

Contemporary Magazine

KALEIDOSCOPE

Issue 18 (Summer 2013), highlighting ANDRA URSUTA, SHANZHAI BIENNIAL, SERGEI TCHEREPNIN, YNGVE HOLEN and PETRIT HALILAJ, investigating AN UPDATED NOTION OF MATERIALITY, exploring the curatorial practice of MASSIMILIANO GIONI, featuring our regulars, tips and three special inserts.

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Describing the starting point of each work as “a moment of material seduction,” Alice Channer’s highly tactile enquiry negotiates the physical, locating the body in an increasingly virtual information society. Words by Rebecca Geldard Photography by Lena C. Emery



Materiality





A studio visit offers a very particular encounter with an artist and their work. From the notion of inner-sanctum privilege to witnessing artworks in unfinished states—among evidence of the material and conceptual planning involved—there is a sense of unreality to the occasion. This is especially true in the case of British artist Alice Channer, whose sculptural works exploring relationships between materials, technological processes and the body are often designed for and partially made in the gallery or museum spaces they're found in. To the extent it may be possible to mentally separate (subtly material) practice from place and the presence of other matter, this is not how one usually looks at art. It would be foolish to think that the inherent theatricality of negotiation (of the works in progress and where to put one's feet, coat or cup of tea) does not somehow influence reception. For the studio, however personalized a private laboratory, remains in some sense a public space in the mind's eye, associated with an indelible set of cultural clichés about being a maker and making things.

As Mel Brimfield suggested through her satirical staging of an artist's studio at Ceri Hand Gallery in London last year, the audience is implicated in the making of the myth. *The Sculptor's Studio* (2012), a carefully curated arrangement of junkshop debris, art works and other creative detritus, was designed to make a viewer feel both in on, yet part of the joke, equally embarrassed as comforted by the nostalgic, base notes of their responses. Brimfield's work highlighted the selective nature of looking but also one's suggestibility to particular visual markers or sensory clues—a notion Channer touches upon during a studio visit as we discuss the making of "Invertebrates," her solo exhibition at the Hepworth in Wakefield earlier this year. "It's not my hair," says Channer as we stand in front of some mock-ups of the (heavy) crepe de chine banner work, central to the show, printed with distorted and scaled-up digital images of human hair, ponytail bands and shampoo bottles. "You'd be surprised how many people think it is." The observation sounds odd at this moment, given that I can see she is sporting a sleek, short bob. The hair in question, after having been photographed, put through color and other treatments in post-production and then printed onto fabric, now seems aesthetically far removed from its wig-prop source. As a highly textural, extraordinarily object-like image in repetition, it rings closer in association to the Japanese horror film *The Grudge* (2002). Perhaps knowing that the artist is a woman is enough to plant the idea of the hair belonging to her in the mind of the viewer. Then again, when written down as a list of visual parts, the work does imply possibly girly preoccupations with product culture. It is precisely such assump-

tions—about authorship, the aesthetics of desire and the ways and means through which it is peddled—that Channer is interested in.

While there is certainly a functional feel to Channer's Hackney studio, moments of pure sensory pleasure can be sourced at the threshold of every architectural surface. This is entirely fitting given that she describes the starting point of each work as "a moment of [material] seduction." These encounters, though not always intentional in this space, are easily fetishized as memories in the mind of the visitor, particularly when viewed through the eye of a camera. In the messier, workshop end of the room, for example, a lone chunk of green wax, the result of a failed working process, rests on newspaper, the printed stories on which are now obscured by hardened evi-



dence of a molten pink spillage. The object holds the impression of a clothing seam as if a fossilized fashion relic from the future, yet it's of little more consequence here than an item to recycle. But, like the wax cast of a pair of women's leggings, it was supposed to become, in this setting it retains something of Channer's concertina-like spatial play with bodily scale, the physical states of materials and the contexts associated with them.

Channer's slight assemblages of sculptural components engage one with what it means to negotiate the physical, locating the body in an increasingly virtual information society. Channer melds classical sculptural approaches and materials with those associated with the mass manufacture of objects and garments and, more recently, the dissemination of images. Favored materials—fabric, marble, wax, paint and metals—continue to provide for her highly tactile enquiry. The inherent properties of her chosen materials are variably altered through a range of handmade and industrial processes—folded, cut, cast and printed—to become a series of surfaces. Channer specifically engineers and arranges these surfaces, sometimes to oppose, other times to yield to the contours and conditions of a given room, which as an architectural vessel, the artist also considers a type of "body." Each installation of stretched, flattened, compressed and fragmented parts implies a sense of being between liquid and solid material states, physical contexts and spatial dimensions. The fact of being surrounded by a combination of hard, shiny metal objects, soft fabrics and imagery of hyper-real liquid states used to sell cosmetics sparks a conversation in the studio about formative influences, specifically the image culture of one's youth. In Channer's (and my) case this was the advertising boom of the 1980s, spearheaded by the now iconic Silk Cut series. It's clear to see the period's influence on the artist's subtly surreal handling of everyday commercial and high-art



materials. One is made aware of the unrealistic sensory promises of the marketeer through these works, all the while being allowed to enjoy the fantastical possibilities brought about by her repurposing of familiar stuff.

For there is almost always a purposely executed kink or two in the production line. Channer plays with the perceived hierarchies of her chosen material elements, skewing one's preconceptions of what they are and what they have become as a result of her handling. Real and implied movement is key: curved panels of changing room curtain-scaled sections of metal, sleeve cuffs and trouser bands (dipped in paint) can appear to undulate—moving barely perceptibly, as if reality were about to override the control setting of a televisual pause. However post-industrial or abstract individual elements and the manner of their arrangement may appear, a sense of the body, as both object and subject, is always present. This may involve the inclusion of a figurative image or synthetic appendage, such as the elongated and manicured bronze and aluminum digits (made from 3D scans of plaster casts of the artist's fingers) that appear to have lightly peppered recent installations like bodily punctuation. The wax casts of clothing, meanwhile, are hung over mannequin limbs (attached with surreal effect to the walls of Channer's studio) during the drying stages to evoke this sense of closeness to the corporeal. Once solid, the tacky-toffee texture of the "skins" they appear to have become elicits the sense of being both inside and at the behest of the human machine.

Channer has consistently worked with fabric, but her first use of digital printing techniques was evidenced in "Body Conscious," a 2011 solo exhibition at the London gallery The Approach. *Tight Skin* (2011), the centerpiece, comprised two lengths of white heavy silk satin looped over chrome bars strung from the ceiling, each printed with a distorted synthetic-colored snakeskin motif. The design had been photocopied from high-street fashion garments, then scanned, digitally manipulated and printed. Here, the width of the image (positioned within the margins of the fabric ground) was determined by that of the digital printer; the width of the fabric by that of the roll from which it was cut. While Channer's most recent printed works on heavy crepe de chine feature digital designs of variable scales and proportions, the process is still very much determined by the natural facets of materials used or the limits of the technology required to manufacture it. In each case she has little idea of what will actually happen to the colors of the found or self-made images she has altered (which can rarely be exactly Pantone-matched) once absorbed by the fabric. Channer describes the evolution of these works as "taking something on a very human scale and massively stretch-



ing it to the scale of the room and the occasion, so there's this sense of expansion and contraction."

Channer's forthcoming project for the Arsénale exhibition at this year's Venice Biennale will likely push the production boundaries of her practice in curious and potentially difficult directions. Her works will be the only objects in (the body of) a room full of wall-based works. Channer plans to include a new pair of digitally printed fabric works and *Reptiles*, an existing work conceived for her 2012 solo exhibition "Out of Body" at the South London Gallery: "to match the extreme vertical with the extreme horizontal." When I visit, the studio floor is an organized jumble of the basic "ingredients" required for this work—curvilinear, polished sections of stainless steel and marble, and bronze and aluminum casts of clothing and the

Gandalf-scaled fingers—that might offer many solutions as to its reincarnation. Seeing how every permutation of the floor is reflected in the metal components of the work gives rise to the idea of how it will translate in a historic space. The process of installing at SLG appears to have left its own impression: "When thinking about positioning [the fabric works], I put them at angles so that there's an awkward tension between them and the room they're in. I very much thought that if I line them up with the walls, like I did in the SLG, they get absorbed more easily by the architecture."

The materials Channer uses appear to have been altered as much as is required not to privilege an origin and tend to hold some sense of their original form and potential for use. This anti-hierarchical making stance—to allow the viewer freedom of associative movement, perhaps—is undercut by an ever-present sense of tension between the manipulated matter (its historicity and thingly character) and the production values in evidence. Channer draws my attention to the ends and edges of a fabric work, unfussily frayed and bear-

ing the graphic symbols and the hybrid signature of the artist's initials and those of studio paid to do the printing. She describes the presence of these essential demarcations as means of acknowledging the "weird status" of the work as it moves between the studio and the art space via practitioners hired to facilitate its making. "It is not an easygoing process," she says. While there is an alchemical edge to the subtleties of Channer's material handling, evidence of this awkwardness is critical to keep the sensory uncanniness of the encounter in check—readable as one facet of an ephemeral but also, in part, perfunctory pilgrimage from concept to installation.

