Tom Morton

The sculptures of Nicolas Deshayes are preoccupied with surfaces — where they begin, where they end, and what meaning they might carry. These works are not quite, it should be pointed out, an exercise in the kind of postmodern critique of the commercial world’s suppression of depth offered up by, say, Frederic Jameson or Even Better Than the Real Thing (1991) era U2 (‘We’ll slide down the surface of things…’). There’s something determinedly twenty-first century about their business with planes and skins; they have one eye on the frictionless aluminium casing of a MacBook Air, and the other on the crisp and craggy potato topping of a gastropub shepherd’s pie. These are sculptures about taste, and authenticity, and how these things wind around the form and content of public life. They are also about a kind of excess materiality, about the consequences of soliciting consumer and other desires.

In Deshayes’ Back to the Drawing Board (1, 2, and 3) (all works 2009), we are presented with three low, uniform oblong tables of vaguely office-y or institutional type. Each has been covered with loose leaves of black construction paper, and supports a clear sheet of vacuum-formed acrylic that appears, with its crinkles and swooping curves, to have been designed on the computer screen of a minor acolyte of Zaha Hadid or Frank Gehry. Into the topological folds of these sheets, Deshayes has poured the dregs of a café latte, the liquid’s temperature unaltered by a few bobbing resin ice cubes. One of these compositions (and they are compositions, busy with balance and contrast) also features a plastic drinking straw in immediately recognisable Starbucks green. What’s suggested here is a very contemporary
type of creativity: tech-driven, caffeine-fuelled, and culturally rather rootless. If these rigid plastic landscapes suggest architecture, is it the roof of a PFI hospital in the British North East, or a velodrome in Vancouver, a contemporary art museum in Shenzhen, or a shopping mall in Abu Dhabi? What difference does it ultimately make? Perhaps, though, we should read them not as notional buildings but rather shed skin, an unstable surface that reminds us that all objects, our own bodies included, eventually wear away to dust.

The introduction of what looks like organic liquid onto a surface also occurs in Deshayes’ Public Work (1 and 2), but here the suggestion is not of cold coffee but of hot jets of piss. First exhibited in the Peckham Multiplex car park in South London, they consist of two stainless steel forms, one a rhomboid, one a shallow curve, hung at crotch height. While they nod to the sculptures of Donald Judd and Robert Morris, they also have about them the undeniable feel of the public urinal, a fact only compounded by Deshayes’ introduction of translucent splash marks on to their surfaces. But if these are pissoirs (and their original placement in a concrete car park, favourite spot of the casual urinater, supports this), they are barely functional, sacrificing as they do the hygienic stuff of guttering and plumbing to pure sculptural form. We might interpret these works as an exploration of the consequences of allowing aesthetics to prevail over public good, or into the strange, corporeal shame we experience in the face of objects seemingly free from the burdens of excrement and rot. (Is manufacturing and consuming such items, we might ask, the crowning perversity of our species?) Perhaps, in the end, these works are about our inability to live with abstractions, whether forms or ideas. Our own particularity exerts pressure, and we will always, at some point, need relief.

The archival inkjet prints, Supplement (1) and Supplement (4), present Deshayes’ own studio recreations of food photography from weekend newspaper supplements, and employ all the inorganic ingredients — shower gel, wood stain, motor oil — of the food stylist’s art. There’s a discrepancy here between the dishes’ apparent and actual components, between the prompt to desire and the thing desired, which is further complicated by Deshayes’ mounting of his prints on aluminium supports resembling open magazines. There are at least five orders of simulation in play here, perhaps more, and the point seems not to shuffle through them in search of a reality principle, but rather to speculate why lifestyle journalism (or indeed the whole system of capitalist representation) places such a high premium on authenticity when it can’t possibly deliver it to us. One answer, at least, is that its absence causes us pain. This is not surface damage, but as Deshayes’ work suggests it is something experienced deep beneath the skin.

Nicolas Deshayes — Tom Morton