

# Exhibitions

## Alice Channer: *Megaflora*

Large Glass, London, 22 April to 26 June

It is sometime between 60 and 200 million years ago, and a smallish cephalopod settles for good on the seabed. Roughly the size of a human palm, the tightly coiled form of its shell gradually compacts under the weight of gathering sediment, its tentacled, squid-like body having decomposed in the tides or the belly of a drifting scavenger. Slowly entombed, the hollow whorl of its carapace holds its shape under the pressure of the surrounding hardened silt, now rock, and begins to undergo a process of replacement, substituted instead by an unstable carbonite mineral called aragonite. This preserves its shape before dissolving away over time, leaving the extant cavity – a sort of mould – to be filled with new minerals, silica or pyrite, carried in by water through the porous stone. Millions of years later, these minerals calcify into a solid fossil-form, and an estimated few million years on from then, this earth-cast *Echiceras ammonite* finds itself wedged among folds of accordion-pleated hi-tech lamé in a north London gallery. The sculpture, *Elon Musk*, 2018, is exhibited as part of Alice Channer's solo show 'Megaflora' at Large Glass in the year 2021.

This ancient organic form, weighty with deep-time implications and held in place by frayed synthetic fabric, is a pithy encapsulation of Channer's sculptural concerns. The industrial vernacular of the production line or the sleek, chromed contours of Silicon Valley tech are jolted out of their regular context by the sudden fact of earthy, biological matter; their aesthetics of convenience and anonymity complicated by a fossilised spanner in the works. *Nautilus*, 2021, consists of three brass chroming jigs which are propped against the wall of the middle room like discarded arrows, each one barbed with 40 vapour-blasted and chromed aluminium nautilus shells of varying sizes. Their glint and sheen appears conversely mechanical when contrasted with the plastic-coated bars worn away from repeated use. All matter, Channer suggests, has been through a manufacturing process with multiple authors, whether cast in the bowels of a prehistoric earth or on a factory floor in Birmingham.

On the wooden floor of the first room is *Biolith*, 2021: three small circular cross-sections of Portland Bowers Roach limestone – a type of shell-flecked stone mined from the Jurassic Coast in Dorset and which I recognise from the distinctive pockmarked exterior of Green Park tube station – appear as if stunted columns. Each of a different height, their surfaces are marked with an ancient scrawl (the spearhead-shaped impressions of turreted gastropods) while various areas are neatly filled with aluminium casts. In the hollowed-out centre of the tallest wedge is a core of finely pleated, tightly packed red satin silk and wet-look animal-print leggings: a flash of colour revealed in a cracked geode. The crepe satin and PVC look tender and fleshy, moulding to the crevice afforded them by their hard stone surrounding. True to its title, the sculpture is a marriage of different associations: the monolithic materiality of the limestone, common to the grandest architectures of central London, with the soft,



'Megaflora' installation view

form-fitting womenswear; familiar and gendered, bodily and intimate.

Accompanying the exhibition is a short story by Rosanna McLaughlin in which a woozy protagonist suffers from spontaneous hallucinatory events. She is plagued by involuntary flashbacks of objects' past lives, recollecting the hands that passed over their surfaces and the rooms in which they were constructed and assembled. A motorbike rips past her and dissolves before her eyes into a disjointed 'confluence of myriad materials and processes', before being 'transported to a factory in Sydenham, where people stood over electrified tanks of liquid encrusted with turquoise metallic residue'. She sees the bike's exhaust pipe plucked from a tank amid scores of others now coated with nickel-chrome. The malady spreads from perceptions of surrounding ephemera to perceptions of herself, including a revelation that her body is shot through like a plant's stem – a hollow void which ruptures the illusion that a human frame is in any way distinct from the world around it.

The surprise of the empty interior is staged at a monumental scale (within the modestly sized gallery) in the titular sculpture *Megaflora*, 2021, an aluminium bramble sandcast with the proportions of a tree trunk. Upon approach, it is solid, rough and spiny. Its other side, however, discloses a central chasm via a great split, through which the router marks left by the casting process are unabashedly visible.

Beyond the bramble at the far wall hang two large silk satin fabric works (*Soft Sediment Deformation*, *Photosynthesising Body*, one subtitled *Diagonal Empress Wu*, 2021, and the other *Horizontal Empress Wu*, 2020). Both close-ups of the veined leaves of giant 'Empress Wu' Hosta plants, the coral-pleated contours of their surfaces ripple in tight wavelets as they catch the light. The shimmer is suggestive of the animacy – what Jane Bennett would call a 'vibrant materiality' – that runs through 'Megaflora' and sparks a circuit through it. Channer does not use materials, so to speak, but rather enlists them as collaborators in her process of sculptural investigation.

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