

Alexandra Bircken

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Coline Milliard



LONDON In a recent interview, New Museum curator Laura Hoptman suggested that Alexandra Bircken's delicate assemblages of wool, twigs and found objects demonstrated an enthusiasm for the handmade reminiscent of the back-to-the-land movement of the '60s and '70s. And indeed, like the American exodus that drew hundreds of city dwellers to the countryside in quest of a better life, Bircken's signature knitted sculptures seem infused with nostalgia for a time when what mattered was making things, not buying them.

Today more than ever, the insistence on the handmade has the feel of a manifesto, one that Bircken develops with each new exhibition. If until now she has mainly produced freestanding sculptures, her eight-piece solo show at Herald St seemed to unfold like a single installation; it could be a design for a way of life. Leaning against the wall in the first room were three large textile pieces stretched on metal frames (*Runaway*, *Receptor*, *Insert*; all works 2009). Combining variably tight weaves of colorful yarns and rectangular fabric remnants, these oversized dreamcatchers seem to describe an ideal community, kept together by a dense network of affectionate links.

As always in Bircken's practice, there is something intrinsically—and almost aggressively—feminine about the work. Her choice of materials and techniques once routinely associated with womanhood and later reclaimed by the feminist movement constitutes a female counterpoint to historically macho geometric abstraction. Bircken's work also refers to the minor miseries of domestic existence. In the gallery's second room was *Not Beyond Repair*, a clothes-drying rack draped with rags and adorned by a couple of pathetic rabbit stuffed animals; it evokes both a terror of the mundane and a yearning for escape.

In another corner of the gallery was *Icarus Survivor*, a red and white mobile made out of a slashed-open puffy vest, a kitschy woolen scarf, and plaster casts of bananas and cupcakes that has the defiant air of a fetish. This ritualistic feel is another characteristic of Bircken's work, seen again here in three Joseph Cornell-like box/frames, each containing numerous found objects evidently meant to conjure the spirit of a place or a person (*Setup*, *5 O'Clock*, *Thwack*). The artist seems to endorse the magical power with which some feminist symbols have been endowed, but not at the expense of making other, rather too obvious associations: *Setup* includes a fabric heart, pink textbook drawings of a uterus and three red-stained tampons neatly aligned in the bullet holders of a marksman's satchel. As visually efficient as Bircken's work may be, it leaves the viewer wondering if 21st-century artists shouldn't be inventing a new form of feminism instead of repeating ad nauseam the once-radical gestures of the '60s.

Above: *Runway*, *Receptor* and *Insert*, all 2009, mixed mediums, each approx. 86 by 63 inches; at Herald St.