

# frieze

## Matthew Monahan



### Modern Art, London, UK

In Michael Taussig's recent book *What Color Is The Sacred?* (2009) the American anthropologist identifies cultural instances of both chromophobia (an aversion to overt displays of colour) and chromophilia (a love of colour). Taussig uses this opposition to contrast sombre Northern European religious art with the exuberance of Southern European and non-Western devotional images. Matthew Monahan's exhibition at Modern Art seemed to both stage this opposition and break it down, his sculptures and etchings alluding repeatedly to the conventions of Western religious painting – incorporating saints, anchorites, seraphim and madonnas. This is emphasized by 'Pressings', a series of large prints depicting a serene face emerging from a flowing, crumpled ground: an allusion to the Ur-text of Christian art, the Veronica or cloth which bathed Christ's face and on which that face blazoned itself. What was immediately striking, however, was the narrow range of colours used: grey, black, cream and silver.

But this is only half the story. The title of one piece, *Odalisk* (all works 2009), with its connotations of a sumptuous 19th-century orientalism, hints at another agenda. Thus while the exhibition obtained a certain overall consistency through its restricted palette, a much more baroque, overtly sensuous coloration sporadically asserted itself. This is most apparent in *Ponce de Léon* which, with its title reference to the Portuguese explorer of the new world, suggests a theme of cultural exchange if not expropriation. An emaciated figure, powdered in orange pigment, stands upright in a vitrine, behind him a bright scroll of yellow and orange, his head bandaged with a red ratchet strap. At his feet lies another

figure, this one gilded and golden. In the context of the more soberly coloured work on show the effect is startling, like a tarot card turning up in a sheaf of Rorschach tests, but the piece speaks to the other sculptures in intriguing and revealing ways. Hence in *The Magpie Dirge*, a massive sculpted head is again bandaged, this time with red ratchet tape and a thick silver bubble wrap. In *St. Julian and Wall* meanwhile another wounded head appears, this time a vaguely Asian image, iconoclastically split down the middle. In this case colour is present only as trace, glimmers of gilding and rich flecks of paint, as if the head has been lying for years on the floor of a ruined temple or lost in the vault of an ethnographic collection.

Yet Monahan refuses to simply hybridize a notionally austere Northern European tradition with the exuberance of the South and the East, for the show as a whole is also clearly concerned with notions of packaging, marketing and forms of display. Hence it is difficult to say whether the head in *The Magpie Dirge* is bandaged, wearing a Tuareg headdress, or simply not yet fully unwrapped. Similarly the ratchet strap that wraps the figure's head in *Ponce de Léon* is repeated in the straps that stabilize the fragile vitrines in which many of the sculptures are exhibited. It is thus often difficult to establish whether the splashes of colour which animate these otherwise lugubrious pieces refer to traces of the sacred, to the exigencies of international shipping, or to the conventions of the museum. In this way while Monahan's show delivers the frisson of otherness that comes from juxtaposing forms of the sacred, its true pathos lies in the suggestion that such experiences are thoroughly permeated by the altogether more secular passions of the market.

**Conor Carville**