

INTERNATIONAL REVIEWS
PAIN COUTURE
(HIGH-FASHION BREAD)

Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris
 6 June – 10 October 2004
 Catalogue: €30

'We can live without clothes but not without bread!' couturier Jean Paul Gaultier exclaimed at the opening of his début art installation, *Pain Couture*. Working from an idea by UK-based artist, Souhed Nemlaghi, Gaultier married the *métier* of the French baker with that of fashion's finest *atelier* workers – to produce *haute couture* with flour, water, salt and yeast. At the Fondation Cartier, behind Venetian blinds made from 4,000 fresh baguettes, he unveiled a set of costumes that were delightfully sculptural, sensual and exuberant. Below, the entire basement operation was transformed into a bakery, in order to replenish items as they faded. Dressed in saucy wicker corsets over their bakers' whites, its busy *boulangères* flood the building with heady aromas.

Gaultier transported the crafts of the *couture* house – the gathering, pleating, darting, beading and embroidery; such specialty stitching as *faufiler* (basting), *surfiler* (whipstitch) and *bâtir* (temporarily binding two fabrics together) – into a comparably specialist world, where they translated into measuring, mixing, kneading, moulding, slicing, *patonnage* (divid-

ing dough), *fleurage* (sprinkling with bran) and *façonnage* (shaping each loaf). Thirteen French master bakers, several British engineers and the Wandsworth baker Treolx Bendix, contributed to the realisation of this ingenious fantasy.

The fanciful range of costumes they created together begins with a spin through French costume history. *Croissants* and *meringues* make a Marie Antoinette wig; a shimmying flapper shift consists of thin *langues-de-chat*; oval slices of country bread form a bustle that literally trails into crumbs. Then there are Gaultier's personal homages to the bread basket:

baguettes, round loaves and swelling *brioche*s adorn or explode from within a range of silhouettes he has designed in wicker. There are baked versions of signature JPG items – the kilt, the corset and the *matelot* shirt. Displayed in glass vitrines are *pain* accessories, too, including a perfectly toasted Hermes Kelly bag.

As one expects from a successful *atelier*, these pieces represent a seamless partnership of skills. Baguettes shoot out with ebullience, forming swirling skirts or flounces; rolls and country rounds pile and curl into a feminine fullness. The results include uncanny evocations of Dior's New Look, evening sheaths by Schiaparelli and sumptuous, crinolined ballgowns. The nature of these transformations – ridiculous and quixotic but also, in the end, poetic – qualifies them as *couture*.

Subtexts and fascinating facts arise with the yeast. The catalogue bulges, for instance, with double entendres (in English, observations such as 'What nice buns the baker has!'; in French, phrases like 'to feel someone's basket', which in conversation means to pinch somebody's *derrière*). The show notes that, if the tools of bakers and dressmakers were intermingled, each trade would unconsciously take up the other's utensils.

Gaultier has stressed that he views his work as craft rather



'Untitled', Jean-Paul Gaultier, french bread, basket-work, 2004

than 'art'. This was the reason he gave for staging *Pain Couture* instead of the fashion retrospective first proposed by Cartier. But for all its novelty, discovery and whimsicality, *Pain Couture* is a pragmatic undertaking. At the age of 52, Gaultier is no longer anyone's 'bad boy'; he has run his own label at a profit since '91 and last March joined the staid house of Hermes as Artistic Director.

A top-shelf saddlemaker from the 1830s, Hermes is currently one of the world's top luxury brands, particularly famous for exquisite leather goods and silks. *Pain Couture* ran during both of Gaultier's first two collections there, each of which he used to emphasise the roots of the house. (Think corsets made like saddles, cinched in front with silver padlocks or svelte riding-jackets sculpted out of shiny crocodile.)

By aligning his own art with a craft France celebrates daily, Gaultier suggests he is at heart a man of the great traditions. (This is despite his kilts, Madonna's conical bras and his role presenting TV's *Eurotrash*.) *Pain Couture* cleverly gives weight to his industry's firm contention that *haute couture* is a national need, as vital to French identity as the *baguette*.
CYNTHIA ROSE

ANDREAS FABIAN: WORK IN PROGRESS

Galerie SO, Solothurn, Switzerland
30 October – 27 November 2004
Catalogue: *Form (...) Handlung*, £19
To the untrained eye – as opposed to that of the experienced maker – the process of wrestling an idea through from start to finish, of engaging with material and technique, is not always apparent. The serene beauty of the finished object on display in a gallery can belie the saga of its creation. In a reversal of usual gallery practice, what was on display in the window of the Galerie SO were the sources of inspiration – rather than the finished object. The eclectic collection of found utensils was a declaration that this show was about work in progress. Andreas Fabian has chosen to investigate the nature of process, to deconstruct the creative act by focusing on a single familiar form – the spoon. This was an interrogation of an object that we use everyday, without thinking. What is a spoon for? How does it perform its base function as eating utensil? What are its component parts and how do



'Spoon', Andreas Fabian, Inox stainless-steel alloy, porcelain, rubber, 13.5 cm, 2004

they fit together? How is a spoon used, and who uses it? What role do spoons play in systems of social etiquette and display?

The exhibition was in no way didactic. There were no explanatory text panels, no indication of where one should start to participate. The objects themselves told the story, testimony to the spirit of enquiry of their creator. A series of organic plas-

ter forms are casts taken from the bowl of a spoon tilted at various angles. An open-ended fold of silver challenges the user to scoop up and retain liquid, testing their ability to maintain the exact level of balance required to perform the feat. The handle of a found silver spoon has been beaten to an exaggerated length, all the better to feed a loved one. The theme of sharing, of eating

from the same plate, was evoked in vacuum-formed plastic dishes that retain the imprint of two spoons.

In several instances the spoon was dissected into its component parts – the handle was separate from, but laid out in juxtaposition to the bowl. Suddenly the bowl of the spoon was scaled up to form an impressive silver vessel. The next spoon form was completely flattened out, with just the hint of the beginnings of a bowl form as the silver starts to curl up. The same idea was then scaled down and repeated in a series of eight.

Many pieces were not for sale. They were listed as models, or as loans from private collections. In a smaller room at the rear of the gallery there was a retrospective of finished work that pre-dates the more recent experiments. However, the questioning attitude was apparent in these pieces too, that of investigation of form and of use. Fabian curated the exhibition himself, in collaboration with the gallery owner, Felix Flury, and a team of colleagues from the metalwork and jewellery department where he teaches in Buckinghamshire. He was anxious to set up an open framework to allow each individual to engage with the work in his or her own way. While there was plenty of discussion happening during the opening, in a number of different languages, the exhibition itself could be read as a conversation without words (this approach chimes with the stated ethos of the gallery, to provide a venue for artistic discussions about the importance of things). Flury extends the artistic discussion beyond the gallery walls, beyond the small baroque town of Solothurn, via catalogues – citing in this one Jean Baudrillard's semiotic analysis of things, *The System of Objects*, first published in 1968. While the idea that objects can act as language is not new, this exhibition offered a paradigm of theory in practice. The catalogue is beautifully produced, with essays that articulate in words the ideas embodied in the work, but it can never really substitute for reading the objects first hand. (There are plans to bring the exhibition to the Millennium Galleries in Sheffield.)
KATE MCINTYRE
Andreas Fabian and Galerie SO exhibit in *Collect 2005* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 2RL, (020) 7806 2512, from 12-17 January 2005.