

# A Review of Jean-Luc Moulène's TORTURE CONCRETE at Miguel Abreu Gallery (September - October 2014)

by BrendanCByrne

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A gas bladder sac, tied off like a balloon, hangs encrusted with the bones of something like a horse. Two uncompleted human hands seem an afterthought to a dripping object resembling an organic drone; its orifices show an interior hollow scalloped and serrated. New kinds of hipbones the color of artificial flowers flecked with rust. A huge flashbulb, blown, its surface mottled. A B&W photo of sea anemones spontaneously growing on a kitchen countertop. Monstrous humanoid concrete heads lay on folded mats, presented almost ceremonially. Their eyes are stitched together; their ears are vestigial; hurricanes swirl their skin. The heads, like all of the objects and images in Jean-Luc Moulène's *Torture Concrete*, are unlabeled (save for the gallery brochure), adding to the feeling that you are wandering through the guts of some alien spaceship, viewing the specimens.

Perhaps the reason for this is that Moulène, according to the gallery copy, views "three-dimensional materials and photography as... tools, articles of use" and seeks to relay "tensions implicit to materials" by following a series of nebulous "protocols", otherwise described as "certain autonomous directives". This is only a taste of the theory attendant to *Torture Concrete*. Stronger stuff inhabits Reza Negarestani's eponymous essay accompanying the exhibition. Like his 2008 theory-fiction *Cyclonopedia* (described by Jonathan McCalmont as presenting "Theory as being intellectually equivalent to the rigorous metaphysical falsehoods of medieval theologians", Negarestani's essay features jags of brilliant writing nested inside dense, complex post-Kantian metaphysics. Here Negarestani describes Moulène "following protocols": "[t]he knot, the body, the head, the hole, the noose and the sealed surface are different instantiations of the same generative principle of formal cruelty through which thought does something to the material in order for the material to forcefully imprint its dynamic influences upon thought... each art object... captures a variation or a phase of this transcendental torture..."

Negarestani is closely associated with the many-tentacled contemporary philosophical movement known as Speculative Realism. Every piece on SR either throws up its hands in dismay at, or enters into, the (anti)movement's predilection for insider argot, willful obfuscation, and constant reinterpretation of its tenets. Instructive is that slow, sage Wikipedia's assertion that "[leading figure] Ray Brassier denied that there is any such thing as a 'speculative realist movement'". Diarmuid Hester, in the introduction to his 2011 interview with Graham Harman characterizes the varied SR philosophers as similar in a "mutual resistance to perceived anthropocentric and subjectivist biases in philosophy and their shared appreciation for the weird".

This focuses on "the weird" spawned both a SR splinter faction and a text which illuminates *Torture Concrete*: Harman's 2012 book *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*. Here Harman posits H.P. Lovecraft as the prose predecessor of what Harman calls Object Oriented Ontology, a SR-related movement which, contra-Kant, regards the universe from a non-human perspective. Harman focuses on Lovecraft's (in)famous prose, specifically his descriptions of cthonic horrors. Harman quotes Lovecraft's first description of Cthulhu: "If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing... but it was the general outline of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful..." (Italics and ellipses Harman's.) Harman emphasizes the "indirect" and "de-literalizing" nature of the description, calling the style "cubist, for a lack of a better term". "Normally," Harman writes, "we feel no gap at all between the world and our descriptions of it. But Lovecraft unlocks a world dominated by such a gap..." These gaps in Lovecraft's narrators' descriptions of eldritch horror are necessary, since their human minds cannot process the inhuman nature of the beings they have glimpsed. As fellow SR traveler Mark Fisher puts it, "After (1) the declaration of indescribability and (2) the description comes (3) the unvisualizable."

In one of *Torture Concrete*'s three non-photos, *Orange Dur* (2010) a long, veined head lays on a green, blue, and orange couch. The image is deeply quotidian at first, but you soon realize you are looking for a face that isn't there, the piece becomes horrifying, the huge, tributary vein the focal point of disgust. This, then, would be "the unvisualizable" visualized.

Fisher defines The Weird in opposition to Freud's definition of the uncanny as "the strange within the familiar", as that which is "out of". Fisher here references the Lovecraft tales 'The Color Out of Space' and 'The Shadow Out of Time' here, but he's more interested in the "notion of things 'cut out' of their proper place" and the idea of "the beyond." Fisher: "The shadow out of time is, in part, a shadow of that which is beyond time." This "beyond time" synchs up with Lovecraft's idea of a "cosmic outsidersness", the wider universe in which humanity is an aberration. Eugene Thacker, also associated with the SR movement, attempts to define this "cosmological" perspective in his 2011 text *In The Dust of This Planet*, which

distinguishes between the “world-for-us”, as opposed to the world that “bites back”, the “world-in-itself”, which “constitutes a horizon for thought, always receding just beyond the bound of intelligibility”, into a “spectral and speculative world” which Thacker terms “the world-without-us”, both “impersonal and horrific”.

To reduce this cosmological perspective sheerly to climate change anxieties and the derivative apocalyptic scenarios which now drive our cultural industry would be to ignore the deeper anxiety generated by the triumph of empiricism which both Lovecraft and Moulène access: that we live in a fundamentally inhuman universe.

*The author is grateful for the assistance of Diarmuid Hester in parsing the shifting planes of SR.*

(For some reason I was unable to get links working in tinyletter. Apologies to those who like to click.)