



ALEX FROST

THE DANGEROUS SUPPLEMENT

The end of middle class civilisation hangs around the sculptures of Alex Frost like an invisible film. Large mosaics, created with broken ceramic tiles, form effigies, wall-based murals or rounded sculptures, with an odd ceramic crackle that forces one to imagine them being dug up and discovered, after we are dead and gone. And if an archaeologist were to discover these items, having gently chiselled away the dirt, and brushed and blown off the dust, what would they discern from these objects, the specifically British culture that they are from, and its signs and symbols?

✓ Frost's recent sculptures, such as those included in a recent 2008 exhibition 'Compassion Fatigue', at Sorcha Dallas in Glasgow, are mosaics and lumpen lozenge shapes that depict the packaging of health-giving foods, creams and supplements. 'Adult (Optivita Berry Oat Crisp)' (2008), for example, is a wall based mosaic rendering of Optivita cereal packaging. Optiva is a cholesterol-lowering cereal, with a huge heart on the box, promising to heal your sick heart, clogged as it is, with fat and salt. The brand name is a portmanteau, created out of the words, optimum, and vita (life) – a hefty promise from a cereal. There are other signs on the packaging of health-giving properties: berries, oats and a red and white palette reminiscent of the Red Cross, or the logo for the British Heart Foundation. Similarly rendered in mosaic in the 'Adults' series are several other products which connote 'adulthood' to Frost, growing up in the 1970's and 1980's, including Ryvita, After Eight Mints, V8

vegetable juice and Earl Gray Tea. This is a selection of products that are, to some extent, aspirational lifestyle choices, presenting an imagined adulthood that is marked by vegetarianism, health foods, dinner parties and dieting.

✓ The compact 'objecthood' of the product packaging is shattered however, both by the use of the sharp shapes of ceramic tile that are used to produce the image, and by the lumpen forms that the images are wrapped around. The heavy, uneven shapes of the sculptures gives them a baleful, lost quality – they might be boulders or rock formations discovered in an ancient field. The transformation of lightweight paper packaging, however, into solid, heavy sculpture certainly adds a conceptual weight. What is worth remembering and memorialising here, about middle class product choices?

✓ Whilst there is an obvious relationship to pop art products, what we are seeing here is not the abstract gleam of Campbell's soup, or the Coca-Cola logo, well-known to the masses, but a particular niche of class-informed life-support offered by Ryvita cracker biscuits, Optiva cereal and Rice Dream milk substitute. What these commodities promise is dieting, purity, and health. Quiet restraint, subtle control, mind over body. There is also the matter of the sculptural materials themselves. Mosaic sits unevenly in contemporary art: it is both a traditional skill with rich history, and connotations of workmanship, but also an 'arts and crafts' process, often occupying unfashionable crafty women's groups.

✓ What is most striking, however, is the unease with which the depicted products become monumental. The very nature of the middle class life-

style is somewhat private, quiet and cosseted. The dream of a private, walled garden. There is a price to pay for this, however. For why should anyone care about a cosy private life? A similar sensation is felt in Douglas Coupland's 'Generation X' (1991) when a character, who has attempted to 'opt out' of the contemporary treadmill of his generation in America, returns home for Christmas. Trying to give his family a valuable gift that is unrelated to commerce, he fills the living room with thousands of candles. The family are overwhelmed and happy, but there is a problem. Life too quickly reverts to normal: "It is a feeling that our emotions, while wonderful, are transpiring in a vacuum, and I think it boils down to the fact that we're middle class. You see, when you're middle class, you have to live with the fact that history will ignore you. You have to live with the fact that history can never champion your causes and that history can never feel sorry for you. It is the price that is paid for day-to-day comfort and silence. And because of this price, all happinesses are sterile; all sadness go unpitied."

✓ It is at the core of this difficulty which Alex Frost's work might be situated. It is the middle class masses, the gallery-visiting classes, which are too uncomfortable for the majority of artists to touch on. As Will Bradley points out in a recent publication that accompanies Frost's recent body of work, there is an unspoken currency at play in terms of brand culture, and its movement within the contemporary art world.

✓ "Simply put, in current usage, brand imagery should be either ubiquitous or underground. It should belong either to a discourse so mainstream, so J-Lo or FedEx, that any media-con-

/// WHAT THESE COMMODITIES PROMISE IS DIETING,
PURITY, AND HEALTH ///



X ALEX FROST / YOUNG ADULT (E45 CREAM), 2008 / Pencil on polymer clay and casting plaster X

X ALEX FROST / ADULT (SLIMATEE), 2007 / Ceramic tiles, grout, glue, canvas and polystyrene X





× ALEX FROST / ADULT (AFTER EIGHT MINTS), 2007 / Ceramic tiles, grout, polystyrene and glue ×

× ALEX FROST / INSTALLATION VIEW, MILTON KEYNES GALLERY, 2008 / Courtesy of Sorcha Dallas and Milton Keynes Gallery ×



nected Western viewer not afflicted by locked-in syndrome will instantly understand it, or to a discourse so marginal that it connotes this marginality far ahead of any further content it is expected to offer the unlucky audience.”

∕ There is an awkward, embarrassed privilege inherent in these lumpy objects. To borrow the title from one of Harald Szeemann's seminal exhibitions, if attitude is here becoming form, then the attitude depicted by these sculptures is an obsequious, quiet, and diffident blob. The lumpen bourgeoisie, as opposed to the lumpenprole of Karl Marx. Softly-spoken masses, anxious, compliant workers, needing and desiring affirmative and supplementary products.

∕ The notion of supplementarity makes itself felt even more in Frost's related series 'Young Adults', which includes references to products such as Kalms (a supplement taken for nerves), E45 (a cream for upset, irritated skin), dandruff shampoo, Pearl Drops tooth polish, and Rice Dream milk. These are smaller softer scul-

∕ Jacques Derrida's elegant essay ... “...That Dangerous Supplement...” on the subject of Jean Jacques Rousseau, gets right to the marrow of the very notion of supplementarity – a subject at the core of Frost's recent works. The problem with supplements, argues Derrida, is that they undermine the 'wholeness' of the original entity. Nothing that is complete, pure and of itself should require supplementing. There is something in the supplement that is dangerous, that threatens us. For why should our bodies need supplementing, in a rich western culture where everything is at our disposal? Why do we need to call nature forth symbolically to heal us? Rousseau vehemently felt that the problem lies in the Industrial Revolution, when nature becomes a supplement to society. Botany, landscaping, and pastoral reverie in art and literature begins, in Britain at least, at the moment of loss, when those in the city begin to imagine the countryside.

∕ Frost's recent exhibition 'BBQ' at ArtSway in 2008, a contemporary gallery in an isolated

sewing patterns, looms and hole punches. Not only is Frost making the image 'blind' – i.e. from the reverse, but has also partially removed his own choices in image making by giving them to a 'blind' machine.

∕ The subjects depicted are also to some extent, blind. The yucca plant is a blind object, it is a signifier of nature created by industry. The self-portraits of Frost as well as others with closed eyes, such as 'Ruth Sleeping', also represent something lost, something missed, something impossible to see. How do we look to the machine? The machine cannot see nature – it is not of nature, and it cannot quite see us either.

∕ Supplementarity returns here. It is not just eye drops and pills that prop us up, but, perhaps more significantly, computers and machines. There is a loss and a gain. In Frost's sculptures and 'Blind Drawings', the anxiety remains. The machine is our ultimate supplement, and it arguably eats away at us. However, its very creation implies that perhaps we needed it all along. ×LMF

∕∕ WHY SHOULD OUR BODIES NEED SUPPLEMENTING, IN A RICH WESTERN CULTURE WHERE EVERYTHING IS AT OUR DISPOSAL? ∕∕

tures, in plaster, clay and Fimo modelling clay, though their forms are still rounded asymmetrical shapes.

∕ If, as we imagine, these sculptures are found by an archaeologist or anthropologist, what might they conclude of this culture? What did it value, and how are its symbols used? Nature is certainly a semiotic feature of the packaging: birds, flowers and plants, clouds, grass, the sea. As is the body; hearts, eyes, and sparkling teeth. Would an external viewer imagine that this is a culture that much valued calm, and held nature and the relationship to the body in high esteem? While there might be some skewed truth in this, this portrait of contemporary British city life is probably not one that we would immediately recognise.

∕ What is, to some extent, clear, is that the depictions and imagery on these products are promises to those who lack. Kalms is a promise to anxious teenagers, E45 promises to soothe to itchy scalps and faces. Dry Eyes is promised to those with tears in their eyes, and Optiva cereal for hearts that are faulty and broken. So, conclusively, what emerges is an idea of a fractious, worried set of individuals in need of support, of propping up.

setting in England's New Forest, touches upon this somewhat. The more specific theme of this exhibition is the idea of nature as a product. The idea of the 'outdoors', or the country retreat are fantasies generated by those who lack. And, as Rousseau would argue, this is because we are a culture who have lost nature, but continue to desire that it serve them. This digging for metal and oil, the necessary result of which has been our reliance on computers and screens, is, in this view, blindness.

∕ Blindness is also important here, for, interestingly, accompanying the 'Adults' sculptures in this exhibition were several of Frost's 'Blind Drawings', primarily of Yucca plants, a 1980's middle class houseplant. Frost's 'Blind Drawings', many of which are also closed-eyes self-portraits, are made using bitmap images of photographs. Perforating holes through paper to create definition of light and shade, Frost then forces pigment through holes in the paper from the reverse, so some of the image is left to the chance of material. Frost's blind drawings are machine-like in that they give the image over to machine for processing, and then are made using a perforating process that has a physical relationship with the Industrial Revolution:

∕ Alex Frost lives and works in Glasgow. His solo exhibition credits include Milton Keynes Gallery, Milton Keynes; The Changing Room, Stirling and Tramway, Glasgow. He has also participated in numerous group exhibitions including those at Glasgow Print Studio, Glasgow; Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow; Centre de Creation, Bazouges la Perouse; Collective Gallery, Edinburgh; Norwich Gallery, Norwich; Zacheta Gallery, Warsaw and Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, amongst others.

∕ Laura McClean-Ferris is a writer and independent curator based in London.

∕ Author's credits: Douglas Coupland, *Generation X* (Abacus, London, 1991) p.171

∕ Will Bradley, 'Define the Hollow Spaces' in *Supplements* (ArtSway, Milton Keynes Gallery & Sorcha Dallas co-publication, UK, 2008)



× ALEX FROST / BLIND DRAWING (RUTH SLEEPING, 2), 2008 / *Framed wax crayon, bronze and enamel on paper* ×

× ALEX FROST / UNTITLED (YUCCA 1), 2007 / *Framed enamel and wax crayon on paper* ×

