

ART Monthly

Jimmy Robert: Akimbo

Nottingham Contemporary
26 September to 3 January

At the entrance to the exhibition's second room, a lone spotlight flickers, then lingers, as if misjudging its cue, finding no performer to illuminate. The spotlight locates instead a blown-up inkjet print of a book held open on a single page which displays a reproduction of General Idea's *Black AIDS #1*, 1991. The familiar graphic (itself an appropriation of Robert Indiana's *LOVE* motif) swims beneath an oily black finish, a murky after-image on the inner eyelid. Framed by the hands of the artist, the volume is thrust towards the lens, conspiring with the blinking light to demand attention. The politics of race, visibility and omission, the commanding power of the frame, are never far from the surface. Altogether, this work provides a glimpse into the landscape of Jimmy Robert's 2019 performance *Joie noire*, formerly scheduled as part of the show's accompanying live programme.

This *mise-en-abyme*, of a work unfolding within another, is part of 'Akimbo', an ambitious and comprehensive survey of the Guadelupe-born French artist's work since 2002. It is also typical of Robert's output: dense with reference yet light of touch. Across the room, cascading from an imposing plinth, is a great swathe of velvet patterned with Marcel Duchamp's 1912 painting *Nude Descending a Staircase No.2*. The seminal modernist artwork is further fragmented and distorted as if seen through a kaleidoscope, appearing at first glance to depict a cathedral's vaulted ceiling or a frantic cloud of bats in flight. This forms one element of *Descendances du nu*, 2016, an assemblage which also comprises two wooden panels that support inkjet prints referencing the work of Sherrie Levine, Sturtevant and Louise Lawler – a matriarchal lineage of Duchamp's previous appropriators. These sit at the foot of the plinth, angled and overlapped as if photo frames on a mantelpiece. As with *Joie noire*, *Descendances* was, in a past life, part of a performance work by Robert: the stage is set, but the curtain is drawn.

'Akimbo' is shot through with a sense of lack – Robert's primary material, his body, is absent – yet these conditions are used productively. Pinned on a lone wall in the centre of the main space, an angular shard of a room, is a creased, brown leather cutting. A4 in size, the fragment resembles both skin and paper. I know from the work's description that it is doused with perfume but I am, of course, masked. The scent is teased, withheld; this is intimacy at a distance.

Throughout the show, traces of the body appear in brief, tacit flashes. Camouflaged between two paper collages, also A4, is a shadowy, rectangular sweep of charcoal applied directly to the wall by hand, similar in dimensions and colour to its neighbours. Its surface is marked by two forceful streaks which stray onto the white page of an adjacent work, staining it with smudged fingerprints. In *Untitled (Belladonna)*, 2007, a botanical illustration of a deadly nightshade plant spews carbon-black smoke across the bare wall, the



Jimmy Robert, *Untitled (Ompdrailles)*, 2013

plume's edges bristling with striations drawn by charcoal-coated fingertips. Remember the classic cartoon trope, in which a door is flung open onto a promptly vacated room only to reveal an empty chair mid-spin, the fugitive having given his pursuers the slip? These prints feel fresh, the dusty residue in a near-indiscernible heap on the floor – its maker on the run.

The figure of the hand, although here reduced to suggestion, sits at the core of Robert's distinctly haptic approach to mark-making. 'Touch this skin, this surface,' beckons the text of artist publication *Revue*, its pages spread out in a broad vitrine. A poetic meditation on the 'invisible' and 'unaccounted for' labour of those who cared for often isolated gay men at the peak of the AIDS crisis, the text (parts of which are read aloud, along with quotations from ACT UP pamphlets and Audre Lorde, by ballet dancer Courtney Henry during *Joie noire*'s performance) is a manifesto for skin contact.

While it would be reductive to conflate two such disparate public health crises as HIV/AIDS and Covid-19 (apart from to briefly acknowledge the blatant disregard for marginalised communities of sufferers and the hubristic tendencies of some to assume a sort of moral immunity for themselves in the face of an indiscriminating virus), Robert's meditations on illness and proximity find themselves, in the context of the pandemic, poignantly inverted. If the affective labour of care was once about getting close enough to touch, it is now about maintaining distance, as the artist's 2019 text pre-empt: 'The social distance, the acceptable one / The space that is allowed between you and me.'

This language reappears in a handwritten letter – scanned, enlarged and partly obscured by photo-

Art Monthly, November 2020

Tanya Leighton

graphic fragments - to elusive artist Stanley Brouwn (1935-2017), detailing Robert's admiration of his attempts to forge a subjective system of measurement with the body at its centre. Robert concludes: 'May this text be an indication of the space between you and me.'

In her 1986 essay *Eros the Bittersweet*, poet Anne Carson assesses the geometry of desire, a triangular circuit of 'lover, beloved and that which comes between them', identifying distance as a necessary condition of eros. 'A space must be maintained', she writes, 'or desire ends.' I am reminded of this as I pace the galleries, taking pleasure in the feeling of expanse between works, their correspondence across meticulously devised sight lines. As much as Robert's visual vocabulary hinges on the satisfaction of touch (clasped hands, the brush of a bare foot against a cool statue, the weight of two bodies dancing a pas de deux), it is equally defined by an outstretched arm, a reach across space which radiates desire. Robert never received a response to his message - Brouwn was a master of the disappearing act - but, as 'Akimbo' implies, a space opened up is an intimacy in itself.

Chloe Carroll is a writer and curator based in London.