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Phung-Tien Phan, *Mid-Thirties*, 2021, table, circular saw blade, 28 1/2 × 27 1/2 × 27 1/2".

Phung-Tien Phan

SCHIEFE ZÄHNE

“Stop Dreaming,” commanded the title of Phung-Tien Phan’s exhibition. But this imperative was only the first card in the deck of language that made up the tight presentation. What followed added both contradiction and humor but—in the best way—offered no resolution. *Girl at heart 2* (all works 2021) consisted of eight white sheets of fabric lining the walls and blocking the entrance, each with a letter burned onto it with a flat iron. In different shades of toast and with a still-fresh scent of fire on fabric, they spelled out the word TRIPLETS. Or, read the other way: LET STRIP or LETS TRIP. I prefer the latter. But where does that leave the indictment against dreaming? Are we tripping or not?

Girl at heart 2 is the sequel to a collage of home-video-style footage from 2020 (which was not on display in this exhibition). It has little in common with that work however, save for similarly autobiographical scraps of humorous and wistful sentiment: two identical photographs of a young woman—the artist, I learned—on a beach, wind in her hair. (It is not only heat, then, that etches things into our memory.) Was this the girl that one remains at heart? Three tables with round saw blades lodged into them (again, you could almost smell the scorched wood) suggested a certain frustration with the repetitive and restricted nature of adult domestic life. But the aerodynamic shape of the iron gave the letters on the walls the character of airplane writing in the sky, or a fat bee floundering at the end of summer. There was a tongue-in-cheek goofiness to Phan’s works that lent the seeming violence of charred textiles and embedded saw blades a more complex flavor. The signifiers were tripping, producing a tension between humor and aggression. The point here was not critique, but rather a self-consciously slapstick testimony to the weirdness of everyday life.

“Three’s a Crowd,” read the title of the accompanying text by Steven Warwick, but it was another of the exhibition’s linguistic ruses, at once description and diversion. The three tables were respectively titled *Twenty-Something*, *Mid-Thirties*, and *Ü40 (weiss auch nicht)* (Ü40 [don’t know either]), the abbreviation referring to parties for people *über* forty. With these jokes on the way people are pigeonholed according to age, the tables functioned less as sculptures than as part of a layering of signs that began with the metatexts and continued with Phan’s highly indexical, almost rebus-like choices of materials. Like her videos and sculptural works, this language game could be understood as a kind of verbal collage that thrives on randomness and incongruity, the adept stylization of which is the heart and muscle of Phan’s artistry.

In “Stop Dreaming,” letters and objects appeared equally literal, but the sentence they spelled out in the room was looped and layered, found no closure, and continued to chase its own tail. The show’s message was that life means a lot of hours spent ironing, that after a certain point there will no more windy beach days full of the promise of what’s to come, and that you’ll instead be left feeling trapped around a dinner table thinking about cleaving it in half. But it also implied that this repetition, this loss, and this belligerence are not drawbacks of existence but its ornaments: something funny and off-kilter to remind us that what happens when we stop dreaming can be just as much of a trip.