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Alexandra Bircken “Recent Work” at Herald St, London

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The piece of material that lines the area between the legs on a pair of tights is called a ‘gusset’, a word of Middle English origin that feels old in the mouth. It is somehow bawdy and tired, hard and soft – a soft double ‘s’ combined with a rather ugly ‘g’ and a straightforward, everyday ‘t’. The word has its etymological root in the Old French word gousset or gousse – which means husk or shell, because this layer is designed to strengthen and protect. In essence then, the gusset is a small, soft piece of armor – usually in the shape of an elongated oval – which provides a thin layer of extra covering for the wearer as well as protecting this vulnerable area of garment from wear and tear. The seam that runs between the two legs is put under stress when, say, one sits on the floor cross-legged, because the thighs open and pull away from one another, testing the stretch of the material: a small moment of everyday tension.

Two works by Alexandra Bircken, Repeat I and Mixed Race (all works 2012) employ tights put under this kind of strain – sections of the garments are stretched and nailed to the wall as though they might be trophies or animal skins. Repeat II in particular makes use of the gusset section on several pairs of tights, half in a ‘nude’ beige and half in black, which Bircken has arranged in a chequerboard pattern, sewn together and stretched against the wall. Some of them have a rather old fashioned rose pattern, which is designed to sit at the top of the thighs. Being that they are designed to provide a thin protective layer of extra skin, tights share some of skin’s qualities and shades. The title of Mixed Race, in which sections of tights have been arranged in a less regular pattern, gestures to skin colour, and Bircken has used shades that run from sheer black through to a deep ‘American Tan’ as it is known constructing an amalgam or hybrid form of skin.

On finding a pair of twigs that had wrapped around one another, so that they resembled a pair of tiny skinny legs and a curving pair of thighs and buttocks, Bircken adapted a pair of tights to create a pair in doll-like proportions, and dressed the twigs in them, which lends them an uneasy human quality. Twiggy is all skin and bone – no pleasant sensuous flesh to soften it, and its hardness is accentuated by the fact that one of the twig ‘feet’ is held in a metal clamp. Bircken’s emphasis on husks and skins (gousse) can also be seen in Twins, a pair of wall-based sculptures made by casting collapsed balls of wool in bronze. Hung on the wall together, these resemble breasts, and though the soft quality of the wool can still be perceived from the cast, and the fleshy quality of breasts may be present in the mind, what is left is armor hard. Similarly, Bircken has dismembered some old motorbiking leathers – a section of arm and leg – in which one can recognise the aspects of the wearer’s body, particularly around areas of movement and tension – a knee or elbow crease – the armor has taken on some of the body’s qualities.

Bircken's sculptural interest in these points of tension and protection, of skin and bone, is also present in Jungle Camp (Spax Galore). The word gusset is also used in architecture and building to describe a strengthening element used to support a corner joist. Bircken creates her own form of architectural structure out of twigs, using fabric bandages dipped in concrete to join the twigs together. In the rear gallery is another large sculpture made from twigs, Chariot, which has a decidedly different tone. Full of movement, this twig structure sits atop a bicycle frame and a skateboard, giving it the look of an improvised vehicle. Strung on the twigs are a variety of elements, which look like the kind of litter one might see caught on branches, walking by trees near a road on some bankrupt morning: can lids, scissors, pieces of fabric and hair. And yet they also seem as though they might be ingredients for some spell, or the collected materials of a survivalist living 'off the grid'. In this work it is not the physical skin that has been stripped away, but rather a skein of value and worth. The material value of the objects – tin, wool or copper – is emphasised by Bircken in this sculpture, rather than their values which we emphasise in our systems of trade. As Chariot displays a basic structure, a skeletal picture of the world: an array of basic elements and materials around which we construct the delicate flesh of life and structures that protect it. (Laura McLean-Ferris)