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An inverted Coco Chanel logo adorns HANY ARMANIOUS's sculpture *Central core component from centre of the universe* 2005. The two interlocking letters are like sections of a broken circle caught in the process of diverging or reforming, splitting into two or re-joining into one.

Inevitably in Armanious's works, each element sparks a train of associations. The initials CC could further suggest crop circles; those enigmatic patterns inscribed upon agricultural fields that read as the encrypted signs of alien contact or the works of an elaborate, but all too human hoax. Beyond these psychical or skeptical interpretations, crop circles remain an intriguing uncertainty, and whether miraculous or fraudulent, they are undeniably poetic. CC also refers to the initials of occult author Carlos Castaneda, the American 'shaman' and self-proclaimed navigator of an uncharted and frightening cognitive schema (Castaneda claimed in his books to have leapt into the void and conquered death). Centered within this ambiguous logo sits a circle within a circle – the 'evil eye' of superstitious belief that protects one from the covetous gaze of an otherwise innocent onlooker. This amulet preempts our gaze and guards the object like an unblinking sentinel, drawing a perimeter around a secretive, inner sanctum.

What is it that the 'evil eye' protects? Or rather, what does it protect us from? Is it *The danger in extracting meaning* (the title of another work from 2006), and if so, what is the danger? Perhaps it warns us not to fall for the sumptuous allure of Armanious's work with its circuitous illogic that simultaneously hides and reveals a truth that we are seemingly unwilling to acknowledge: that is, the chaotic and non-rational stuff which is harboured within our world. This glimpse of chaos can be likened to the Baroque sensibility of Nicólas-Sébastien Adam's marble *Prometheus* 1737,

with its folding and unfolding curves and contortions seemingly shaped by the turbulence of an indescribable void. Armanious also frames this 'void', reorganizing the literal stuff of reality in the ornamentally grotesque sculptures of *Basic instruction* 2003, or the plastic morphology of peaks and points in the series of works from the 1990s titled *Snake oil*, as he positions the baroque within our modernity. Armanious' practice is founded on simple gestures – breaks, cuts, splits, castings, mouldings and simulations. But within this simplicity of gesture, certainty becomes ambiguity. The known and familiar of the world are brought together and elaborated in ways that reveal indeterminable and unexpected meanings – systems are created from apparent chaos, fragments begin to speak beyond themselves and new orders are formed.

Take, for instance, *Untitled work* 1996–current, in which a blank wall becomes a mysteriously inscribed surface. A thick roll of black, adhesive vinyl band-sawed into profiled sections is adhered to the wall in ordered strips separated by small gaps of white. Patterns are seen within what initially appears to be the randomly undulating edges of the tape. The resulting lines recall the teeth of the saw or the sound waves that were an artifact of the process. *Untitled work* is a ghost of the formalist imperative, a tremor that registers upon the wall in the tension between a flat-line and the first signs of life. It is a kind of 'automatic drawing' where the artists' machine is the new intermediary of psychic transference. In the un-titling of this act the artist understands the word 'work' as a verb. In fact, what the artist un-titles is the very labour itself, the 'act' of creation: the untitled work of a machine.

*Central core component from centre of the universe* articulates the basic dynamic mechanism and mystery existing within these prototypical machines: a wheel that revolves around an axis – a simple machination that changed the world and encoded the cosmos in a spinning top. It is a simulated potter's wheel, a remade prehistoric tool that shapes symmetrical form from formless clay. A lathed clay column rises from a point on the wheel and touches the ceiling. Stability appears to come from within the lingam, not the seemingly precarious supports on which it rests. The seat has been recast as a candle that has been lit and snuffed out. The candle is also a paradox: the wick implanted within both provides illumination and is the seed of the candle's undoing. The sculpture spectacularly demonstrates the energy that is expended in creation, but also posits itself as something of an imposture, a false oracle or magic trick devised to debunk our worship of the creative act.

Like *Untitled work*, the components of this sculpture are the products of machines, but these machines are also the products of other machines and processes ad infinitum. The artist draws us towards this realization. But where can this idea take us?

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We can find a parallel in Rene Magritte's 1935 painting *The red model*, which illustrates a pair of boots and the feet they were designed to enclose in an uncanny state of becoming; the shoe becoming a foot or the foot becoming a shoe. The shoe is a technology for the foot that adapts it to a new end. *The red model* is much more than fanciful metamorphosis – it describes a disturbing relationship between humanity and technology, which begs the question: at what point do the machines we make begin to make us? When does the body become an artifact, an 'after-fact' of a technology by which it must be ultimately surpassed?

*Advocacy group* 2006 promotes the idea of our entrapment within an 'intelligent design'.<sup>1</sup> It is a gleaming chrome assemblage of machine components that supports an armored medieval soldier. He stands in an upright pose suggesting a body within. A pair of hooks becomes the emblem of his shield. The soldier is imagined as a human hook, a link within a chain and a support for something unknown. He stands there, vulnerability encased within the technology of war, his fragility and uncertainty mirroring our unease.

The figure in *Advocacy group* reminds me of Daniel, the neo-human centerpiece of Michel Houellebecq's novel *The possibility of an island* 2005. In this book, the 'neo-humans' achieve eternal life through the technology of cloning. Living alone in shielded pockets of post-apocalyptic earth, they ponder their original 'self', while languishing in a suspended state of 'eternal recurrence' awaiting 'intelligent designers' that never materialize. Towards the end of the book, Daniel leaves the cyclic security of this state and returns to the chaotic, hostile beauty of the world. Certain of his demise, he lapses into a semi-delusional state, his thoughts fragmented, but lucid. The story ends: 'My dreams were populated with emotional presences. I was, I was no longer. Life was real.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Intelligent design' was the title of Armanious' exhibition at the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, 1 June – 1 July 2006

<sup>2</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *The possibility of an island*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 2005, p 345