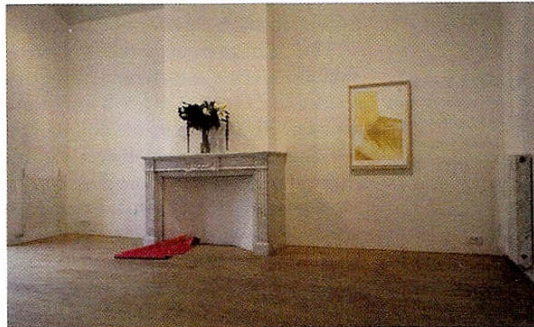


BRUSSELS

Reena Spaulings

SUTTON LANE

A visitor to “The Belgian Marbles,” the recent exhibition by the Reena Spaulings collective, would have noticed two things right away. First, thanks to a series of colorful lithographs of the shadows of palm trees called “A Place in the Sun (Shadows)” (all works 2009), marble surfboards (*Mollusk [Portoro]* and *Mollusk [Rosa Portogallo]*) installed on the balcony, and brightly colored yoga mats on the floor, the exhibition felt tropical—but for no apparent reason: This being Brussels, the effect was incongruous, or merely weird. Second, everything seemed completely offhand, as if the artists had nothing in particular to say and instead just monumentalized whatever was happening around them in the art world, whatever they and their friends might have been doing. The shadows of palm trees were



View of “Reena Spaulings,” 2009.

photographed in the group’s free time at Art Basel Miami Beach, and had been layered with the scanned lists of names from a sign-in book from Reena Spaulings Fine Art in New York, so each piece was in every sense an index of the mechanics of the art world—but not in any systemic or illuminating way. The marble *Radiators 1–3* were motivated only by a desire to replace the original radiators, which had been cleared out because they were deemed too ugly. The connecting pipes and bits of unpainted wall were left intact to indicate the absence of these originals. Even the use of marble appears to have been spurred only by the convenience of a relationship, in this case with the collector Josef Dalle Nogare, who owns a marble quarry near Verona, Italy, and offered materials and production in exchange for artworks.

But while the overall effect may have been one of total nonchalance, this impression would not have been accurate, nor were the tropical colors and themes as arbitrary as they first seemed. A clue was given by the exhibition’s title, which puns on the Parthenon statuary hauled two centuries ago from Athens to London. The whole exhibition revolved around this axis, which for the sake of convenience can be generalized to that of South/North, or hot/cold: The surfboards, yoga mats, and palm trees all evoke the heat of the South, while Brussels is northern and cold, like London; Spaulings’s marbles had made a northward journey from Italy parallel to that of Elgin’s. Such geographic constructions are also historical, speaking to the domination of Northern European powers over those in the undeveloped south. The radiators were inscribed within the same system: Whereas the original radiators had been installed to give heat, their doubles offered only the coolness of marble. Hot/cold is also light/dark, and the lithographed palm-tree shadows make the allegorical binaries explicitly solar—a point emphasized by the series title “A Place in the Sun (Shadows).” Sun/shadow is also origin/repetition (the vanished radiators and surfboards versus the shadows and signatures), and, ultimately, truth/error—therefore the possibility of knowledge, and interpretation from beginning to end. “The Belgian Marbles” offers a most exacting allegory of tropes, which belies any first sense of blasé chic, and confirms that Reena Spaulings continues to operate at the highest level of theoretical and stylistic sophistication.

—David Lewis