

Mike Cooter & The Hex

Moot, Nottingham, UK

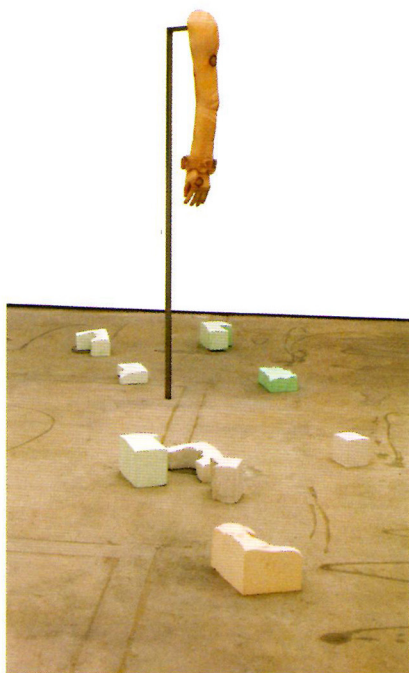
Taking as its starting point both a cult film and the self-mythologizing of an entrepreneurial 18th-century New Englander, Mike Cooter and The Hex's exhibition 'Production Still' followed how plots are shaped and histories are made – or unmade – by sculptures, props, relics and replicas. Moot, an artist-run project that has been open as a gallery since October 2005, is now in its second home, a tall brick building just outside Nottingham city centre, and, fittingly for a show that dealt in accrued meanings and unexpected transpositions, the exhibition was originally commissioned for Moot's previous space. Cooter was invited by East London-based curatorial duo The Hex (Jason Dungan and Maria Zahle), and the space between the three works he presented was demarcated by a number of cast-plaster place-markers that overlaid the gallery with the footprint of the Hackney flat in which the pair usually commission work. This implied domestic setting was a notional point of origin, quickly unifying an engaging exhibition in which economy thankfully didn't equal reticence and pared-back objects were often more than they seemed.

'Production Still' traced what little remains of the self-titled Lord Dexter, an eccentric American businessman now chiefly remembered – if at all – for his endearingly misguided attempts at social climbing, which included commissioning a sculpture garden in which he placed himself alongside Napoleon Bonaparte and William Pitt. (He also once announced his own death to see who would come to his funeral.) Cooter had →

a fragment of the original wooden sculpture, an oversized left arm, carved again in wood and suspended from a thin metal bracket in the middle of the gallery (*Carved Arm (after Joseph Wilson (1779–1857), for Timothy Dexter, Newburyport, 1801–2)*, 2008), while on the wall hung four framed examples of the evolving appendix from Dexter's self-published memoir (*The Last Page*, 2008). Following jibes about the pamphlet's complete lack of punctuation, Dexter obligingly added 13 lines of punctuation marks so that readers 'may peper and solt it as they plese' [sic]. This page changes slightly in each edition, as the editors exaggerate – for comic effect – the extent of Dexter's indignant riposte.

In a work shown as part of 'Nought to Sixty' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, last year, Cooter considered the unexpected entangling of a statue of the Maltese Falcon with conservative judicial nominee Robert Bork, from whose failed Supreme Court nomination the slang 'to bork' was coined (*Original Intent*, 2007–8). At Moot was a schoolboyish copy of another prop, this time from Jacques Tourneur's 1942 film *Cat People*, a small clay knight (the fictional King John of Serbia, in fact) impaling a panther. The oddness of Cooter's objects is striking – what was a Serbian king doing killing panthers? What's so special about falcons from Malta? The answer to these questions is obvious: nothing. Alfred Hitchcock dubbed such contrivances 'MacGuffins', essentially arbitrary plot devices that hurry the action along but mean little else. With restraint and wit, 'Production Still' considered what happens when these nothings are given form, when a prop or whimsy gains an unplanned second life after the intended initial significance is all but forgotten.

Sam Thorne



Mike Cooter & The Hex
'Production Still'
2008
Mixed media
Installation view