

THE POIGNANCY OF “STUFF”

A protest against forgetting:
DAVID ROBILLIARD's first solo show in nearly
a decade opens at ScheiblerMitte

KARI RITTENBACH Text

Gilbert & George call David Robilliard their “favorite writer.” But can one really trust the literary judgment of a pair of curiously coordinating Conceptual art sculptures? Starkly aestheticized, angular, and tableau-like prose certainly didn't get Wyndham Lewis situated very securely in the hollow halls of literary modernism. Then again, art and language have been tussling since Lessing (if not before). Showing in the back-alley gallery at ScheiblerMitte, Robilliard's lyric paintings do their best to confuse the viewer about the strictly unrestricted limitations of each medium, even more.

Neither trained artist nor erudite poet, Robilliard began his career in the early '70s when he moved to Hoxton, London from the Channel Islands. He met Gilbert Proesch and George Passmore while working as a day laborer, his pockets full of jumbled scribbles and sketches. At once enchanted, the duo later published his book of poems, *Inevitable*, in 1984. Robilliard himself served as somewhat of a muse, besides soliciting the beautiful young bohemian men whose bodies turned up later in kaleidoscopic G&G imagery. An East Londoner well before East London was a scene, Robilliard had a seminal impact on the YBAs who followed him, though working with fewer, cheaper materials to produce arguably more profound content. Robilliard's Berlin debut marks his first solo show in almost a decade.

For a cynic, Robilliard's work is peppered with naïveté, or enigmatic statements which might be characterized as such. In

other words, his perspective is distinctly poetic. Consider, for instance, the couplet “Eating Out:”

**You're like a potato.
You'd go with anything.**

An optimistic reading renders the subject tolerant and open to a smorgasbord of suggestions: crème fraîche, chili con carne. But that dusty, hard-up depression vegetable can be a vestibule for leaner items, too. Whether Robilliard himself has been grazing away from home, or looking on as a partner proceeds to “eat out” too many nights of the week, the conclusion is slander: like a passive, self-loathing lover, the potato is easily uprooted and ultimately bland.

If seemingly light and simple, Robilliard's poems and unfinished portraits deal with “stuff” — often grimy, day-to-day observations from the young man G&G venerated as the “new master of the modern person,” to wit: that is, articulate and astute. It would be silly to describe his written work with placatory statements or insufficient adjectives (like: aphoristic, rhapsodic, at times melancholic) just because words hold so much meaning for Robilliard. Unlike the Dadaists and Concrete poets in the traditional typographically-destructive avant-gardes before him, Robilliard uses words semantically, if somewhat impetuously; his narrative fragments flesh out the elbows of his characters.

In print, Robilliard's work has appeared in several volumes, including *Life Isn't Good*,

It's Excellent (his acknowledged personal slogan) and in limited editions of postcards such as those packaged up in *A Box of Poems* (1987), which he used to mail frequently to friends in the early '80s. On oversized white canvases, his poems take shape in primary colors, blending into or almost swallowing sketches of men: partially outlined profiles or disembodied, upturned faces. The male expression — the trace of a fuller figure — is the dominant motif alluded to in scant detail. And yet, the burgundy line of a jacket's shoulder strap lets the viewer know it's made of leather; squashed and squared-off heads reveal the haircut's significant, sometimes sinister character. But figurative innocence here is balanced with recorded, life experience (“you know how / to wind me up / you know how / to calm me down / you know”) over the top of a mostly blank surface. The words tracing through his hapless figures are sympathetically drawn, curvilinear, and not precast — not at all concrete. Rather often, Robilliard's turns of phrase turn corners themselves.

Taking an irreverent approach to both representational genres, the sharp humor in the text-image conflagration of Robilliard's paintings comes across as humanistic and vulnerable. One marks a slight shift in tone in his later compositions — diagnosed with HIV, Robilliard took to introducing himself, unapologetically, as “David Robilli-AIDS.” But even tinged with grief (“a burst of tears / from all your friends / the end”) the poet's dark wit endured. He died in 1988 at the age of 36.

WHAT'S BIG HOT AND HARD — THE SUN



David Robilliard, *Big is Breathtaking*, 1987, courtesy Aurel Scheibler