

frieze

'Donald Moffett'
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Since the 1980s, American artist Donald Moffett has been the exponent of a particularly streamlined form of political art. A veteran of 1980s AIDS activism – he was a founder member of the artist group Gran Fury – his work sublimates a righteous ire within tightly regulated formal boundaries; for Moffett, painting is used as a kind of aesthetic compressor concentrating the very real concerns and complexities of identity politics and human sexuality into a hard-hitting, high-tension visual experience.

'Fleisch' (Meat), his exhibition at Stephen Friedman Gallery, was a case in point. Moffett exhibited a series of stark, monochrome canvases, each immaculately customized with zips or surgically precise sutures. These ornamental scarifications of the picture plane formed compositional motifs that were rigidly geometric and exquisitely sexualized. At the foot of Lot 031507 (Oolo) (all works 2007), for instance, Moffett placed two small black circles either side of a vertical, bright orange zip, above which hovered a small hole – the vivid tone of the zip searing across the dull beige canvas like a heat-seeking missile toward its target. Similarly, Lot 011707 (loo) stitches the same cock and balls motif into a dirty unprimed canvas, its surface hovering between the abstract, paint-spattered macho heroics of Antonio Tapies and grubby bedsheet stains. These rather literal, figurative allusions set other more visually ambiguous works into disturbing oscillation – is the zipped star shape in the centre of Lot 011107 (7b1) a sphincter or a starfish? A piece of fetish wear waiting to be peeled open – it's unprimed linen body as haptically tempting as a piece of roughed-up moleskin or velour – or simply a seven-pointed geometric composition?

Whether flayed, splayed, punctured or incised, Moffett's suite of paintings – almost all claustrophobically encased within thick, heavy frames – unfolded their surfaces, laying bare their objecthood and bluntly refusing any reading in conventional painterly terms. Following the exhibition title's corporeal lead, the works began to demand a distinctly darker reading. Each composition tugs and pins its own derma as if participants in a subcultural rite of attraction, inviting penetration – both optical and physical – through their surfaces. Lot 020207 (O) comprises a cotton duck canvas painted white on its underside. Fitted with zippers radiating inwards from each of the four corners of the almost-square stretcher frame, the canvas is peeled back like wings on a simple piece of origami, and held with nails set through gimlets fixed into the apex of each fabric flap. Against the white gallery wall, the painted canvas reverse forms a diamond shape, the corners of the frame poking out from between each point of the pinned cotton. Lot 020207 (O) gapes wide open, reduced – if it were not for the optical effect of the white painted areas hazily blurring with the wall it hangs on – to its bare, skeletal structure; a kind of painterly auroboros, eating its own pictorial space in order to become its own frame. The fabric is splayed and nailed to the wall with such care and attention that, like a sexual submissive, it almost could have deliberately invited violence against itself.

The political charge to Moffett's work lies in the sheer precision of their manufacture; the machine-like stitchings (although these are, in fact, handmade), the delicate way a pearlescent zipper toggle hangs from the end of its fastenings, the crisp opacity of zinc-white or tar-black paint against coarse linen. His works suggest an extreme form of commoditization through scopophilia; a pinning down, scarifying and branding that demands the object of its desire to stay where it is so it can just keep on looking. This group of works evokes a world free of the kaleidoscope of sensual, polymorphous sexual expression that makes up humanity, instead describing one of dominion over others; a form of desire that has transgressed its need for perpetual teasing or ritual conjugation and passed into an altogether darker realm of violence. Passion cannibalizing itself, desire taken to the point where self-destruction is the only road to satiation