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“Critics Picks: Matthew Buckingham, *Subcutaneous*”

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By Johanna Burton



Edgar Degas's famous depictions of 19th-century nightlife offer snarling women, sharp-toothed men, vacant-eyed boozers and pig-nosed lechers; a man of his time, the artist considered the human face to be a topography of built-in ethical constructions. Of course, physiognomy, or the measure of character on the basis of outward appearances, existed well before Degas employed it to picture the lower class as inherently base. Indeed, Matthew Buckingham's current exhibition takes the birth of physiognomy as the point from which to explore cultural conventions alongside their often insidious underpinnings.

Focusing on Johann Caspar Lavater--author of the 1775 text *The Physiognomical Fragments*, Intended to Promote the Knowledge and Love of Mankind--Buckingham creates a fantastic story that happens in an impossible present-time. A two-screen, 16mm film installation takes up the center of the gallery; this format allows Buckingham to express his subtly oxymoronic aesthetic in a loose narrative.

Actors play the parts of Lavater, his adherents and his detractors; they all wear powdered wigs anachronistically, yet fervently. On one screen, close-ups of an actor playing a young Goethe suddenly break with convention as the opposite screen features a twirling view up a massive tree. Most beautifully, the two films, which are shown on a low curved wall, allow projected light to bleed onto the gallery wall behind them--creating two dark, square shadows that undermine any claim the images have to pure representation. This joining of the stable and unstable is especially effective, as it implies that even the most scientific-sounding theories--say, that widely spaced eyes indicate intelligence--are often just social constructs.

Buckingham reminds us that Enlightenment-era assumptions about the relationship between appearance and character are still prevalent. At one point, Buckingham's film flashes a series of contemporary-looking silhouettes: male, female, Caucasian, black, Asian. The way we almost instinc-

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tively label them suggests that we've ingested at least some of the prejudices of physiognomy. The title of Buckingham's installation, Subcutaneous, is telling in this sense: What's going on under the skin is actually less important than the social niceties that make us think we don't need to look.