

REVIEWS: UK

Matt JohnsonAlison Jacques Gallery, London
13 October – 13 November

For a reclining nude, *Odalisque* (all works 2010) is not conventionally seductive. At first glance the sculpture appears to be an oversized figurative hunk of clay crudely worked by hand: a maquette rather than a finished work. In fact, *Odalisque* is a highly finished item rendered in matt bronze. The title and pose of the figure recall those Ottoman temptresses depicted over and over again on canvas by countless nineteenth-century painters of orientalist themes (Ingres, Delacroix and Renoir all painted her, sprawled topless in a seraglio). Being the size of a small cow, she weighs a ton I imagine. Above all, it's a really funny work: a fat muse, resplendent, blubbery and wickedly absurd.

Los Angeles-based artist Matt Johnson has a keen intelligence for unfreighting seriousness from art history. *Grotesque at Prayer* is probably the most sophisticated work in the show: what at first appears to be a large scrunched-up ball of tinfoil slowly resolves itself into a bust with a cowl of hair, a globular nose and two crude hands pressed in supplication to its lips. Unlike *Odalisque*, this work plays upon the slow reveal; the unfolding of abstract form into figuration is not immediate. The reference here is to that which is dank and hidden ('grotesque' comes from the word 'grotto'). Johnson's *Grotesque at Prayer* similarly attempts to shiver from view, its stainless-steel body folding light, mirroring the viewer.

Beekeeper is a more straightforward stone item that bears some resemblance to traditional African sculpture. There's no double bluff here: it doesn't look like a lump of clay or a ball of foil. The twist is the hair, which is a close-crop Afro composed of hundreds of lifesize bees cast in bronze, though I'm not sure I quite see the point of this – for me, David Hammons's brilliant *Rock Head* (various dates) is the definitive anthropomorphic stone-with-an-Afro (a one-liner that really hits home). Johnson's most enigmatic work here is *American Spirit*, an ersatz model of a packet of the eponymous brand of American cigarettes that levitates (with the aid of hidden magnets) on a plinth. The trick is tawdry, but it's also bafflingly affecting.

While Johnson's sculptures are jocular, they also nudge towards the spiritual. In the press release, the artist quotes Pythagoras for how one might seek 'supernatural, infinite existence within the finite'. Johnson, a former student of Charles Ray, finds these moments in quotidian gestures, which he monumentalises to exacting aesthetic standards. (For example, his 2004 work titled *Breadface* is a visage apparently bitten from a slice of toast, which recalls the tabloid-friendly manifestation of Jesus or Mary in believers' visuals.) It'd be too much to claim that I get a spiritual kick out of this show, but Johnson's earthy spiritualism certainly transcends the binary tricks (high art/pop culture; art history/quotidian gestures) that he deploys to such immediate effect. *Colin Perry*

Odalisque, 2010, bronze,
94 x 185 x 94 cm. Courtesy
the artist and Alison
Jacques Gallery, London