



Disclosing the Uncanny

31 Mar — 29 Apr 2017 at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London, United Kingdom



Disclosing the Uncanny. Courtesy of Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

6 APR 2017

Organic shapes seem to pulse with life on the walls, hanging in unctuous fleshy folds, like slow-dripping molasses. They are organic, ribbed like the undersides of mushrooms, like a coral reef, or like writhing heaps of worms, snakes, noodles, intestines, frozen in place, static yet moving. They are like wasps' nests, organic hive structures at once tantalising and making you recoil. Nearby are perfect white marble heads, classical busts from the hallowed halls of antiquity. Except they are blasted, broken, noses bent, eyes gouged out, parts missing, sliced off, lopped off, blasted away into oblivion. This is a weird room of bodies you are entering – they are present in their absence, in the suggestion of skin coloured velvet, of suggestive crimson, of human shapes familiar in their grotesque manipulation. In *Disclosing the Uncanny* (31st of March – 29th of April 2017) at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Norwegian artist Hanne Friis and Belgium-based Iraqi sculptor Athar explore the fragility and visceral presence of the human body.

In the works of Hanne Friis, opposites collide in a litany of seeming contradictions – order/chaos, beauty/grotesque, natural/artificial, inside/outside, or, as she refers to herself, “Baroque-minimalist”. The drama, sensuality and movement of Baroque art find themselves



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translated into Friis's minimalist aesthetic through her unique treatment of raw material. Creating tactile sculptures, she carefully hand dyes textiles with pigments she has collected from natural materials she has foraged from the Norwegian landscape and her surroundings, such as lichen, birch bark, mushrooms, pinecones and other plants. This process, while time-consuming, imbues the fabric with soft, almost otherworldly yet, fundamentally organic colours. She then painstakingly begins to fold and bunch the fabric by sewing with a tiny needle.

The resulting sculptures here are made of materials such as silk velvet or wool, hanging on the gallery walls. "I always work with the space and the tension between different spatial elements," Friis explains. "I find it interesting to combine the intimate with the large-scale." These finished pieces bring to mind the human body, their organic shapes familiar, beautiful yet repulsive. "I am interested in the body's vulnerability and human mortality," explains the artist, "but also the power and violence of life." Through folds of fabric or coils of yarn, they give the impression of uncontrollable growth, of burgeoning, swelling, multiplying masses. The soft earthy colours are reminiscent of skin tones and more (for some parts are a deep crimson). Are we looking at parts of a body, or at natural landscapes? "I'm interested in the ambivalence and insecurity that the materials and their colours evoke," admits Friis.

This visceral element finds resonance in the works of Athar, whose striking stone sculptures explore the expressive potential of the contemporary human body. Classical-style figures and busts are hewed out of marble, only to be deformed, amputated, alienated and manipulated. Limbs are twisted, torsos amputated and faces seemingly sawed off or simply blown away. At other times, they are metamorphosed by hitting the stone for hours in a regular cadence, creating a trance-like, meditative state. Athar gives shape to his subjects' innermost thoughts, fears, agonies and suffering by distorting his sculptures through a variety of techniques, including carving, sandblasting, acid erosion and shooting. The distortions of stone depict the distortions of an internally tormented spirit, vulnerable to the violence of life. For the artist, a perfect body "is an unsuitable reflection of a person's physical and psychological fragility."

For Athar, growing up in various countries in his youth, after a childhood in Florence, has reinforced a sense of belonging that goes beyond geographical borders. This desire for a common human experience, transcending culture and time mingles with the images that permeated his childhood, of the Gulf War, themes of suffering and violence that became a part of the unfortunate fabric of his cultural heritage. As such, it is only when the perfect ideal, the perfect body is manipulated, Athar says, that "it begins expressing a reality representative of the human condition – a condition that finds entropy in its very essence." This sense of violence permeates each piece, the perfect marble subject to a variety of invasive acts, from being eaten away by acid to being blasted away physically with force. Natural processes, such as rain slowly eroding away stone over millennia are sped up, compacted and forced upon each piece of stone. "The work seeks to highlight an inevitability each one of us is subject to – our very own form of decline," explains Athar. "They embody an acceptance of time's natural processes and an acknowledgment of time as an element that bonds us. They aim to stand as a testimony for the possibility of beauty in the face of decay."

Entering the exhibition space is to enter a strange room of bodies. Friis's sculpture evades the walls, creating a space reminiscent perhaps of *The Upside Down*; somewhere fleshy, threateningly organic, pulsing with hidden life. Athar's sculptures, while hard and cold stone, capture the visceral bloody violence of the human condition, of an ongoing battle with this too, too fragile flesh. There may only be velvet and stone here, yet, somehow, there is

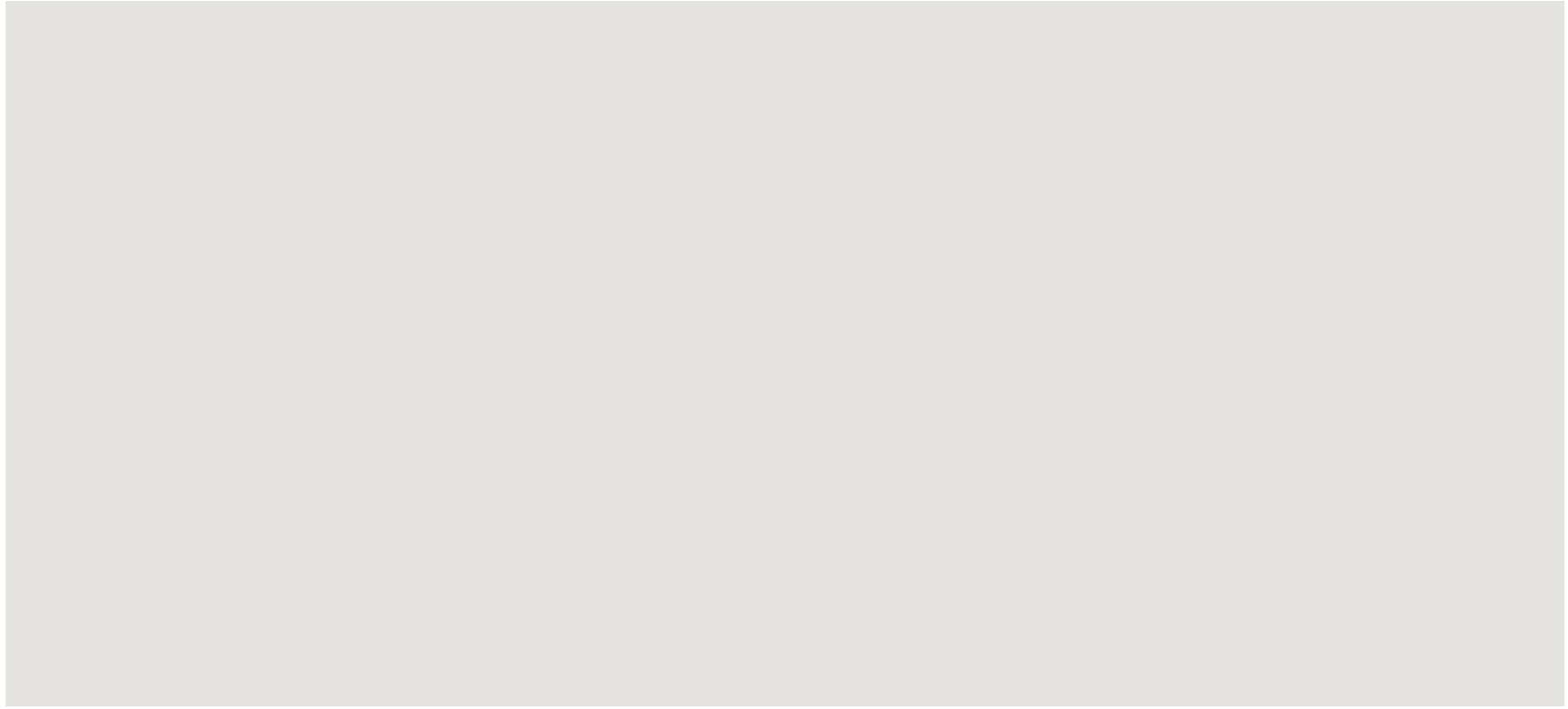
flesh everywhere.

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Opening hours

Tuesday to Saturday

From 11am to 6pm

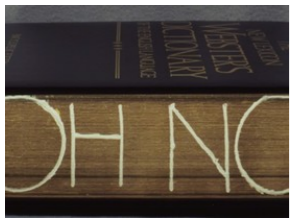
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Captions

1. Disclosing the Uncanny. Courtesy of Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery
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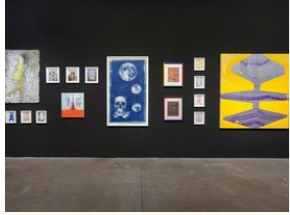
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