

ARTFORUM

BERLIN

Per Billgren and Leigh Ledare

RECEPTION

“Something Might Have Been Better Than Nothing . . .” was the suggestive title of a two-person exhibition by Per Billgren and Leigh Ledare, childhood friends from Seattle and former art school classmates at Columbia University. It sounds like an oblique reference to the detritus of adolescent yearning (or its nostalgic sublimation) inhabiting the portraits and landscapes of a shared biography. Ledare, thrust into the spotlight several years ago with a racy body of work (photographs, videos, and the 2008 book *Pretend You’re Actually Alive*) that perversely complied with his ex-ballerina/ex-model mother’s desire to document her sexed-up postmenopausal persona for posterity, has subsequently shifted his camera away from his maternal muse while remaining faithful to the conceptual rigor and affective investment that complicated his images beyond their shock value. Staged alongside Billgren’s more muted photographs and sculptures, Ledare’s depictions of sexual desire and value exchange revealed a broad interest in how people perform identity.

Common to both artists’ trajectories is a return home to renegotiate the past, a slippery operation that lies somewhere between emotional catharsis and the opportunity for artistic license. Billgren’s *The New Tastemakers*, 2011, shows empty interiors of a middle-class condominium complex shot furtively by the artist while he was employed as a maintenance worker—the work recalls Sophie Calle’s *L’Hôtel*, 1981, but is less invasive, more detached. The coauthored, diaristic essay that accompanies the exhibition evokes the melancholic smell of American suburbia experienced by Billgren as an adolescent “unwillingly” arriving in a new country; he posits as its visual equivalent an abject inventory of unkempt beds and sofas, wall-to-wall carpeting, and flat-screen TVs. Other objects attest to the escapist impulses of the absent owners: framed pictures of exotic locales, a collection of antique brooches, a well-stocked liquor rack. The sculpture *Under the Watchful Eye of a Scrutinous Superior*, 2011, evidences further breaches of the worker’s contract: It incorporates two cardboard boxes that seem to be from a makeshift nightstand shown in one of the photographs, presumably lifted in an unsupervised moment.

One imagines that Ledare’s mother, Tina Peterson, must have lived in a similar setting. His photograph *Mother’s Living Room #1*, 2004, shows a space rendered dysfunctional through being crammed with several decades’ worth of clothing, objects, and other props from a double life constructed out of frustration; in a context-specific installation (untitled and undated), several pages from a 1968 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* featuring Tina as a svelte young model were mounted on a coffee table fitted with glass and covered with empty beer bottles, a candy wrapper, and other refuse from the opening reception, as if to insist on documentary value rather than artistic objecthood. Similarly, five of the ten framed photographic works comprising Ledare’s 2008 “Personal Commissions” series—portraits of the artist posing as instructed by women whose personal ads he answered—were placed on the floor and stacked against the wall; you had to get down on your knees to flip through them, assuming a vantage point consistent with the horizontality of Billgren’s photographs, which were incorporated faceup into objects lying directly on the floor. (In contrast, *Collector’s Commissions [Thea Westreich]*, 2008, was hung vertically on the wall and shows Ledare, in a Pollockian gesture, preparing to take a piss between a Cindy Sherman and a Christopher Wool.) It’s no wonder that the notably gendered depictions of male sexuality in “Personal Commissions” have a particular appeal to female viewers, as Reception’s cofounder Christine Heidemann remarked to me. Yet they are portraits not so much of the artist as of the women he commissioned to make them, their fantasies reflected in the erotic stances of the sitter, and in the objects and interiors that also speak of those desires.

—Michèle Faquet

