

THE PHYSIOGNOMY OF PHEROMONES

© Stephen Zagala

The title of this exhibition, *The decadence of the nude*, comes from an essay by Pierre Klossowski which celebrates paintings that demonstrate a deep but obscure affinity between an artist and a subject. He describes such paintings as 'beautiful nudes'; charged with the emotion of an encounter and a 'disquietude in the experience of the Other'.

For Klossowski, these affects of aberrant intimacy bear on physiognomy rather than anatomy. Academic studies of the nude are overly concerned with the physical anatomy of their subjects, while modern painters neutralise desire and dissolve sensuality into the formal anatomy of the picture plane itself. Between these two extremes, Klossowski points to a tradition of delightfully decadent nudes that evoke incommensurable impulses through subtle surface effects: peripheral gazes, prehensile poses, uncertain smiles.

Klossowski (pronounced Kwosofski) is an idiosyncratic figure. It is hard to imagine the twentieth century without his intellectual contributions. In the 1930s he helped found the Collège de Sociologie with his lifelong friend, Georges Bataille. In the 1950s and early 1960s, he penned several novels and was awarded the coveted Prix des Critiques. During this period, he was also responsible for translating many of the most influential European writers (Benjamin, Kafka, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Nietzsche) into French. Throughout his life, he wrote many celebrated essays on philosophy and art theory. And, on top of all this, he executed over 300 large pencil drawings which have been exhibited in major galleries and biennales around the world.

The significance of Klossowski's work speaks for itself, and yet he has remained a relatively unknown figure, largely by his own design. Michel Foucault described Klossowski's analysis of Nietzsche as 'the greatest book of philosophy' he had ever read, but Klossowski rejected the description of himself as a 'philosopher'. In fact, he resisted all professional categorizations. Rather than presenting himself as a novelist, translator, essayist or artist, he described himself as a monomaniac; a singular point of obsessional activity.

At the age of 96, living in low-income subsidized public housing in Paris's 13th arrondissement, Klossowski's remarkably singular life came to an end in August 2001. Despite his achievements, almost all the obituaries mentioned that his more famous younger brother, Balthus, had died six months earlier.

Unlike Balthus, who denied the eroticism of his paintings of languid pubescent girls (referring to them as 'angels'), Klossowski was always clear in stating his obsessive fascination with libidinal drives. Consequently, Klossowski's drawings have a manic immediacy about them. His nudes linger in a liminal pictorial space, like fragrances with faces. There is an intimacy in the physiognomic detail, but the airy tableaux have an otherworldly quality suggestive of daydreams. Like aromas left behind on the sheets by a lover, they are reminiscent of singular encounters, but they peel away from real people to take on an erotic life of their own.