

Karla Black, Fruitmarket, Edinburgh review - airy free-for-all

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By Mark Sheerin

A retrospective of the abstract sculptor highlights her idiosyncracies



Karla Black, 'Adds Up' (detail), 2017. Glass, Vaseline, plaster, scrim. Courtesy Galerie Gisela Capitan, Cologne and Modern Art, London. Photo: Karla Black

As Karla Black's first retrospective opens to the public, the institution she has paired with, Fruitmarket, also reopens with a new £4.3 million extension. In lockdown, the Edinburgh gallery has had the builders in.

And from the fragile yet powerful works in this new show, it would appear, despite peaking covid rates in the Scottish capital, that the art scene might have survived the worst.

Black is avowedly a sculptor, and the first two exhibition spaces are given over to sculptural objects assembled into the type of exhibition one might have seen pre-lockdown. The works conform, loosely, to a shared aesthetic: in this case, delicate abstract forms such as clouds; slim paper monoliths, in light

pastel shades; forms that either sit messily on the wooden floor or appear to float in mid-air on thread, tape, or decorative chains; forms that lack finish and seem to invite touch (**main picture: *Adds Up*** (detail), 2017).

But spend a little time here and idiosyncracies become visible. The works jostle for oxygen and their layout is irregular; if this is a retrospective, it is not a very formal one. Three of the hanging sculptures present themselves as paintings: fields of colour and pictorial marks on rectangular backgrounds; and so *Recommend*, 2013, *Includes What's Wanted*, 2016 and *Personal*, 2018 all chafe at the definition of sculpture. Elsewhere, synthetic materials have been crumpled and plaster or paint has been dusted. The curation appears as ad hoc as the works: not a display of expensive trinkets, but rather a dynamic array of playful experiments. "Retrospective" suggests a collection set in stone rather than this airy free for all.



Each plaque carries a list of materials, and, famously, these materials include cosmetics, packaging and Vaseline, along with more traditional art supplies, themselves often only used raw, as powder. Perhaps the most outlandish work in this respect is called *Better*, 2010/21 (**pictured right**). This consists of the dried remains of the heartburn remedy Gaviscon, as two bottles have been poured out onto the wooden floor; the flaking floorboards now look drought stricken.

From nail varnish to spray tan, such readily available materials offer Black an immediacy which would be lost in the mediums of wood, bronze or stone. The artist has said that art galleries offer the chance to behave in manner proscribed in most other public spaces, and there is a touch of anarchy here. Her plaster is unmixed, her paint not dry, her works could sag, fade, topple or scatter. It has been said this is a look back at childhood with explorative play as therapy. Black frequently sites child psychoanalyst Melanie Klein as an influence.

Klein knew that play was a serious matter. The Fruitmarket's Upper Gallery is awash with the colour pink: an extensive carpet of plaster and pigment. The installation bears a cryptic title – *Punctuation is pretty popular: nobody wants to admit to much*, 2008-2021 – and is itself punctuated by a number of spools of pink thread which the artist has cast into the mix; they have made little tyre marks where they roll away from the viewer. The longer one looks, the more spools one sees, and the contrast between these fine tangles of thread and the immensity of the colour field becomes uncanny – as if these threads were the fragile chains of association which an analyst might follow back to a recovered memory of infant trauma.

Black rejects the term feminine to describe her work and indeed pink-for-a-girl is a critical trap which one would like to avoid. But thread, on the other hand, occupies a long tradition of female art from Anni Albers to Louise Bourgeois. Therefore, *Punctuation...* weaves in women's art and women's historical work, and perhaps uses its stereotypical colour to suggest that childhood conditions you for one or both of those two activities in later life.

The final space in Black's show is a former warehouse adjacent to the existing gallery. If the rest of Fruitmarket is light and currently filled with pale colours, the new space creates a very different mood for Black's final installation: it is darker, more substantial, and richer. Seen at first through a curtain of gilded threads, her new site-specific commission, *Waiver for Shade*, 2021, comprises a hopscotch of square outlines, delineated in soil, leading to a soil mound. This too glistens with square patches of gold and copper leaf, and similar foil pieces are scattered around the perimeter of the space and gently flutter from time to time on the far wall.

Since most of the light here is a diffuse spotlight glow, the first impression is magical. The veil of thread sparkles as you approach and filters the entire enigmatic scene like a piece of lo-fi Augmented Reality (AR). But the focus soon becomes the earthiness, the earthboundness of this scene, and therein lies the tension in Black's work between cosmetic SFX and abject materials, such as chalk, cardboard boxes and the toilet paper scrunched on the warehouse wall for a piece called *Not Granted: Untie*, 2021. Incidentally, toilet paper doubles as art material and lockdown panic purchase.

It may sound alarmist, but the mound of earth is just about the size of that a gravedigger might displace. One may re-open the museums, but this covid-fear gets everywhere, and extra mural ideas duly infect Black's work. The white cube-like Fruitmarket may offer a self-contained space for art and seal it with a boundary work called *Fences Kept*, 2021. But these daubs of wet paint across the Market Street windows and doors are to invite visitors in, not keep them out. It may be said that abstract sculpture and global pandemics now co-exist in a public realm where fences have never been more notional.