

The quiet fascination of a transfigured reality

In 1934, in his renowned essay on Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, Erwin Panofsky introduced the term «*disguised symbolism*». The German art historian - one of the fathers of iconology - explained how, in Northern Renaissance art, strong symbolic elements persisted despite an apparent realism. The objects we see in the painting, though rendered with meticulous precision, are never *merely themselves*: they conceal messages and latent allegories. The lit candle is the divine eye, the green of the garments signifies hope, the dog fidelity. In van Eyck's work, Panofsky writes, «*medieval symbolism and modern realism are so perfectly reconciled that the former has become inherent in the latter. The symbolical significance is neither abolished nor does it contradict the naturalistic tendencies; it is so completely absorbed by reality*». Viewers are not always aware of the presence of these additional meanings; indeed, what is expected of them is to abandon themselves «*to the quiet fascination of [...] a transfigured reality*¹».

In Miguel Martin's exhibition, I see a similar mechanism at work: the office and the gym are ordinary environments, scattered with familiar presences. Yet their arrangement invites the viewer to piece together a story, connecting the dots, interpreting the signs, and absorbing the emotional temperature emanating from each object. These installations are credible life scenarios; at first glance they may appear as simple reconstructions of ordinary spaces, maybe even theatrical sets awaiting actors. And yet, clues and symbols surface everywhere: some seamlessly camouflaged, others deliberately placed to expose subtle cracks in the simulation: the story of a childhood trauma framed like a "certificate of achievement"; band-aids on the walls and stairs; a medieval sculpture on the weights bench; enigmatic photos on the side of the locker. These are all *glitches* within an otherwise coherent representation, a setting that, through the force of its realism, invites identification. It depicts an everyday reality familiar to many in our hyper-capitalist society, evoking a life cycle marked by dissatisfaction, financial insecurity, and desperate attempts at compensation. An endless, draining loop of highs and lows, an exhausting routine oscillating between ambition, disillusionment, and a vague but persistent aspiration toward self-improvement. Everything appears doubled, somehow fractured and caught in a perpetual state of oscillation.

¹ Erwin Panofsky, Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, Burlington Magazine 64, 1934

The internet, which is featured twice along the exhibition path, also reveals contrasting faces: a place for refuge and comfort, for mining cultural capital, and for improvised forms of self-medication - yet also a source of frustration, endlessly saturated with aspirational content. The YouTube video playing in front of the treadmill, for instance, titled *Built Himself a Free House in the Mountains Alone* shows the construction of a small refuge in the woods, condensing the entire process into just over an hour. The man on the screen creates everything from scratch, using only natural materials: he is alone with his dogs, in the middle of nature, self-sufficient and in charge of his own time. He works incredibly hard, but his exhaustion, seen through the eyes of an office employee, appears legitimate, solid and meaningful. Just like the stones he handles. Hundreds of YouTube commenters, resting on their couches (or running on treadmills), can only dream: «*Rich is the man able to build his own house with a few tools. He has freedom, no debt, peace and quiet*», writes user SANDYMN2011. The only natural element in the gym, by contrast, is the stone from which a menacing gargoyle has been carved. Its crouching figure recalls the incubus in Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare*, pressing down on the chest of a sleeping woman. Providing an effective counterpoint, on the upper floor we find an ironic image: a cheesy poster depicting a kitten gazing at its reflection in a pool of water. Small and vulnerable, it leans on the soft, reassuring power of its cuteness, but in the upside-down world of its mirrored image lies its aspirational version: a majestic tiger. Ultimately, the office and the gym in *Up and Down* evoke the concept of *kenopsia*, a word coined by writer and video-maker John Koenig in his *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* (2021). The term, often linked to the aesthetics of liminal spaces, describes the feeling most people get when a place they are used to seeing inhabited suddenly appears deserted and silent. In Koenig's words, it's «*the eeriness of places left behind*». These environments act on our unconscious minds as «*emotional afterimages*»², conjuring events and feelings that belong to the past. Miguel Martin's installations produces a similar effect: they are empty containers in which we can still sense the lingering ghost of a life that is no longer there.

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² John Koenig, *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, Simon & Schuster 2022