

# MOUSSE

## Agenda

### 1. Robert Overby: Works 1969-1987

CENTRE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN GENÈVE  
Rue des Vieux-Grenadiers 10, CH-1205, Geneva  
centre.ch

In 1971, Robert Overby went to a derelict, burned-out building in Los Angeles called the Barclay House, painted thick layers of latex rubber directly onto the building facades and architectural fragments, let the latex harden, and then peeled it off. The resulting serial castings recorded every bump, scratch and blemish on the house in meticulous detail, mapping out air vents, pipes, patch repairs, and grooves that marked the edges of the cladding. The features often exaggerated the sense of decay and the passage of time, making it more of a personal interpretation than a loyal reproduction. Among the pieces from that series of work, which spanned everything from single doors to five-meter-long walls, there's one that stands out, called "East room with two windows, third floor." The rusty, iron-tinged ocher palette, the decadent plasticity of the rubber latex, and the two windows that resemble vacuuous eyes make it look like a weirdly anthropomorphic, ghostly mask; it is a simultaneously haunting and haunted vision that is hard not to be captivated by. Interestingly, the rough, almost primordial quality of those hollow windows will, in a few months' time, be contrasted by the shimmering and luminous windowpanes surrounding the galleries of the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva, where on January 30 the first institutional survey exhibition of Overby's work in Europe will be opening. The show, which is curated by Alessandro Rabottini, will then travel to GAMeC–Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Bergamo, Italy in May, to the Bergen Kunsthall in Norway, from September 2014.

Windows will not be the only strong contrast integral to the Geneva show: the numerous concrete and plaster casts made by Overby in the '70s will stand out sharply against his "stretched drawing" series from the same period (for example, "Magnetic Stretch," an intriguing piece made of shiny PVC and resin in bright, artificial colors). Overby's subtle, faint, and slightly out-of-focus paintings of headless torsos (including the exquisite "Vertical torso with grey edge" from 1973) will be at odds with the "montages" series, where collages of explicit close-up stills cut from porn movies generate over-detailed and straightforward visual renderings of various orgies. As a matter of fact, Overby has been shifting between styles, media, practices, materials and schools of thought throughout his career. But while most of his pieces vary in appearance, they are all connected by the artist's fascination with façades, planes, and the skins of people, buildings, and inanimate objects (like 1971's "Rubber Sock," included in the show, which was allegedly his first rubber cast). As Andrew Bernardini wrote exactly a year ago for this magazine, "[Overby] skinned many a building, the skin more real than the things being skinned."

In the end, his investigation of the interaction between surface and meaning led Overby to produce a number of "masks," some perhaps accidental, like the cast of the East Room of the Barclay House, some more unequivocal, as illustrated by what may be his most iconic painting, "Pink Head," a flesh-colored latex rubber face-mask. It is an intriguing and somewhat disturbing image; at first it looks like a painterly version of a shot by Jimmy De Sana from his collaboration with Terence Sellers; but anyone who looks at it less superficially will soon notice that the neck ends abruptly, the face has no nose, the lips are painted onto rubber, wrinkles catch the light where breath suctioned it in, and the narrow eyeholes are crooked and misaligned, with only one eyeball weirdly peering through. Once again, Overby

proves that rather than just recording the surface, his interest lies in exploiting its imperfection, in revealing the flaws in the crust.

It is no accident that all the painted BDSM masks and latex wall casts presented in the Geneva exhibition look as flaccid and slack as the sloughed-off outer skin of a reptile. Earlier critics of Overby's work pointed out that this limpness might recall Claes Oldenburg's works—but those had a kind of candidly dull happiness written all over them, while Overby's stand out more as an admission of defeat. It is also worth noting that besides "Pink Head," another seminal portrait is presented here: "Untitled (Monk Restoration)," from 1973. The painting, which comes from a series of copied old-master portraits, depicts a curly-headed young monk in prayer, shown in profile. The two images could hardly be more antithetical, but in both paintings, in much the same way that too much makeup makes a face look ghastly rather than fresh, the artist highlights flawed lines and pictorial weaknesses instead of concealing them. As art historian Ina Blom as pointed out, in reference to Overby's work, "it tells stories the way a cadaver on a dissection table does—what used to be 'just life' is now 'information'." And indeed, the surprising range of the artist's output presented in the show leaves the viewer itching to see just what's inside that lifeless body, who's hiding behind the flawed mask. Suddenly, you just want to dismember more, to dig deeper, to frantically scratch at all those surfaces and explore the imperfections hiding within. *(Text by Nicola Ricciardi)*



1 Robert Overby, *Saulle's Place*, 23 April 1971

1 Robert Overby, *Pink Head*, 1974-1977

