



Alexandra Bircken Ties Knots at Kimmerich

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Due to her training in fashion before turning to sculpture, critics often liken German artist Alexandra Bircken's work to garments and textiles, describing it in terms of weaves and layers. Reviewing her 2007 New York solo debut at Gladstone Gallery, the Times' Karen Rosenberg wrote: "she gives yarn-sheathed branches the earthy sophistication of models in bulky wool sweaters." But in Bircken's new exhibition, Think of me at Kimmerich (through October 29), her latest works suggest a move away from such techniques or at least an attempt to strip them down to their most bare principles.

That's not immediately apparent upon entering the Tribeca gallery, where one's greeted by "Demolition Ball" (2011), an elegant sphere of warm brown leather hanging from the ceiling, looking like an out of shape punching bag. But the rest of the work remains comparatively simple in its materials, and more mysterious in its meaning. "FE203" (2011), a distorted rectangle of woven audio tape, ripples and shines in twisting stripes of brown and black, recorded data turned into a record of the artist's threading. A similar structure grounds "Runner in the Woods" (2011), a grid of branches fastened together by cloth and mortar. A copper-coated grape stem hangs at the piece's center, its delicate and precious form seeming all the more vulnerable surrounded by such rugged materials. At the rear of the gallery the ceiling-hung piece "Reel Deal" (2011) is the show's most anthropomorphic, its bundles of hemp rope evoking five heads of hair. They also give the entire space the smell of fresh hay, appropriate considering the many pastoral components on hand.

Surrounding pieces push the textile aesthetic into other media, and are the exhibition's most engaging. What looks like a gold-painted bundle of rope, "Knochen" (2011), turns out to be a bronze cast full of notches and crevices, and resembles some odd item from a natural history museum's geological collection. The cheekily titled "Uknit I" (2011) takes the exhibition's knitting motif to an absurd, medieval extreme. Bircken created a chainmail-like pattern of interlocking steel magnets on a huge nine feet by nine feet metal board. The effect remains subtle, despite the materials' imposing size and weight, and the magnets seem to ripple against their weathered backdrop of dull gray. It may look just like the weave of a wool sweater, but its sophistication is hardly earthy. In these and other dramatic departures from form Bircken finds new ways of stretching a potentially constraining categorization of her work.