Serpentine Gallery London August 24 to September 23

Especially good in Dan Flavin's semi-retrospective at the Serpentine Gallery is the recreation of his 1973 barrier construction *untitled (to you Heiner, with admiration and affection)*, an all-green, large-scale lightwork which transforms Hyde Park, seen in the windows behind it, into a strange, rose-tinted planet. It is all great: the work's gridded form echoed in the delicate window panes of the Serpentine; the intimate homage to the artist's dealer Heiner Friedrich; the power of the vivid green, the strongest of the fluorescent colours. Robert Morris, Flavin's fellow Minimalist, famously wrote in 1966 of the aspirations of the new sculpture that he wanted every part of it – object, light, space, shape, proportion, size surface – to be inseparable. Here that aspiration is accomplished: the work feels cohesive and limitless, extending up to the lilac reflections of the skylights and later illuminating the night sky. Observe the Serpentine in the evening and it shines an emerald halo. Minimalism is meant to be cold but to see Flavin's art is to be bathed in warm light. Hard-edged? These works have no edge at all, stretching out to infinity at the speed of light. Cool and clinical? This place glows like Las Vegas. And who was it who said that art in the age of mechanical reproduction has no aura? Flavin's machines are all aura, all electric aura.

In David Batchelor's book *Minimalism* (Tate, 1997) he explains that to 'get' Minimalism is to enjoy such contradictions. Minimalism goes soft all the time, turning

Ken Lum
Michael Hasson &
Associates 2001



Dan Flavin
 left
*untitled ('monument' for
 V. Tatlin) 1975*
 right
*untitled ('monument' for
 V. Tatlin) 1975*

decorative and lovely when it is supposed to be lean and mean. But this is not to doubt its real and lasting accomplishment; as Batchelor puts it, 'Minimalism substantially changed what art could look like, how it could be made and what it could be made from'. Wow! And within that very radical, Minimalist moment of invention, Flavin was possibly the most radical of them all.

Today the work struggles to maintain its shocking extremism; in the jewel-like setting of the Serpentine, it's almost gone altogether. As savvy viewers, we have lost the innocent scepticism of critic David Bourdon who, in 1964, slammed Flavin's exhibition by comparing it to the

window display at a nearby electrical supply shop – as if that were a bad thing. It is more likely these days that, in seeing an ordinary row of fluorescent tubes lining a school corridor, we gasp, 'Hey, looks like a Flavin!' The works may produce a mechanical aura at the flick of a switch, but they accumulated an art aura as well, especially as the installations became bigger and more monumental. Flavin wanted his works to look 'dumb-anonymous and inglorious' but, like Warhol's soup cans, they've failed to maintain their nothingness, gaining gravitas by the kilowatt hour. On the plus side, what the works have lost in revolutionary anti-artness they

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have gained in old-fashioned formal beauty. We can now appreciate the subtle washes of colour on the walls and the floor; the shade and shadow of the metal fixtures, all lined up like the notches on a classical pediment; the inexhaustible experimentation in his combinations of long fluorescent bulbs – giving a new spin to the words ‘test-tube’ – especially evident in the many ‘monuments’ to V. Tatlin’ which occupy the rotunda.

Curator Michael Govan’s straightforward installation, mixing simple themes with chronological order – from his very first *the diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)*, 1963, to *untitled (for Ad Reinhardt) 2d*, 1990 – belies the confidence of a critic who has a long and loving familiarity with the work. The only disappointment is the absence of the circular white fluorescent bulbs, the most gratifyingly domestic and suburban of his works. This is only the second time a museum exhibition of Flavin’s work has been mounted since his death in 1996, and in the ethereal atmosphere of the show one senses throughout the presence of Flavin’s ghost. The titles, dedications to Donald Judd, Henri Matisse and others, continue to express the artist’s affection for these friends and influences. One almost hears Flavin’s voice describing his ideal gallery space: ‘a spatial container ... [which] would not restrict [the work’s] act of light except to enfold it’. The terms he chose are important: light performs an ‘act’, like a living thing; it is ‘enfolded’, nurtured and held rather than simply reflected. Flavin thought of his lights almost as if they were alive; even in this posthumous show the works pulse with life. ■

Gilda Williams is a writer and Commissioning Editor for contemporary art at Phaidon.

■ Katharina Fritsch

Tate Modern London September 7 to December 9

It is hard not to leave Katharina Fritsch’s first major show in Britain without a disturbing sense of sterility. The sculptures, drawings and paintings are executed with such a tight measure of control and precision that the chaos, whimsy and spontaneity associated with creativity are batted down into harsh submission. Corporate uniformity, commercial kitsch and fear of what cannot be contained have streamlined messy experience into bland identikits of reproduced memory, fantasy and belief. Where society had once released collective anxieties through seasonal rites, customs and folklore, shown in superlative harmony in the ‘Lexicon Drawings’, secular individualism and commodification of tradition have now rendered these impulses helpless.

There is nothing malevolent or even mildly spooky about *Witch’s House and Mushroom with Four Balls*. Its lines are stark and cleanly designed. The red mushroom, a powerful hallucinogen, is cutely benign. The crystal balls are opaque. The witch, revered and punished for her superhuman powers, is absent, her domain emptied of meaning. A fairytale set by Ikea.

Fritsch’s use of scale is one of her distinctive successes. In *Man and Mouse*, a giant mouse sits on the chest of a sleeping man, like a stubborn emissary from a dream world that cannot be tamed and nullified. Its inescapable presence conjures hope. The combed texture of the mouse fur and the plumped pure white seductiveness of the duvet and pillow are set against one

another exquisitely. It recalls the putative medieval torture of women who were treated to a mouse or rat placed in a box on their naked bellies until the rodent ate its way out. Some say that this practice engendered female fear of mice. Fritsch inverts the sex of the tortured soul, giving the mouse the role of a female avenger – very pleasing.

In *Monk, Doctor, Dealer*, three slightly over-sized figures stand in a triumvirate of strange powerlessness. The doctor and monk have failed. The monk is a black void, the doctor, a skeleton in a PVC-like coat administering death, while the dealer of money, art or drugs is all flocked red and endowed with the cloven hoof of the devil. All three represent our attempts to negotiate an understanding of immortality and death – a role once performed by primitive myth.

Elephant, the life-size sculpture of a stuffed elephant from a natural history museum painted in a glaucous colour, evokes the ancient story of the dying god or king, mute and imploring. Elevated on a plinth so that it is almost crushed up against the ceiling, it recalls the way the wild has been made domestic by museum collectors and stands in for the way the artist herself is trapped into the confines of the white walls.

Company at Table is less successful. Thirty-two identical male figures sit at a long table, covered with a folksy red and white plastic tablecloth. The individual surrendered to corporate branding is stripped of, say, Magritte’s wit. Designed to invoke the nightmarish dissolution of self, it collapses into numb, imperturbable overstatement. *Child with Poodles* also seems heavy-handed. Four concentric circles of miniature black poodles surround a white infant lying on a golden star. Increasingly in the West, like highly pampered pets, we congregate around the next discovery of spiritual truth. The chaotic pagan elements of belief are constrained into a tidy, lifeless form once more.

Katharina Fritsch
Witch’s House and Mushroom with Four Balls 1999

