

SHAHRYAR NASHAT

GALLERIA S.A.L.E.S. ROME

Review by Ida Panicelli
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Shahryar Nashat investigates and questions the fetishization inherent in the display of works of art in museums, and, more broadly, the mechanisms for the presentation of art and the opulence of its symbols, rich with political and economic significance. In various articulations, his work reflects on the concept of dominance—that of the artwork, architecture and museum institutions over the viewer, but also the subtler power of one individual over another inherent in seduction. The terse, formal manner of his photographs and videos heightens the dichotomy between a conceptual coolness and a warm and sensual physicality.

The subject of the photographic works *Downscaled Upscaled 1* and *2*, both 2011, is the plinth; each image shows two plinths identical in all but size, the smaller atop the larger. These cold, self-referential masses relate nothing about any sculpture they may have supported. Like empty reliquaries, they no longer represent anything but themselves, inconsequential details of a broader allegorical discourse. In the absence of the work of art, the base is a mute signal. And yet it is the indicator of an “apparatus” comprising all those effective strategies of representation that dominant powers have used over the centuries, from the Roman Empire to fascism by way of the pomp of the Baroque courts—strategies based on the formidable political force intrinsic to narration through artworks. This reflection on the precariousness of symbols of power seems more relevant than ever today, when entire nations are rebelling against their tyrants, in part thanks to the Internet, which has enabled the popular imagination to bypass official channels to make room for the direct communication of needs and desires. When the rhetorical symbols of political authority become obsolete and are demolished, only empty pedestals remain.

Photoscaled 1, 2, and 3, all 2011, show minimal marble bases on which rest small, vertical brass shapes similar to hinges, used to secure sculptures to their pedestals. These stand against

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three different backgrounds—yellow, cyan, and magenta— which imbue the images with a glamour that contrasts with the silent coolness of the objects. Again, the work of art is evoked in absentia, soliciting reflections on the uncertain destiny inherent in its fragility, or indeed on its mere survival.

In a totally different register, the videos *Mud*, *Torso*, and *Fruit*, all 1996-2011, scanned from Super 8 to digital, are brief fragments of an amorous and sensual discourse whose subject is the male body: bare feet that move in mud, a lathered body in the shower, the mouth of a young man eating strawberries. Nashat raises the temperature of his images to boiling point, in *Mud* and *Fruit* with the help of voice-over that manifests the homoerotic impulse that has generated the work. The focus is on details, never on the whole. The body itself is elusive; even the face of the young man eating strawberries is shot only partially, in close-up focus on the damp, red mouth. Nevertheless the explicit sensuality of these three distinct fetishistic expressions of desire hides the limitations of the human condition: our awareness of the unattainability of the other. In approaching both artworks and human beings, complete understanding elude us. As Roland Barthes made clear in *A Lover's Discourse*, both seducer and seduced are involved in a power game in which the other may be defined only by the pain and pleasure that arises from their mutual indecipherability. Though we are pushed by erotic tension to avidly desire and scrutinize the other, it remains unknowable in its entirety.

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