

Otto Berchem

What are friends for?

Otto Berchem's work is about a kind of fragile interdependency between people. Even friendship can prove tenuous and complex and sometimes just banal. From early in his practice Berchem has shone the spotlight on the nature of friendship (appropriately enough) through a series of collaborations. *Blood Brothers* with Alicia Framis was a performance where two artists forged an everlasting friendship using a blood oath. There was kind of teenage dirtbag equivalent in another photographic work called *Fuck off (coast to coast)* with Corbin Doyle. The two friends are photographed on either side of the Atlantic gesturing aggressively at each other. Berchem also references a stereotypical male bonding scenario with artist Jonathan Monk in a piece called *Couch* where they lounge about watching and commenting on the football. Are all witty clichés and still poignant interrogations of what it means to be together.

However, Berchem hits another nerve when the work focuses on awkwardness and discomfort. The artist treads a fine line between the security of knowing one is included and supported and the vulnerability of clearly identifying when one is not. Social isolation and close connection are different sides of the same coin and which ever we feel at a given moment, one thing is sure: other people - what they think and what they do - are always implicit in the equation.

He creates vulnerable intimate situations from which to consider what it takes to cut it in today's competitive conditions. While there is absolutely a kind of underlying fragility based people real and raw aspiration at the core of the work - there is also a kind of generosity in which the artist tries to create opportunities for those who engage. With *Dating Market 2000-2002* Berchem has identified and taken a moments pause to look at a love game. We are constantly assured within contemporary society that openly looking for love is not a stigma nor is it sign of desperation; yet finding a cure to the social faux pas of singleness is insisted upon. The remedies for a lack-of-love are constantly mediated and promoted through magazines, websites, dating agencies and now thanks to Berchem in the shopping mall too....

*Single? Looking for someone special?*

*No time to meet new people? Grab your chance to meet someone while you're shopping! Pick yourself a flower basket, And make it clear that a date is on your grocery list!*

Berchem taps into the seemingly inexhaustible need for matchmaking services while also identifying that other contemporary condition: our increasing lack of time. ? The artist provides a real 21st century solution Why not then kill two birds with one stone and put ones self on the market while at the market? Shopping baskets with a plastic flowers mark out the single shoppers who are available or looking for a partner. The simple innocuous flower decoration offers the opportunity for those who want it to transform the supermarket or mall into something more exciting - a space full of future partners. (Something perhaps teenagers would argue the mall is meant for..)

It's a charming mix between serendipity and strategy, Consumerism dominates - it infiltrates the public and the private - it claims to offer happiness. By using the baskets the singleton is temporarily identified and definitely willing to change. Otto Berchem plays on all these social categories and the desires which motivates us to jump into more acceptable groupings leaving the past well behind – with the possibility of something pretty pleasurable in between.

Annie Fletcher

Written for the Catalogue of Sculptura 02, Falkenberg, Sweden