

ARTFORUM

Michael Dean

ANDREW KREPS

Turner-nominated artist Michael Dean, a soft-spoken and swearsy Georgie sculptor in his mid-forties, considers himself, above all else, a writer. Typically angular, vaguely anthropomorphized forms made from everyday construction materials such as concrete, corrugated metal, and plywood, his installations develop from his impulse to transform the solitary experience of putting words on a page into something that you can walk around and touch. On the main floor of Dean's first exhibition at Andrew Kreps, nine freestanding concrete-and-steel sculptures were arranged across the length of the gallery like a series of waxing and waning moons. (The lunar installation was perhaps explic-

ated by the show's title, "A Thestory of Luneliness for Fuck Sake," which contains a portmanteau of "loneliness" and "lune." The latter term, taken from plane geometry, denotes a crescent figure bounded by two circular arcs.) Coarse yet vulnerable, like the desiccated body of a sea-horse, each sculpture was created to resemble a warped variation on that omnipresent symbol for happiness: the smiley face. Given titles like *Unfucking Titled Tear* and *Unfucking Titled Cope* (all works 2021), the pieces were made even more intriguing by the items they were garlanded with: a bike chain, crushed soda cans, a burnt book, bright-yellow caution tape reading FUCK SAKE and BLESS, and a plastic shopping bag on which the iconic sans serif THANK YOU was replaced by I LOVED YOU I LOVED YOU I LOVED YOU.

Although indebted to language, Dean's art is perfectly uncongenial to the written word. This was emphasized by a splayed-open dictionary propped against one of the smileys

and featuring a kind of lorem ipsum devised from the letters *h* and *n*, the verso and recto pages mirroring each other nonsensically. A press release offered only basic information about the artist's general practice, inviting visitors to find their own entry point. Dean seems interested in how, when repeated enough, things—words, forms, or gestures—lose their meanings and acquire new ones. Hence the ubiquitous smiley, which is both language and its lack, a human representation and digital cypher, an encapsulation of emotional experience and its corporate stand-in: an avatar perhaps for what late theorist Lauren Berlant called cruel optimism, in which an "object that you thought would bring happiness becomes an object that deteriorates the conditions for happiness." Poured by the artist himself, the concrete of Dean's structures—including a henge of craniopagus smileys, some upside down, that were installed in Kreps's downstairs space—

indeed flirted with decay, their balletic, sometimes emaciated forms suggesting a fragile foil to the grim Brutalist architecture that litters the United Kingdom.

Or not. Dean's art feels designed to simultaneously rebuff and embrace all interpretation. "What is important to me is somehow not to present myself as a poet, but to produce a moment in which the viewer can be the poet," Dean has said. Like fiction written in the second person, this authorial deference, while seemingly generous, instead reveals a lack of confidence in one's audience, as though they cannot be trusted to imaginatively engage with a work of art fully on its own terms. Despite the ensuing air of incompleteness, Dean's delicate attention to shape and his empathetic use of materials is a boost to morale. At their best, his new sculptures fuse the artificiality of our emoji era to what Flaubert called "the melancholy of the antique world." It is a realm, the author wrote, that "seems to me more profound than that of the moderns, all of whom more or less imply that beyond the dark void lies immortality. But for the ancients that 'black hole' is infinity itself; their dreams loom and vanish against a background of immutable ebony. No crying out, no convulsions—nothing but the fixity of the pensive gaze."

—Zack Hatfield



View of "Michael Dean," 2021. From left: *Unfucking Titled Poor [Verso]*, 2021; *Unfucking Titled Free*, 2021; *Unfucking Titled Free*, 2021.