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## Paloma Varga Weisz: CHOR

Barbara Gladstone Gallery

10 SEPTEMBER – 8 OCTOBER



In German, 'chor' stands for chorus, Greek chorus, refrain, choir, choir loft and even coir, the rough material made from woven coconut fibres. Paloma Varga Weisz, in her first US solo show, lightly touches on all these varied meanings with a selection of wooden sculpture, installation and watercolour works.

Woodcarving is central to the practice of the thirty-eight-year-old, Düsseldorf-based Weisz, who participated in the 2005 Venice Biennale's *Always a Little Further* group exhibition. At Gladstone, Weisz's primary medium is limewood – the soft, light-coloured wood of the linden tree that was favoured by medieval sculptors. It's a fitting choice for the anachronistic, quasi-ecclesiastical feel of most of the work.

In one room, a chorus-like grouping of eight busts (all 2004) is arranged on top of, and in contrast to, what appear to be contemporary church pews or bus benches painted grey. Viewers may sit to look into the charming faces of these quaint and whimsical figures, mannered in their carved period dress, with their folded hands and stoic expressions. The works' titles tell you what you're seeing: *Hundeportrait*, a bust with a dog's head; *Wurstkopfmann*, a man with sausages on his head. *Dreigesichtsfrau*, or three-faced woman, heretically appropriates the technique of depicting the Christian Trinity as three faces integrated into one head.

Illustrative rather than representational, these busts contain ersatz references to art history, calling to my mind the work of Texas painter Julie Speed and the gifted artist and children's book author Tomie dePaola. As such, the busts feel more two-dimensionally graphic than fully sculptural, despite the lovely working of the soft limewood.

In another room, however, the four *Frauenbüste*, though rough-hewn, are far more sculptural in their presentation. Poised on wood and velvet benches, these busts feature the sweet faces of young women, perhaps novices, peeking out from swaddled wimples of roughly carved wood, which retains its hairy, coconut-shell-like surface.

Also in this room is the dramatic, hanging sculpture *Fallende Frau, Doppelköpfig*. Though suspended by a sumptuous tangle of grey fabric, this full figure appears to be caught, mid-plummet, in a headfirst freefall, with arms and legs flailing. Actually, we only see the wooden extremities protruding from folds of fabric. These carved hands, feet and head are perhaps all that actually constitute the body, but they are beautifully and sensitively fashioned and sufficient to suggest an entire corporeal form. The figure's two-faced head variously suggests falling or flying, depending on the angle of view. The overall effect is a theatrical spectacle of multiple, shifting perspectives – the hidden body, the ambiguous sensation of movement and suspension, the voluptuous gravity of the grey cloth.

Elsewhere, there are several small, wall-mounted sculptures (all 2005) – a child with scales (or chainmail) and a pair of hands holding a devotional head. Lastly, a room of playful, closely related watercolour portraits (all 2005) provide a delicate finish to this self-assured exhibition.