

Hausrat / Household assets: Alexandra Bircken

May 12 - September 2, 2012

Der Kunstverein, seit 1817. Hamburg

On the first floor of its premises in Hamburg, Kunstverein Hamburg is presenting the first institutional solo exhibition of works by Cologne-based artist Alexandra Bircken, who was born in 1967. The show will primarily feature recent works produced between 2010 and 2012.

The title of the exhibition, Hausrat, meaning “household assets” or “household objects”, can be taken literally. The assortment of objects filling the exhibition space all have to do with household and home in one way or another. Many are plucked straight from the domestic environment – such as ironing boards, sledge runners and carpets – while others play on associations of domesticity or convey the sense of “home” as something offering cover and shelter. Detritus that would generally be regarded as refuse is given a new, modified form: Sweepings are permanently preserved in latex and shrivelled fruit and dried leaves are arranged into still lifes to produce what might be called inventory snapshots“ of domesticity frozen in time. Fittingly, one of the pieces featured in the show is entitled “Accumuli“, while another is called “DNA“ (both from 2012).

The materials Bircken uses play an extremely important role in defining her sculptures. Drawing both on “worthless“ scraps and materials traditionally used in the arts and crafts, she repurposes them by applying various handicraft techniques and assembling them into works of art. Besides materials that are typically processed into something else, like wool, fabric and cement, Bircken also works with objets trouvés taken from her natural surroundings and everyday environment.

These found objects serve as raw material, but they also serve as a kind of “text“ projecting a myriad of connotations, social distinctions and symbols. Certain articles of clothing, for example, help to communicate their wearers’ attitudes and status and to set them apart from members of other social groups. When moulded into the cast of a bathtub and coated in dyed plaster, as in “Mud Bath“ (2012), however, they are transformed into a single shell delineating the shape of a different object altogether, merging with it and with one another so completely that they are hardly recognisable as items of clothing at all. Mud Bath is only one of a number of Bircken’s works that implicitly refer to the affinity between outer covering and actual skin. Materials, after all, are also archetypical textures, and as “membranes“ of a sort, they can enclose and envelop things in many different ways – serving as clothing, shelter or even as a sail, for example – and can embody very diverse tactile and psychological qualities.

For her installation “Cagey“ (2012), the artist fashioned a shell woven from cement, strips of material and scraps of clothing, creating something resembling a primitive tent that evokes warmth and shelter and at the same time appears extremely fragile and anything but impermeable. Although the sculpture is fitted with wheels and is thus potentially mobile, it gives the impression of having been “stranded“ in the exhibition – much like the piece “Chariot“ (2012), for which Bircken mounted various found objects such as straw, bits of rubber and lumps of coal onto a well-worn skateboard and an old bicycle frame.

By bringing together and interweaving the artificial and the natural, the hard and the soft without implying any sort of

hierarchical relationship or value, Bircken challenges our tendency to think in terms of dichotomies and the preconceived notions and role expectations to which we so easily fall prey – and whose hold is so difficult to break once we have become entrapped. Indeed, the idea of entrapment is a recurring theme in Bircken's work. Many of her pieces resemble textile "spider's webs" in which various objects such as children's toys, pieces of clothing or branches and stones are entangled. The form and function of the individual found objects recede into the background as they transcend them and are transformed in an artistic embodiment of the idea of metamorphosis and organic development. Thus many of Bircken's new pieces convey the idea of movement and change in two ways – more obviously by evoking sails and vehicles, and less evidently by showing up the fundamentally changeable and constantly shifting nature of individual objects themselves.

The exhibition is supported by Westag & Getalit AG and Adolf Fette.