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Claire Barclay

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 The Fruitmarket Gallery

Claire Barclay's exhibition *Openwide* offers two intriguing and seemingly quite different ways to approach her work: through new pieces made *in situ*, and via an elaborate display of small objects included in previous exhibitions by the artist. Both testify to her ability to imbue ambitious installations with a subtle sculptural aesthetic.

The two new works are upstairs. 'Caught in Corners', 2009, with its rendered straw bales and printed fabric, brings to mind an encampment, or perhaps the remains of one, a site of temporary domesticity, a place of refuge, of claiming ground. 'Subject to Habit', with its frames and mats, recalls a school gymnasium, an obstacle course, a site of disciplined activity, a place for testing the body. Both works imply gender: the sense of active opposition between them is palpable, leading to deeper ambiguities within each. And in both cases, touchstones of familiarity provide only a temporary frame of reference, because elements of abstraction or indeterminacy insistently undermine a referential reading.

With repeated visits I find these pieces belong in the gallery space more and more, but remain capable of disturbing it, oscillating between everyday familiarity and subversive estrangement. Small, but significant sculptural works, or unusual materials, posed or poised around larger elements, bring a gnawing awareness that these are not functional objects, utilitarian constructions, or even representations of them, but something more elusive. The presence of two dunce's caps amidst the varied array sounds a warning to critics trying to pin this sculptural language down.

Claims that artworks deconstruct binaries (stereotypically of inside/outside, male/female, presence/absence) abound in contemporary art discourse, to the extent that one wonders how art writers negotiate everyday life if such fundamental categories are so easily undone. It seems worth insisting on the unfixity and ambiguity of precisely such distinctions in relation to Barclay's work, however, because it produces real hesitations when one attempts to begin even a straightforward description of it. Language circulates around it, without seeming to get much of a purchase: you end up with a lot of similes, analogies, a lot of 'almosts', 'as ifs', 'perhaphses'.

Barclay has said that her shift away from 'readymade' materials to the machined or hand-crafted objects which have characterised her mature practice, was motivated in part by a desire to elude the easy associations which readymades tended to elicit. Part of the pleasure to be derived from her work, however, consists in trying to balance the associations one inevitably brings to it with the strange objecthood of the things which provoke these associations. Not quite fetishes, not quite relics, neither craft objects nor commodities, Barclay's things defy easy categorisation. They feel linked to the body, perhaps because they often include materials such as leather, clay, steel, wood or cotton, to which we have a tactile familiarity, but also because, the way they can evoke both graceful and awkward disposition in space, is resonant with our own embodied state.

'Openwide', 2009, itself, the pseudo-retrospective of small sculptural elements left over from previous site-specific works which occupies the Fruitmarket's ground floor, is a significant achievement. Barclay has constructed an unconventional, interlinked set of walls, troughs and ramps, providing the setting for the small pieces, never quite conceding to the need for vitrines or plinths as the supports on which museum objects out of their time or place are usually propped. 'Openwide' thus negotiates difficulties inherent in recapitulating these kernels of other wholes in a nuanced fashion, by making the small sculptures at home in a museological setting and rendering its modes of display uncanny.

The term 'site-specific' when applied to sculpture tends to bring to mind those settings in public space or in landscape marked by mythological narratives, by

historical resonances or by topographic particularities. While Barclay's exhibition isn't overtly engaged in this terrain, it nonetheless engages with the specificity of two crucial sites – studio and gallery – conflating, confusing them as spaces of production and display, and refusing to mystify either. If the studio is usually where artworks are born and, in Adorno's words, museums are like 'family sepulchers of works of art', this exhibition proposes more complex lifecycles for cultural forms.

Tellingly, Barclay describes her installations as 'very much a pause in an ongoing process', and it's worth reflecting on the temporal complexity of this pausing, for the pieces are not only in some sense arrested in the midst of their installation, but also arrested in the process of their dissolution. They are poised and precarious, just as they are familiar and uncanny. Perhaps the crucial driver of the interest Barclay's practice possesses, is that its many ambiguities are linked and layered, entwined and gathered together, just like the materials of which her installations consist.

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Above: Jonathan Horowitz, 'Official Vatican Portrait of Pope Benedict XVI Torn in Half (After Sinéad O'Connor)', 2008, framed c-print

Right: Jonathan Horowitz, 'Portrait of Chrissie Hynde (I hope the Muslims win)', 2003, inkjet print on vinyl

Below: Claire Barclay, 'Subject to Habit', 2009, installation view

