

Mark Rappolt, 'Leigh Ledare/Per Billgren: Something Might Have Been Than Nothing', Art Review, June 201

Art Review:

Leigh Ledare/Per Billgren: Something Might Have Been Than Nothing

The achingly metaphysical title of this two-man show, which incorporates photographs, videoworks and sculptures, offers something of an open goal to any reviewer looking to score an easy conceit. Make something of the work (with all the sense of the fantastical that implies) or dismiss it as nothing. Indeed, if you're really ontologically anxious, you might even be tempted to wallow in some self-indulgently Heideggerian or Sartrean thinking.

The thing is, once you're in the show, it's all too easy to do all that. While much of the work, Ledare's photographs in particular, records a provocative action (mostly that of crossing a line between the personal and the social – overt weeping, stripping and sexual posturing), it's presented so as to appear resolutely passive: it's a call that begs an answer. Love me, fuck me, hold me, etc. For the viewer this sensation of the work's passivity is heightened by the presentation of the work as you flick through a selection of Ledare's framed photographs stacked against a wall (a mode of display he's used in the past), or encounter what look like the remains of a party (and given that I visited the morning after the night of the opening, who's to say it wasn't?) on top of one of Billgren's glass-topped viewing tables (sandwiched within which are a selection of photographs). Ultimately, the effect is like riffling through a stranger's wardrobe and trying to guess something about who they are; and in case that wasn't clear, we get Ledare's *Mother's Living Room* (2004), an image stuffed full of equally stuffed clothes rails.

Ledare's works (many of which are fast becoming relatively well known, albeit rather early in his career – he completed an MFA at Columbia in 2008, Billgren, also at Columbia, the following year) dominate. Among them are the infamously Oedipal documentary series on Ledare's mother in various more-or-less pornographic poses and a complementary series (*Personal Commissions*, 2008) of the artist posing more-or-less seductively in the homes of people who have placed personal ads to which the artist has responded. But the inclusion of Billgren's more low-key works, such as *The New Tastemakers* (2011), a collection of photographs of appallingly kitsch or banal domestic interiors (as conspicuously absent of people as Ledare's are conspicuously present), complicate the game, by dropping the show into a dizzying social vortex propelled by the question of who is validating whom. Who are these tastemakers? How do they operate? Is Ledare setting out to validate his mother's existence? Ledare the existence and desires of the advertisers to whom he responds? Or perhaps in both cases it's the other way round. And ultimately, of course, how are you validating the work you see before you?

At the heart of this show, then, are issues of agency and the related concept of free will. What do these constructions (the installation makes clear that this is to some extent what a theme park designer would call a scripted experience) tell us about the fundamental emptiness of a work of art? As a viewer, are you really making something out of nothing? Or perhaps, if you don't relate to the work, nothing out of something? And given that, either way, you've answered the artists' call, is there any difference between the two? Perhaps the ultimate perversity on show here is that the more this exhibition seems to engage the viewer, the less it offers up.