

History of Art Panel (Jeanette Kohl, respondent) – May 1, 2020

"Decapitated Alabaster: Exegesis, Medicine, and Tactility in English Alabaster 'St. John's Heads' (1432-1520)"

Rebekkah Hart (History of Art)

As Shakespeare's Othello approaches his intended victim, he chillingly observes, "Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, And smooth as monumental alabaster." (5.2.3-9) This early documented comparison of flesh to alabaster in England reflects how the translucent surface of polished alabaster not only resembles glowing, pale skin but also invites flesh-to-flesh contact between the living and material worlds. The famed alabaster carvers of England employed this unique and tantalizing quality while carving tablets in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. My research focuses on the alabaster carvings of the decapitated head of St. John the Baptist commonly produced in England from 1432 until the ban of religious images with the Reformation in 1520. These tablets were used in private devotional settings, often wrapped in cloth or encased in wood, thus heightening the tactility of the worship experience and further isolating the exposed stone face.

In the visual culture of late medieval and early Renaissance Britain, with its predominance of brightly polychrome sculpture, the pronounced use and display of luminescent, white stone invites tactile encounters and brings the materiality of alabaster to the forefront—the material produces meaning. In the particular case of "St. John's Heads," my research examines how the use of alabaster highlights certain religious and political ideologies, as well as medicinal practices, which parallel the biblical episode St. John's beheading and the associated worship of relics. My reevaluation of the sculpted heads' material emphasis furthers the growing interest among scholars in alabaster as material and adds nuanced meaning to the proliferation of English alabaster St. John's Heads popularly traded across Europe.

"Menacing Banality: Examining the Uncanny in Neue Sachlichkeit Still Life Photography"

Chloe Millhauser

Walter Benjamin's incisive 1931 critique of Albert Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist Schön* mired *Neue Sachlichkeit's* photographic practices in overtones of apolitical regressivity. In 1981, Benjamin Buchloh intensified the castigation against the *Neue Sachlichkeit* genre, positing that the reductive realism of *Neue Sachlichkeit* works oriented the genre as a nebulous progenitor of German fascism. However, in reviewing a broader field of *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography, this essay strives to highlight those photographers who confuse the politics of Interwar photographic realism, thus providing a more nuanced perspective into the movement's representational practices. Viewing *Neue Sachlichkeit* still life through the methodological lens of the uncanny allows for the complication of seemingly banal, straightforward imagery. This investigation examines the works of Gerda Leo and Aenne Biermann, two of *Neue Sachlichkeit's* lesser known female photographers. On close observation, Leo and Biermann's outwardly benign images of quotidian objects denature into aberrant, disturbing scenes where banal commodities gain a strange agency over the viewer. Reverse perspective and the use of the extreme close-up grotesquely personify the arranged objects, imbuing them with humanoid qualities that threaten animation. Leo and Biermann render the everyday object as menacing, damaged, and all-consuming. Rather than turning away from or aggrandizing authoritarianism, their photographs mirror the disturbing interwar conditions as a mode of trenchant critique.