

I AM AS YOU WILL BE: THE SKELETON IN ART

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Only the best thematic exhibitions can hope to quickly usher their viewers past the obviousness of superficial conceits, just as it is the hope of their curators that the show will launch devotees of the visual into spirals of philosophical conundrum begetting robust, humanist engagement. So it is with Xavier Tricot curating *I Am as You Will Be*, yet another in a series of museum-quality shows to which Cheim & Read has dedicated itself recently. But though the show, with its century-spanning array of artists' renderings of skulls and skeletons, points the way towards a land well seeded with existentialism, the one overwhelming and inescapable message of *I Am as You Will Be* is not, as the show title suggests, that we must all confront the inescapable fact of our mortality, but to wonder, instead, about the fate of our teeth.

If this sounds strange, a bit of close attention reveals that there are two kinds of work in this show: those with teeth, and those without. And this is not meant in any kind of metaphorical manner. I am speaking of real, hard, sometimes pristine, sometimes decayed, obdurate, aching teeth, much like the 50 laid out on Jenny Holzer's *Lustmord Table* (1994). Holzer's display is archaeological and criminological – these bones belong to the players in a gruesome murder – and so materialist. The teeth are arranged in a single, well-organised line at the table's edge, and the arrangement offers nothing in the way of spirit; there is no subject here – or if there is, it is not human, but archival.

Contrast this with the large Indian-ink-on-paper work by Jannis Kounelis (*Untitled*, 1980), whose sweeping, gestural lines describe ethereal skulls with hollow eyes and circular but notably empty mouths. Think Munch's *Scream* multiplied. Kounelis works the lines of evocation, but with a seriousness that is less eerie and more a childish 'Boo!' It's after real affect, but it's all about the pleasure of the action rather than the reality of a scare, much less a sense of dread. Tony Matelli's *Sad Skulls* (2003) occupy similar territory here. Matelli's pile of noggins have all of their teeth, but once we see that their jawlines have been configured into frowns, we're back in the land of trick-or-treat.

Painstaking verisimilitude cannot counter the loss of that brute and discomfiting feeling that comes from seeing the awkward smile of a denuded mandible. And the more eidetic the representation, the further one seems to get from the possibility of meaning. Take Adam Fuss's artist book, *All* (2007), which juxtaposes photographic prints of real skulls (drawn from daguerreotypes also included in the exhibition) with foil-stamped tissue pages bearing ritualised words such as 'life', 'tribute' and 'virtue'. Here each skull is nearly tautological: they simply are what they are, and the text is offered up as supplement (as it always is with photography). Which, in the end, is the weakness of *I Am as You Will Be*: though much of the work is beyond reproach, when a theme is (mis)taken for history, the ultimate impact lacks, well, bite. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*



James Ensor, *My Portrait as a Skeleton*, 1889, etching, 12 x 8 cm. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York