

The approach, 1st Floor, 47 Approach Road, Bethnal Green, London E2 9LY

Alice Channer: Synthetic Fibres



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Review by Alex Borkowski

While the bulk of Alice Channer's practice is non-figurative, the current solo exhibition of her recent work at The Approach seems resolutely concerned with bodies. Her concern with the material culture in which we house and clothe ourselves takes a fascinating turn when considered terms of the cult of increasing immateriality that characterises the digital age. She creates spatial arrangements from which bodies are simultaneously evaporated and evoked, engaging the viewer in strange and shifting embodied perspectives.

The focal point of the exhibition is a set of twin sculptures: the titular 'Synthetic Fibres' (2014) and 'Deepwater Horizon,' (2014) named for the BP vessel that leaked 4.9 billion barrels of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. The sculptures are situated opposite each other in the gallery, sprawled on the floor in swirls of mirrored steel and black SuperMatt. The aqueous shapes are incongruous with the stiff material and precise laser cut lines that compose them. As one circulates around the works, the visual referents most strongly evoked are the aerial shots that permeated mainstream media following the BP disaster. These ubiquitous, and ominously beautiful, images documented the relentless creeping of toxicity towards the coastline as oil coated the surface of the water with a suffocating, shimmering skin.

Rising from Channer's synthetic topographies are stiffened vest tops, maxi dresses and leggings encrusted with metallic paint. On this vertical plane, the perspective shifts from an aerial distance to an intimate anthropic scale as the silver outfits stand empty next to the viewer like petrified spectres. Channer also coils embossed snakeskin polyester into lumped spirals resembling igneous rock formations or perhaps chemically induced excrescences.

The cheap lycra and polyester of our everyday attire thus become intertwined with large scale environmental disasters. As Kari Rittenbach remarks in a brilliant accompanying text, sleek synthetic fabrics eerily echo their malignant means of production: this is an aesthetic 'idealised in the anguilliform flickering of an eel, or inky iridescence of a seeping oil slick.' Liquid leggings are perhaps the consummate vestments of our time: their wet look casually and unabashedly declares that we are swathing ourselves in petroleum products. This iteration of the 21st-century body presents itself as a lacquered and slippery surface.

The exhibition in The Approach's one room gallery space also includes 'Zero-G' (2014), which consists of six small casts of sharp rock-like polyps dotted along the wall. These pre-historic geological formations are remade hyper-new in white plaster, shiny nickel, and gelatinous blue resin. The rock formations also appear in 'Tsunami' (2014), as a glimmering cast aluminium boulder rests on the floor in front of a digital print that situates its likeness in high definition against a blurred snakeskin background. Here we see, perhaps, an exploration of the strange outcomes when organic matter is converted into chemical products and digital images. Everything is subject to changes of states as it is incorporated into an environment dominated by synthetic amalgams and flat screens.