

SHAHRYAR NASHAT

Galleria S.A.L.E.S. Rome, Italy

Review by Emily Verla Bovino
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A stout cavalier straddles a parade horse, his head bowed slightly to survey his troops in promenade. In the fresco he created for Florence Cathedral, Paolo Uccello painted Sir John Hawkwood and his horse in one-point perspective, on the same level with the viewer, but depicted the cenotaph on which the mercenary and his horse stand in three-point perspective, viewed from below. The multiple vanishing points upset the hierarchy between the subject and the object, disorienting the viewer and the viewed: the equestrian statue is indeed monumentalized on the impressive cenotaph, but Uccello's perspectival play pulls the viewer up alongside the cavalier.

In Shahryar Nashat's recent exhibition, 'Placed High for Dramatic Impact', two idealized plinths on flat, coloured backgrounds – *Disappointed Pedestal (Red)* and *Disappointed Pedestal (Green)* (both 2008) – are also portrayed as though viewed from below, but they lie empty, commemorating only their own forms. The artist employs a similar strategy in a black marble sculpture of a plinth resting on another plinth. The work, entitled *Downscaled and Overthrown* (2008), is the show's centerpiece, though it is displayed in a back room like a treasured relic. The marble sculpture rests on a tall pedestal built from medium-density fibreboard, the rough surface of which accentuates the gleaming polish of the rich rock: while the synthetic, processed MDF recalls the tangible truths of everyday experience, the dark marble radiates the glow of an ideal like Aristotle's 'phantasma' that distant image of an idea that appears in foggy flashes in the mind before a thought is articulated. In Nashat's double plinth the 'downscaled' pedestals memorialize the absent, overthrown symbols of power that once proudly announced their dominance. Thus, the stage deposes the staged, and - to quote the title of a 2004 Kunstmuseum Solothurn exhibition featuring Nashat - succeeds in 'overthrowing the king in his own mind'.

Taken from Russian novelist Andrei Bely's masterpiece, *Petersburg* (2013), about a son's plot to assassinate

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his Tsarist official father, this quote asserts that power can only be overturned by first feigning submission, then sneaking up to the throne and taking a swift kick at one of its weak, rotted legs. The best instant to strike is when the powerful are caught offguard: when bodyweight shifts as an ankle turns or in a moment of repose when one foot bears the body's entire physical mass. As if to illustrate these subtle points of weakness, Nashat truncates downloaded images of classical, virile, bronze figures at the shins and the calves (*Foot-Height Abridged Hercules in Repose* and *Calf-Height Abridged Satyre*, both 2008). Two larger inject prints, *The Calf of Adrian Hermanides* (2008) and *The Foot of Adrian Hermanides* (2008), also 'abridged' but considerably less monumental, are photographs Nashat took of an artist colleague. In the first, a bare leg lies limp, thrown upon the seat of a stool and turned to show its calf; in the second, a naked foot is planted flat on a cardboard box, its toes tensed and contracted. Nashat offers these oft-overlooked points of tension, vital to a figure's stability, to a desirous and fetishizing gaze.

When a regime falls, the monuments to its figureheads are broken off at the ankles and toppled from their pedestals. Suddenly, all points of reference are lost. The displaced desperately seek a new ruler who can assure them a defined place in the world. Who is the subject and who is the object in this exchange? In Nashat's video *Modern Body Comedy* (2006), two men act out these questions in a choreographed performance in which a pair of shoes and socks, a false moustache and a broken chair are the props for their power games. When one man kneels to lace the other's shoes, his gesture seems obsequious; yet it could also be an expression of dominance, as he has, in effect, immobilized his partner. The film ends with the two actors on the floor in a confused embrace, somewhere between tickling and wrestling.

Like Uccello's fresco, Nashat's work sends tremors through the ground between the subject and the object. Human existence, Nashat seems to say, is a constant struggle for dominance, played out not just between the self and the other, but also schizophrenically between the self and itself. Nashat's work dismisses the dominant/subordinate dichotomy, demonstrating that such concepts are illusions conjured to reorder the muddled superimposition of roles, identities and meanings we encounter in daily life.

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