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Let It Bleed

Kent Anderson Butler's "Embodied Fusion" brings the pain to Bunny Gunner

By: Christopher Michno



Kent Anderson Butler's video works feel sacramental and, strangely enough, oddly transgressive at the same time. Often, the performances Anderson Butler documents with video involve the artist putting himself in uncomfortable situations or at risk of injury—not wildly so, but enough to notice. His body is central in the creation of his work, and he provokes an immediate visceral response in videos like *Virginal Wound* (2007), in which he picks and scrapes at the cuticles of his thumb until they bleed. His videos can be difficult to watch, and also mesmerizing and quirky. His most recent video, *Embodied Fusion*—also the title of this solo at Bunny Gunner—documents the artist pushing the limits of his physical endurance at a locale near the Salton Sea.

*Embodied Fusion* begins with the artist lying prone in the dirt, with the desert foothills and a nearly transparent blue sky in the distance. About 10 to 15 yards behind the artist sits a mound of rusting automobile carcasses, a twisted strand of rebar and some parched coastal scrub.

Anderson Butler raises himself to the plank position, while two young women circle him and then stand in silent embrace behind him. Over the next minute and 45 seconds, Anderson Butler struggles against gravity. His grunts are audible; his arms shake and his face reddens from exertion. After he collapses, the women approach him, flipping him on his back. Taking his ankles, they drag him across a scabrous terrain of decomposed granite, Anderson Butler's back toward the wreckage and off screen.

Sometimes women in his performances present a kiss—as if it were an anointing or a ceremonial farewell before Anderson Butler is led off to the next immolation. In other performances, they pick up the pieces. In *Embodied Fusion*, the two women are quietly detached, more attuned to each other than to Anderson Butler; they are the implements of the artist's willing mortification.

Anderson Butler also employs the body for the still images in this show. He plainly and purposefully displays his body in one of the two large, photo-based tapestry pieces created for "Chic," his recent solo at Carl Berg Projects at Pacific Design Center. Portraiture is accompanied by a mythology of truth: a feeling of a privileged view into the sitter's personality. Anderson Butler's tapestry portraits couldn't be further from this paradigm. At just over 6-and-a-half feet by 5 feet, these two portraits are larger than life. In each, the subject, shirtless and imposing, stares into the camera with an impassive gaze.

More to the point is these portraits' affinity with glamour photography, the mythology of desirability and the manufacture of consumer demand. Here the portrait of the model is ripped from the context of the fashion magazine and the sale of designer goods. While these tapestries present ordinary men in all their fleshy imperfection, the individuals in these portraits are still as unknowable—in these images—as are the models in fashion magazines.

A third tapestry, created from a video still in *Embodied Fusion*, features Anderson Butler squinting at the camera, holding his push-up, just as it's getting difficult. It is his video work which leaves the biggest impression, as if he is investing the ephemeral nature of existence with sacred significance.

