

# ARTFORUM

## REVIEWS

All Cities

## PRINT MAY 2018

### All Cities

Basel

Berlin

Salem, Massachusetts

Cairo

Chicago

Dublin

Guadalajara, Mexico

Hamburg

Istanbul

Lisbon

London

Los Angeles

Manila

Milan

Montreal

New Delhi

New York

Oslo

Paris

Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Portland, Oregon

San Francisco

São Paulo

Tallinn, Estonia

Vienna

Washington DC



Sonja Gerdes, *Talisman for Oxygenenergizer (Left)*, 2018, bronze, sheep's wool, 15 x 11 x 6 1/2".

## Sonja Gerdes

### CLOACA PROJECTS

Cloaca Projects is situated in a small, garage-like space on the old industrial edge of San Francisco, a rapidly changing city dedicated more and more to new technical systems of hyperefficiency. Sonja Gerdes's recent project for Cloaca portrayed uncertain states of relation with such technologies as human beings lurch into the future. Her suite of sculptures represented living creatures as they become augmented, undermined, or superseded by built extensions. Individually and as an ensemble, they functioned as signs of dystopian outcomes amid a scientific culture of optimism.

Two mismatched, wall-mounted talismans flanked the entrance, revealing upon close examination complex assemblages that used molded bronze understructures to graft natural forms (e.g., flowers) onto more clearly fabricated forms (metal and wire

armatures). There was something both aspirational and awkwardly perverse in these ambiguous combinations of nature and culture as they hung, static: Hand-knotted macramé was woven through thick openings in a blue-tinged metal apparatus whose surface texture resembled the folds and whorls of stiffened fabric.

A ring of charmeuse and polyester mesh curtains dominated the gallery within, pushing those two talismans near the door to the periphery of one's vision and partitioning off a space-within-a-space semi-visible through the dark hanging mesh. This permeable yet obscuring material had the weight and synthetic sheen of exercise clothing designed to "breathe," both inviting and repelling further entry into the demarcated interior. Stark white lengths of fabric declared in printed blue letters BREATHE and AIR FOR FREE, pointing to the invisible, life-giving substance. Curved to almost fill out the room, the hanging drapes allowed passage only along a narrow corridor to the back of the gallery.

Upon reaching the rear of the larger room, viewers encountered biomorphic ceramic forms that echoed the talismans' juxtapositions of organic forms with machine parts. An outsize breast was laid on the rough stone floor, covered in a synthetic pigment of the same cerulean hue; its nipple was fused with a gaudily decorated acrylic nail. Nearby, a giant spiderlike form was splayed out, half-squashed, atop a woolly sheepskin. The insect's bulbous thorax extrudes into machine-tooled exoskeletal plates, which branch into knobby vertebrate limbs held together with shiny silver nuts and bolts. These embalmed prototypes of hybrid figures seemed the remnants of some failed experiments for the future, while also representing a sort of elegy for lapsing species.

The impetus to conduct such futurist exercises—speculative, fantastic, and ambivalent—might oscillate among optimism, escapism, and loss. While humans are grappling with scenarios of extinction—machinery and raw capitalism insidiously overwhelming human agency, or climate change wiping out *Homo sapiens* altogether—the investment in science fiction signals not simply the collapse of hope when scientific, economic, and biological inventions and expectations seem to have failed, but the shaky transition during which sometimes startling theories and practices are proposed as replacements.

Turning back toward the entrance after reaching the rear of the gallery, viewers were confronted with a longer text printed on a curtain panel: an overarching manifesto for the show. Part mystic-cosmological poetry, part scientific tract, and part instruction manual, the series of statements proclaimed belief in the interconnectedness of all living and material things at the molecular level. Through invisible fluxes, this credo averred, oxygen transfer serves as soul-giving animator. Such exchanges paralleled the porous mode of circulation with which Gerdes impelled visitors into her larger project.

Pushing back into the circular curtained area, viewers were surrounded by magnified images of peacock spiders—half-gorgeous, half-menacing alien creatures—printed on the insides of the blue curtains. The floor there held one last island of devivified organismic appeal: a second oversize blue human teat, also laid out on a small sheepskin, but sculpted to appear deflated—soft, inviting, and seductive, yet with its anima hollowed out, conjuring a final transformational moment of the “born” becoming “built.”

—Brian Karl

All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY.

