

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Juan Pablo Langlois: *Afterwards no one will remember*

By *Colin Edgington*



Installation shot of *Afterwards No One Will Remember*. Courtesy Cindy Rucker Gallery.

Walking into Juan Pablo Langlois's exhibition *Afterwards no one will remember*, at Cindy Rucker Gallery, was like entering a box of Dantean episodes. The cityscape outside—of hyper-activity, noise, and the hubris of twenty-first century “progress”—was deadened and replaced by the quietude of a chamber full of lechers, lovers, and watchers

who felt as if snatched from the eternal depths of the collective unconscious, and made real. Within the white walls was an inanimate vitality.

The exhibition consisted of two sculptural pairs of lovers, a wall of Greco-Roman masks—hung as if embedded into the wall’s surface, peeking through the veil—and two videos. Langlois’s couples are sexually entangled in actions that, at first, feel innocent and lustful, if also crude and callow, before one becomes attuned to other base behaviors: simmering resonances of cultural upheaval and political violence. The figures seem to consume one another, especially in his stop-motion video *Papeles Sádicos (La niña que movía la cabeza, Triángulo Sádico, Cabeza con anteojos)* (2011), in which the figures open up and spill out their clothing, falling apart and reforming as they engage in a mutual consumption of one another.

Langlois has been making work since the late 1960s, but has rarely shown in the United States, and never in New York. He is highly regarded in Chile, where he maintains two studios and works in near isolation, separated from his professional life as a bureaucrat, and where he had a retrospective in 2012. This, his first solo show in the United States, and his first exhibition in this city, curated wonderfully by Paula Solimano, covered a large span of Langlois’s career, without overfilling the space with a heavy hand. The show was small and light, despite its subject matter. It was visceral and jarring, but pregnant with personal, national, and global histories.

The Chilean experience during the 20th century was one of violence, and it still looms large in the mind of its people. The purported suicide of the democratically elected Salvador Allende, as the military coup (in which the United States was complicit) seized Santiago, set off years of oppression under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, whose combatants reaped violence on, and imprisoned, Chileans. In a truly panoptic sense, Pinochet’s regime brutalized the mind, as well as the body. As the critic David Levi

Strauss wrote, while in Chile in 2006, “Chile’s recent dark history has isolated its inhabitants from each other. The culture of surveillance and mistrust that became entrenched during the Pinochet dictatorship still exists in attenuated form, as peripheral glances, shadows and whispers.”^[1] Langlois’s forms are full of these mistrusts and whispers, formed into grotesque lovers with reddened mouths licking one another, genitals exposed in full arousal, and skin that doubles as mummified wrapping, while words from newspapers and ephemera drape from their scalps in lieu of hair.

Langlois’s use of newsprint and tempera is both economical and conscious. The 20th-century information carrier is cheap and easily collected. The tempera, aside from its archival quality, traces back to Egyptian sarcophagi and the Fayum portraits. The imprinted skin resembles our actual flesh in how it represents the history of one’s life. Here the bodies are not pristine, but yellow and fragile looking. They are sick creatures who literally embody traces of rhythmic upheaval and violence, their skin, carriers of their narratives, the history of their making and expression. The grotesque world, one that is often hidden, suppressed, or forgotten, is made by Langlois into solidified mannequins, with tarnished flesh, like lovers with rigor mortis. Even as these figures reach for love, they are equally indurated and dispensable—lost, stiffened, thrown away but somehow still alive.



Installation shot of *Afterwards No One Will Remember*. Courtesy Cindy Rucker Gallery.

At the back of the gallery was Langlois's video *La Playa* (2011). It begins with two of the artist's figures intertwined on the beach. They are enveloped, and taped, in bubble and foam wrapping, as if washed up on an as-yet-undiscovered crime scene. Over time, the waves strip the couple naked. All is recorded softly, a light and airy mood, calm with the sounds of water rolling over the sand. It is slow and soft, but unnerving. A wave comes in and washes over them, but at this time the intervals between cuts increase, the angles become more acute, the scene more visually chaotic. The woman attempts to lick the other's chin, and we see that it is a corpse. Its mouth tightened and rigid, with teeth exposed. Two figures, made of papier-mâché, tell us of life and death. The woman gently cradles the back of the other's cranium. Its pathos, in deep death and paper, seethes as a history of the skin, and stains it, too, like tar to teeth. The soft light and the blue waves wash over the yellowed skin of these mannequins as if cleansing them. But in this process of cleansing, the woman's head snaps from the neck under the force of the water and from the fragility of her body. The head rolls through the sand, and there it sits, alone, a final violence, and fade to black.

Langlois's figures in *Afterwards no one will remember* point to the extremity of loss, to the possibility of love, to the process of making and destroying, and to the physical nature of our collective and personal memories. They demand attention and, once they have it, their latent image digs out a history of violence and injustice. They are unabashedly fragile and shocking, yet also provoke laughter in their make-up. With a violent burst of love, Langlois's works exorcise a social and intellectual putrefaction. The way they fold into and out of one another portrays a vision of life which one cannot unsee. Their images are carried by the viewer, in perpetuity, as whispers of the brutal complicity of humanity.

[1] Levi Strauss, David. “A Wolf That Knows Enough to Keep Its Distance” in *A Public Space*, No. 3, 2007