

Alice Channer

Soft Shell

13th September – 10th November 2013

The exhibition *Soft Shell* at Kunstverein Freiburg is the first solo exhibition of the British artist Alice Channer (* 1977, Oxford, GB) in Germany. Channer's sculptures can be associated with the generation of British artists such as Richard Deacon and Tony Cragg, who became internationally renowned in the 1980s. Their work synthesised sculptural abstraction with metaphors relating to the social or the natural, as well as found objects with traditional casting and modelling procedures. They experimented with the structures and textures of various pure materials like wood, metal and bronze and combined these with found material, e.g. used linoleum. A decade later, other British artists achieved international success, such as Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas. The early work of these artists redefined sculpture as an assemblage of found objects, which are enriched with associative narratives, comparable to the words within the syntax of a sentence. At this time, traditional production processes of sculpture received less attention, as the previously dynamic intersection between a self-reflexive, artificial and abstract formal language and the outward facing associations of found objects were separated.

Alice Channer reactivates aspects of this former synthesis. Her sculptures, which she produces by combining traditional and highly modern construction processes, act as synthetic replacements for both natural and industrial forms as well as for structures of self-reflexive artificiality. They erode the difference between organic and synthetic as well as between real and artificial, which had already been diluted in our digital, post-industrial culture. Instead of tending towards direct representation of natural phenomena, her work seems to create alternative realities produced by materials and creation processes rivalling those of nature.

The exhibition *Soft Shell* occupies the extensive hall with a series of new sculptures. They stimulate the audience to reconsider habitual experiences of not only the relationship between artworks and the space that they occupy, but also to the world outside of the parameters of an art installation. *Chlorine* (2013) is made of blue polyester foil applied to the glass of the skylight, making it appear like the surface of a body of water reflecting the colour of the sky. In turn, the floor of the exhibition space below becomes like a seabed hosting the growth of ecosystems separate from those above the surface. The resulting otherness and distance of the different ecosystems corresponds with the way in which the outright artificiality of Channer's sculptures alienates them from everyday objects, bestowing them with a fantastical, almost supernatural aura.

Tsunami (2013) dominates the exhibition hall of the Kunstverein. This work is a draped length of silk of 140 cm width, which is suspended from the ceiling and falls to the floor, where the ends spread to each side, like carpets laid out in opposite directions. The digitally printed image on the fabric derives from a monumentally expanded and vertically stretched photograph of leggings. The brown and grey pattern is reminiscent of snakeskin, combining associations to nature with abstract design. The piece protrudes vertically into the atrium, referencing the scale of the hall. Another work, *Exoskeleton* (2013), is made up of undulating polished steel plates, arranged on the floor like wide ribbons standing on their sides. Thin polished steel rods curve around the plates like spines. A flat light blue polyurethane resin strip winds between the steel arcs like a tongue or a tail. They are synthetic-industrial distillations of forms that can be likened with organic phenomena. Life-size 'fingers' cast from aluminium or bronze appear separated from their body. They are too bent to be human, but are modelled on a woman's hand and have then been transformed. The 'fingers' balance on the sharp edges of the wavy steel configurations like gruesome remains of a natural catastrophe, which has eliminated all other traces of human life. They share an unnatural metal shimmer with a series of aluminium cast 'rocks', which weigh the

silk of the hanging sculpture to the floor. The expectations of industrially produced polished aluminium counteract the appearance of the 'rocks' as forms created through natural sedimentation, or of the balancing 'fingers' as body parts. The obvious weight of the 'rocks' contrasts the illusion of their weightlessness created through the pattern on the silk surrounding them.

Fixed to the walls in the ground floor and directly above on the first floor are azure blue, long bent shapes of polyurethane resin with titles such as DFR1123 (2013) or ID2404 (2013). These letter and number codes suggest an impersonal, industrial production rather than a subjective creative process of an artist in the studio. But these casts of different textiles like leggings and halter dresses do also seem to be created through natural forces, like seaweed or fossilised roots. However, their synthetic colour and translucency lead associations away from nature and towards the artificial world of industrial plastic production methods and 3D printing. On the floor of the upper gallery lie two flat, polished aluminium casts that have been bent to shape two curves: Nanoparticle (2013). Unlike the waveforms standing on their edges on the ground floor, this sculpture resembles large ribs that have been washed ashore and laid on their back. The upward curved forms suggest the possibility to flow, which then again appears impossible due to the way they have been arranged on the floor.

The exhibition *Soft Shell* challenges culturally conditioned expectations to categorise sculptures as either natural (based on found objects), representational (figurative), or formalist. Channer's practice instead proves that sculptures are neither images nor abstractions, but their unique coalescence. Because of the way in which her sculptures unite organic and synthetic connotations, they appear unsettling in relation to the space they occupy: it is neither artificial, fictional or real. Instead, the exhibition space becomes an unstable alternative, which is enticing, but requires slow habituation, as if to different laws of gravity.

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