

Fresh space for fruitful creativity

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Karla Black's work is the first on show in the Warehouse, a new addition to Edinburgh's Fruitmarket gallery



The newly-redesigned Fruitmarket gallery in Edinburgh © Ruth Clark

Gareth Harris

In a former nightclub just by Waverley train station in Edinburgh stands a mound of earth dotted with patches of gold and copper leaf, framed by strands of metallic thread hanging from the ceiling. The installation by artist Karla Black fills the Warehouse, a new gallery space at the Fruitmarket, one of Scotland's most influential contemporary art venues. The exhibition — *sculptures (2001—2021): details for a retrospective* — spans the entire gallery space, featuring works made by Black over the past two decades.

Fruitmarket, closed since August 2019 for a £4.3m capital development, has now expanded into the former fruit and vegetable warehouse located next to its current venue on Market Street. Fiona Bradley, Fruitmarket's director, outlines the building's former footprint on a whistle-stop tour, detailing the scale of the conversion and the venue's history.

The stretch of buildings alongside the train station were built as warehouses between 1893 and 1931. The original Fruitmarket gallery opened in 1974 with an impressive programme of shows dedicated to artists such as Frank Stella and Tamara Krikorian. The Electric Circus nightclub occupied the adjacent space in recent years; when the club owner offered the lease, Bradley jumped at the chance.

“Upstairs, it was untouched and had an incredible material resonance; there were still fruit and veg hoists in the roof,” Bradley says. Three different dance floors built one on top of the other were all knocked out under the architectural plan conceived by Reiach and Hall Architects of Edinburgh. “It was more a case of stripping out than converting,” she adds, pointing to the most striking architectural intervention, a slatted wall facing the street crafted from joists and floorboards derived from the bygone club.



The contemporary arts space has undergone a £4.3m redevelopment © Ruth Clark

The gallery relaunch inevitably stalled as the pandemic unfurled but the development stayed on track, funded by a host of private and public bodies. The governmental body Creative Scotland contributed £1.5m while local philanthropists and notable art world figures such as the gallerists Iwan and Manuela Wirth and artist Martin Creed also backed the expansion project, reflecting Bradley’s clout.

Bradley is clearly relieved and excited. The existing exhibition galleries have been refurbished while a new learning studio and accessible main staircase complete the overhaul. The Warehouse meanwhile has “immense potential”, Bradley says, adding that Jyll Bradley and Daniel Silver will create new commissions for the space following Black’s intervention.

Black’s “Waiver for Shade” (2021) piece, with its interplay of light and dark, riffs perfectly with the industrial steel-framed, brick-lined Warehouse; the shimmering leaf and thread is enticing, prompting visitors to excavate the space and pick out the patterns scraped in the soil across the floor. The walls, daubed with protruding clumps of toilet paper smothered in eye shadow, are another realm completely. Vaseline smears on the opposite window are a witty anarchic touch.



'Waiver for Shade' (2021), one of the pieces in artist Karla Black's retrospective in the new space © Neil Hanna

Black first gained access to the Warehouse in early May, creating the piece over the course of two weeks. Bradley is convinced she is the right artist to baptise the new space, bringing a "forced moment of raw creativity" into the Fruitmarket. "To have an artist work in that experimental, improvisatory way is a total joy," she says.

Among the historic works on show in the existing galleries is a piece made from the indigestion medicine Gaviscon, which has been mixed and shaped into a relief that sits neatly on the gallery floor, setting and hardening to resemble a section of a tree or the outline of a brain ("Better"). Other key early pieces on show in the lower gallery include "Recommend" (2013) made from cotton wool pads and the pink polystyrene tower, "Don't Depend" (2006).



Scottish artist Karla Black © Ronnie Black. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne



Fruitmarket director Fiona Bradley © Chris Scott

Bradley writes in her accompanying catalogue essay that much is made of the materials Black uses: cosmetics, over-the-counter medicines, cleaning products and packaging as well as paint, paper and plaster more usually found in fine art. Black bristles however at the suggestion that her work has in the

past been labelled “feminine”.

“It’s ridiculous. My work is really big and heavy, there’s tons of materials, the scale is massive; there is huge endurance in the making. I’d say that strength and endurance could instead be seen as feminine,” she says, in a lively face-to-face meeting. The layers of soil weighted on the ornate floors of the 15th-century Palazzo Pisani at the 2011 Venice Biennale, when Black represented Scotland, spring to mind.

Everyone thinks about art differently, she reiterates, prompting a considered analysis of the different contexts for interpreting her creations. “If my work has a theoretical base, then it’s a psychoanalytic one. If we’re thinking about art psychoanalytically, as a civilising of the [behavioural] drives, we are thinking through Kleinian rather than Freudian psychoanalysis,” she says, referring to late Austrian psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s system for gleaning meaning through physical exploration of the world.

The stacked, sandwiched, floating sculptures gathered in this survey are monuments to the process of making. In the upper Fruitmarket gallery, Black has reimagined the work “Punctuation is pretty popular: nobody wants to admit to much” (2008/2021), a vast pink carpet made from plaster powder and powder paint. “It’s pure alchemy and totally transient,” Bradley says, pointing to thread looped around the ceiling. The powder might fall down the cracks and stay there forever, she adds, reflecting how Black’s work may be transient but remains indelible.

In the late 1990s, Black studied sculpture at Glasgow School of Art where she also took a postgraduate degree. At a show at Intermedia Gallery in Glasgow in 2001, she used washing powder and custard to create unconventional forms, developing her practice through “actions with materials”. “I was able to walk away and just see them as objects,” she says. “Untitled (2000, Alka-Seltzer in the rain)”, a piece that will be staged at the Fruitmarket, is a nod to live art (the work melts away as the tablets fizz and dissolve in the Scottish rain).

Black is unequivocal though about the medium she works in. “I’m quite adamant that I make sculpture,” she said in a talk given last year at Des Moines Art Center, Iowa, marking her first major museum show in the US. “I feel like the work skirts up against other mediums; it does get very close to performance art as well as painting and installation, but it pulls itself back all the time to say it’s autonomous sculpture,” she elaborates.



'Looking Glass Number 16' (2021) by Karla Black © Tom Nolan

The US show was clearly a milestone, and she relished showing her work alongside paintings and sculptures drawn from the collection by heavyweight American artists. “They gave me free rein. I asked, for instance, ‘can I have that work by Eva Hesse?’ It was a weird sort of paradise,” she recalls.

Talk turns to life post-Covid — will the art market correct and reset? Commercial pressures could stifle artistic production, Black says (patronage will arguably continue in some form, though). “You need to live and everyone makes their pact,” she says, “but it is getting more and more difficult for that raw creative moment to exist at art fairs, which are problematic.”

Art, she believes, gives us “permission for freedom”. As she said in Des Moines: “Art is a little fenced-off bit of civilisation in which we are given the permission to behave like the animals we are.”

To October 24, fruitmarket.co.uk