

HELEN MARTEN

«ALMOST THE EXACT SHAPE OF FLORIDA»

1 SEPTEMBER – 4 NOVEMBER 2012

PRESSINFORMATION: FRIDAY, 31 AUGUST, 11 AM

OPENING: FRIDAY, 31 AUGUST, 6-9 PM

Followed by summer party in the courtyard

To mark the reopening of the Kunsthalle Zürich in the new Löwenbräukunst complex, we present the first institutional exhibition by British artist Helen Marten (born in 1985 in Macclesfield, lives and works in London) as the second solo show to be staged at the Kunsthalle Zürich's renovated and extended premises. For «Almost the exact shape of Florida», Marten has created a new group of works which interweave the diversity of her work in terms of media – from sculptures to wall pieces and floor works – in a comprehensive installation.

Entwining real surfaces with implied linguistic scenarios, Marten pokes humorously at questions of ownership and dishonesty in materials, the relationship of object to artefact, and of package to product. Interested in the grammatical approximations made in workmanship, Marten's exhibition weaves constant conversations between counterfeit and camouflage. The idea of tracing around the outlines of substance – of hinting at recognisable information through disrupted form – is one that gives authority to the wonky, to the drunken and the misaligned. Image is continually tripped up by language, by a deliberateness of error that postures with all the concrete certainty of cultural recognisability. All plausible facets of the gallery space – walls, floor, circulation, aftertaste – are treated with equal consideration, with emphasis on the thought that the speed of delivery of an object can reveal different formal relationships, playing a crucial role.

In *Geologic amounts of sober time* (2012), four large silk-screened leather panels depict graphically flat portraits of Mozart. The surrounding environment of the image is immediately domestic, also canonized – it is proud: a Chippendale chair, a Windsor, an 18th Century bedstead, monochrome floor and horizons. No part of the scene is allowed to expand, always tucked to the edges of the frame or obscured behind a looming face. Shirt collars, hairlines and eyebrows are inflated to indecent scale, and with this obstinate flatness comes a retinal defiance of volume. Hair doesn't bristle, eyes don't blink and fabric does not fold. The image is a shorthand emblem of culture, of abstract prodigy, but as a character, it is fossilized, geologic, sober. Yet from the frames in which these screens rest, are hung bottles of alcoholic spirits, saturating the image with action, disrupting all with the possibility of slipping into a puddle of alcoholic solvency. There is a constant twitching and twisting between manual diagram and sensory catastrophe; lines are straight, black, clear, but could become drunk and walk off the screen at any moment. The action of screen-printing bundles with it the language of package making. From the way we stamp up fruit crates to the strains of ink rolled onto beer mats, the crispness of the dried ink line is one that implies authority and a definitive end destination. But like the alcoholic implications of the hanging bottles, all the materials and the baggage of wordiness (the anagrams and the metaphors) are given freedom to sprawl.

Marten handles reality codes, visual idioms and their exaggeration with a freedom that lends conventionally humble or overlooked ideas a new symbolism and grandeur: carbohydrate, pasta, packaging, the pavement are all inflated to newly meticulous study. The uncanny is lent familiarity and vice versa; where there is failure, it is cultivated; models and expectations are stripped bare, or given new levels, new meshes of meaning; things are too big, too flat, too lethargic. There is comedy, but it is thrashed out, analysed and deeply sincere. *More handles than fingers to count on* (2012) is a ceramic vessel that has numerous far too small, cartoon-like handles attached to its surface like a maple syrup bottle. The inscription "LAUDER" also appears in royal blue in many different typefaces above the dull beige-glazed surface. The reference to the cosmetic brand of the same name is clear, but the suggestion is also a misspelled, mispronounced command – an instruction to increase volume, to get louder, to deliberately bring too much, too many. It is an idea of masking error or flaw with over-saturation – of drowning out or covering up exactly in the same way as make-up creates the pretence of smoothness over an imperfect base. The rough-cut and

stained fabric below the pot surface behaves like its dumbly solid shadow, but unlike the posture of the glaze, the roots of manufacture are more overtly hand-wrought, coarsely patched together. In its scrappiness, it is a casual aside, a simple grounding base, but also provides for the next sequence involving the filling and emptying of codes through the dismantling of the classical art pedestal. An elongated opening also gapes mouth-like in the layering at the bottom half of the ceramic: it is a gap with no functional use, no offering of meaning. The invitation is to stick a hand inside, to test the space for density – to lose a finger perhaps, or meet unknown substance. Like much of the work in the exhibition, there is tension in the surface, a seething erotic play where the electrifying forces come from the missing or the overwrought: puffy pretzels, crisp pillowcase, droopy bronze entrails, swollen bundles of matches, off-cuts and out-takes. Raw surfaces meet edge to edge with hi-gloss polish, flat dry wallpaper holds oily suggestion and the wipe-clean or static free are forced into a reactive agency.

Marten assigns central importance to physical reality and craftsmanship in her work. In her selection of materials she explores the questions as to how expectation can be translated into material language: how material could be used for its specific location in a narrative; which materials are associated with which characteristics; and, correspondingly, already “belong” to a fixed set of associations. She selects everyday materials from the “warehouse” of the present – metal, particle-board, door handles, water bottles, clay and chicken bones – and turns their intended roles on their heads. The idea of touch (or lack of it) is visible in every work: drippy glue, improvised joints and split seams hold equal pace with perfect corners or obviously mechanised labour. Stone and metal can be given a humorous levity or shy weakness, whilst a raw surface that has been welded at a high temperature is made well behaved through the additional treatment of powder-coating.

The titles Helen Marten gives to her works are also pervaded with puns. *Hot Frost (Blueberry / Lime Ice / Glacier Ice)* (2012) plays with the paradox of “hot frost” but also with the label “hot”, of being “hip”, of the collision in temperatures between pace in making and consuming. This work consists of three male profile silhouettes made of Corian, a calcareous, heavy and fashionable material conventionally employed in the production of kitchen worktops. Coloured in the slightly frosty colours of pale blue, pastel lime and cold white, one has a hat, another glasses and the third a beard. Caricatures, their foreheads morph into the outlines of mountains and become snow-covered peaks, while the oversized heads, whose materiality evokes associations with snow or ice, are made to falter under threat of melting from the heat of the matches blobbily bundled onto their surface. There is something erotic in this absurd elongation of the heads into engorged peaks, a pictographic suggestion of desire, of a bodily swell in a statically slapstick action of melting and freezing, pooling in and out of legible shape.

The large group of works produced for exhibition here all share a commonality of forcing language to bend in between the outlines of recognisable shape. The muted and the mutable carry equal exotic potential, and Helen Marten's quickness of signalling and transportation sets up a space where even a peanut could be assumed to have almost the exact shape of Florida.

The Kunsthalle Zürich would like to thank the Präsidialdepartement der Stadt Zürich, the LUMA Foundation, and the Hulda und Gustav Zumsteg-Stiftung for their support.

Further information on the exhibition:

The exhibition travels to the Chisenhale Gallery, London, 23 November 2012 – 27 January 2013. Further venues are being discussed at the moment.

Events:

Please consult the latest information on our website: www.kunsthallezurich.ch.

Catalogue:

To mark this exhibition, the first monograph on Helen Marten with texts by Michael Archer, Ed Atkins, Kit Grover, Flint Jamison, Beatrix Ruf, Polly Staple and Richard Wentworth, edited by Kunsthalle Zürich in collaboration with further venues, will be published by JRP|Ringier.

Guided Public Tours (in German):

SUNDAY TOURS, 2 pm: 9.9. (Niels Olsen) / 23.9. (Rahel Blättler) / 7.10. (Niels Olsen) / 21.10. (Niels Olsen)
LUNCHTIME TOURS, Wednesday, 12.30 pm: 26.9. (Rahel Blättler) / 10.10. (Rahel Blättler)
EVENING TOURS, Thursday, 18.30 pm: 13.9. (Rahel Blättler) / 4.10. (Niels Olsen) / 25.10. (Niels Olsen)

New opening hours as of 1 September:

TUE/WED/FRI 11 AM – 6 PM, THUR 11 AM – 8 PM, SAT/SUN 10 AM – 5 PM, MO CLOSED

We would be happy to provide additional information and digital visual material:

Tel. +41 (0)44 272 15 15 or email presse@kunsthallezurich.ch.