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Walead Beshty : Wallspace

Walead Beshty, ***The Phenomenology of Shopping (Filene's, Danbury Mall, CT)***, 2001–2003, color photograph face-mounted to Plexiglas on display box, 68 x 47¾". From the series "The Phenomenology of Shopping," 2001–2003.

WALEAD BESHTY
WALLSPACE

Almost two decades after Barbara Kruger's *UNTITLED (I SHOP THEREFORE I AM)*, 1987, channeled Descartes's *cogito* into an iconic indictment of unrestrained American consumerism, Walead Beshty has put a different Cartesian spin on a critique of contemporary capitalist society. His show "The Body-Body Problem" was a smart, engagingly droll examination of identity and desire in a time where even our deepest emotional longings are sublimated into commodity-love.

As he did in his recent special-project show at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Beshty—a young, London-born, Los Angeles–based artist enjoying his first solo show in a New York gallery—centered his examination of knowledge and existence around America's ubiquitous shopping malls, with their endless appliance showrooms, houseware departments, and toy stores. In a pair of large photographs from his 2001–2003 series "The Phenomenology of Shopping," these sites become stages for mordant performative disruptions, as the artist inserts himself—literally—into the carefully conceived artificial environments of commercial merchandise displays. Both taken in department stores, one depicts Beshty kneeling limply at the edge of a sales-floor bed, his head stuffed entirely inside a pillowcase; in the other, he's sprawled on the ground, his face again obscured because he's thrust it into the circular door of a washing machine. The images are entirely consistent with Beshty's characteristically wry mode of address—attired in the nondescript jeans-and-sweatshirt costume of the weekend warrior, he is a consumer Everyman, swooning to the power of the product, a willing prey being swallowed whole by the seductive charisma of the wondrous things that surround him.

The repeated penetrative gestures at the heart of these subversive acts evoke an erotics of consumption, an angle that Beshty's newest photographic project makes abundantly clear. In works like *Hold on to Your Love, Touching me, Touching you*, and *Do You Feel Love?* (all 2004), serial photographs show the artist's disembodied hand making hilariously inappropriate contact with various items on store shelves—groping a basketball, probing some sort of pink nozzle on a children's toy, diddling the underside of what appears to be a stuffed animal—or poking and caressing assorted orifices in walls and floors, like a horny architectural fetishist. In one particularly memorable image, Beshty spreads the flaps along the zipper on a piece of tarpaulin to reveal a padlock glistening like something from a Suze Randall centerfold. Interspersed throughout were works from his "Do You FEEL Me?" series, 2004, wall-hanging pieces in which Beshty renders in lettering excised from fields of golden glitter snippets of yearning pop lyrics, by Simply Red, Peter Gabriel, the Beatles, and others, including Bonnie Tyler's cornball classic "Total Eclipse of the Heart." Taken together they paint a picture of misplaced craving, of thwarted attempts to connect, of earnest affection ill spent and unrequited.

Though Beshty himself figures, in some form, in many of his works—one notable exception here being *Paired Adonis*, 2002, which features a large-scale photo of a lithe male nude twinned with his stereoscopic double—he rarely reveals his face, directing the viewer's attention instead toward the consumerist accoutrements from which, the artist suggests, we all build our identities. This purposeful anonymity is taken to its furthest extreme in the artist's *Absent Self-Portrait #3 (Age Progressions)*, 2002, in which Beshty had a forensic artist digitally "age" eight childhood photographs of himself to twenty-five years old, his own age at the time he made the work. The resulting suite is an uncanny collection of almost-but-not-quite Waleads—the artist as thick-necked farm boy, jowly businessman, vacant jock. With its mix of class picture goofiness and creepy, missing-children bulletin overtones, *Absent Self-Portrait* is a representative example of the range of Beshty's program—a welcome brand of jocoserious conceptualism that frames an astute critique of the self in the age of mechanical reproduction.

—*Jeffrey Kastner*

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