

Alice Channer: Invertebrates

Hepworth Wakefield 16 February to 12 May

During her pre-opening talk and tour for 'Invertebrates', British mixed-media sculptor Alice Channer explained the exhibition space's irregular geometry. It was, she said, a room 'without right angles'. The curious side-effect of this design was that it made the gallery tricky to visualise, disabling her method of recalling locations from memory to notionally place works before installation. Despite or perhaps because of this resistance to mental fixity, the relationship between art, walls, floor and gallery expanse in 'Invertebrates' is handled with complete control. Being unable to keep an image of the empty exhibition in mind has, rather unexpectedly, served Channer well. There is a fully considered interplay between the collection of works – comprising metals, textiles, marble and lumps of concrete, all made this year specifically for the Hepworth – and its surroundings. Moreover, Channer's intellectual effort, her attempt to hold, measure and manipulate the elusive Hepworth locale in mind, has yielded an atmosphere of ludic virtuosity; a mood one suspects is only possible with an artist in total command of a given space.

For example, the viewer initially steps into a deft spatial inversion: Channer has positioned works as if the exhibition entrance were its exit. Formally speaking this means there is a busy concentration of objects on entry, which tapers off towards the vast floor-to-ceiling window at the other end of the space. As such the entire room is bathed in incredible natural light, giving the impression that Channer's works have rushed in through the opening of a great luminous portal. If this positioning suggests a horizontal dynamic, placing viewers within the flow of a frozen stream of objects, then *Homo Sapiens* focuses attention on the vertical. They are two large sheets of heavy crêpe de Chine – a rich fabric that is one of Channer's signature materials – unfurled from the ceiling to an excess that spreads across the gallery floor and is held flat by bars of grey marble. Channer has used similar works to draw attention to the full spread of exhibition space in displays at the Approach in 2011 and South London Gallery in 2012, but in *Homo Sapiens* digital prints on the fabric's surfaces are of long straight brown hair as opposed to the material abstractions that covered earlier incarnations. Subsequently, the effect of a dynamic flow across the gallery's vertical axis is accentuated through a kind of circuitous visual metaphor: does the hair drape like cloth or is it the other way around? This shifting territory helps *Homo Sapiens* exude an irresistible suggestion of weight, of gravitational pull with the body as its measure.

Channer has actually said of her practice that 'the work is me', suggesting a symbolic relationship between the art and the artist's body. Both exhibitions at the Approach and SLG drew attention to this body centricity, titled respectively 'Body-Conscious' and 'Out of Body', so it is tempting to see *Trogodyte* and *Stalacmite*, long freestanding slips of denim-like aluminium, and other works as essentially different parts of Channer. But although the suggestion of a body is still present in titles like *Spine* and *Surrogate Limb*, there is a determined move away from privileging human frames in the anthropomorphism at play. In *Spine*, curved steel rods are spread across the floor, over and underlaid with thalassic forms in polyurethane resin. They look, on first encounter, similar to paper miracle fish paused in the fortune-telling process. But these are invertebrates; snakes, actually, slithering through steel waves that Channer has fabricated in reference to minimalist door handles in the Wakefield lavatories. An idiosyncratic choice, but it works. In the vicinity of *Spine*, both *MAR108* and *MAL001*, two lengths of polyurethane resin draped over wall pegs, look different from other iterations similar to this series of works that have appeared in previous shows. Before they recalled scarves or detachable cuffs left by someone, a trace of a weight, however scant, removed from the shoulders or wrists of a body and transferred to the gallery walls.

Alice Channer
Invertebrates 2013



Here, the sun seeping through their yellow pigment, they become the shed translucent skins of phosphorescent reptiles.

Graduating from the Royal College of Art in 2008, Channer's practice has developed at a startling pace and 'Invertebrates' captures her in the process of another leap forward. From shifting perspectives to indeterminate biomorphs, the viewer is propelled through the gallery by a polyphony of confidently executed ideas. In this weightless digital age, Channer's work should be essential viewing for those who still believe in the concrete charm of significant form. ■

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