

MACBA COLLECTION. BENEATH THE SURFACE

Exhibition from 11 October 2017 to 4 November 2018



Karla Black, *Particle Debt* [detail], 2014. MACBA Collection. MACBA Consortium. Private long-term loan. © Karla Black, 2017. Photo: Gasull Fotografia

REFLECTION ON SURFACE, its material condition and the expansion of the pictorial field have a significant place in contemporary artistic practices. How have forms such as painting and sculpture been altered and stretched so that matter itself is constructed as critical message? *MACBA Collection. Beneath the Surface* investigates the notion of surface as a privileged place for experimentation and meaning. A large number of the works on display explore postminimalist practices incorporating the critical content which they brought to the language of abstraction.

The Surface

'THE DEEPEST PART OF THE HUMAN BEING IS THE SKIN',¹ wrote the poet Paul Valéry in 1932. This statement was revived by Gilles Deleuze in 1969² to reclaim the value of surface as a privileged place of meaning. The pictorial act is also an art of surfaces. While it is undertaken strictly on the surface of the canvas, it is this, being limit and at the same time container, which opens up the possibility of representation.

In the first area of the exhibition, works which question the surface's language and its dialectics are presented. Through its deconstruction, painting is subverted and denied, transforming it into a performative, conceptual or antirepresentational action, even to the extent of its destruction or disappearance.

While still faithful, to begin with, to the idea of 'a painting', Ignasi Aballí places himself on the edges of painting with works that negate image and remove any possibility of fiction. In his pieces made with varnish or correcting fluid applied directly to the wall, the only indicator of the painting's presence is its very absence, its tracks. His works converse with the experimentation in material of Antoni Tàpies and Jean Dubuffet, who in the 1950s definitively overturn the traditional idea of a pictorial layer. Emphasising the corporeal nature of the pigment and other materials incorporated onto the canvas, they question the status of the painting as a space for stories or a window open to the world, and, with the incorporation of the most irrational and shapeless aspects of the human mind, replace it with the creation of a new reality. Perejaume takes this process further, activating the irreversible process of composting, by literally mashing up all the component materials of the painting. The result is *Compostatge de nou pintures, compostatge de sis pintures i compostatge d'una pintura amb marc i vidre* [Compost of nine paintings, compost of six paintings and compost of one painting with frame and glass] (1994), a humble sculpture which creates a metalanguage: a representation of painting out of 'unpainting'.

¹ Translated from Paul Valéry, «L'Idée fixe ou Deux hommes à la mer», *Œuvres*, vol. 2. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1960, pp. 215–16.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969, p. 20.

Lucio Fontana's physical interventions on canvas cause it to open up to the surrounding space. Fontana perforates and cuts the cloth which thus becomes a three-dimensional body instead of a flat medium. The experiments of other artists such as Robert Rauschenberg or Dieter Roth are carried out in a similar vein when they incorporate simple materials and edible substances to transmute the painting into an assembly or an object of everyday use.

The disappearance of painting has also been tackled from strictly conceptual premisses, as is the case with the artistic proposal of Art & Language. In their installation *Mirror Piece* (1965), the mirror becomes a different pictorial surface, generating reflection which questions the very capacity of representation.

In the surface's efforts to go beyond itself, the pictorial at times is superimposed on shapes in space, as happens in Ángela de la Cruz's objectualised canvases and Karla Black's sculptures. De la Cruz is interested in the relationship between the physical nature of painting and the imprint of the human body. Her deformed or broken frames and crumpled canvases preclude painting itself, in an act of rebellion against the authoritarianism practised by artistic tradition. Works such as *Clutter VII (Yellow)* (2004) make reference to the plastic bags and metal boxes used to keep dead bodies in after accidents, in a gesture of tragic anthropomorphism. For her part, Karla Black also sets out from the permativity of the human body in her sculptures made with all kinds of materials and items from everyday life. The artist constructs her volumes without forgetting the tactile nature of the materials, which explores from emotional premisses which are close to children's play and psychoanalysis.

Other exhibits displayed in this area spring from the political potential of the pictorial surface, such as Latifa Echakhch's installation *À chaque stencil une révolution* [To each stencil a revolution] (2007), which converts sheets of stencil paper, used to make revolutionary handbills in the 1960s and 70s, into a layer of chromatic wrapping. The formal triumph of pigment thus hides a profound denunciation.

On the other side of beauty

IN THIS APPROXIMATION to the pictorial layer, we can assert that the film-maker Derek Jarman expands the condition of the painting to the surface of the screen. In his last film, *Blue* (1993), which bears witness to his fight against Aids, Jarman does not work the colour from the materiality of the pigment (despite his being both painter and film-maker) but from the visuality of the cinematographic medium. The vision of a blue screen is turned into a narrative essay around this colour and an autobiographical story in the face of his illness. Jarman's vibrant blue pays homage to Yves Klein, who in 1959 invented this ultramarine pigment, IKB 79, to express his idea of art as mystic experience.

Close to this feeling linked to a certain spirituality, we find works which privilege the volume and formal qualities of art, although its balanced forms do not avoid the upheaval which hides on the other side of beauty. The questioning of perfection guided James Lee Byars' production, which approached Platonism, Zen Buddhism and the Shinto tradition of Japan. Byars breaks down the complex world of experience into the simple, pure shapes of geometry. He usually works with materials of great purity, such as white marble and gold, a precious metal whose meaning is also explored by Dora García in *Bolsa dorada* (1995), which aims to activate our mental projections out of our ignorance of its contents. Despite the fact that gold is an element traditionally associated with perfection and immortality (its capacity to create light emulates divinity and the sun star), it is also highly toxic in the extraction process. Félix González-Torres' light installations also hide a profound melancholy beneath their festive appearance.

Places of life

CHARLOTTE POSENENSKE was one of the European artists who adopted American minimalist principles such as seriality, industrial production and economy of media, into which she incorporated a social dimension. Allied to the critical discourse of the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, after ten years of artistic production, and convinced that art could not change the world, she decided to give it up and dedicated herself to activism and sociology. Her functional objects associated with the city and its buildings, such as ventilation ducts and piping, follow the logic of standardisation. Posenenske shared decisions over the installation and assembly of her *Square Tubes. Series D* (1967) with the teams with whom she was working. Although they are now in a museum, at the time they were placed in living spaces, such as markets, railway stations or factories, thus playfully looking to blend into their surroundings.

Rita McBride's postminimalism, which belongs to a later generation, is centred on building structures of urban domestic settings while twisting their normal proportions and colours. As she shows in one of her works, *Servants and Slaves (Domestic)* (2003), the spaces of the city's servants and slaves (garage, kitchen, laundry, drains) remind us of the historical role of class, race and gender struggle in the machine era. It is significant that this is done from minimalism, a movement traditionally associated with a certain sexism. In the case of Sigalit Landau, her interest in the living conditions in the towns and cities of Israel is reflected in sculptures made with used pipework, a remembering of, and at the same time a metaphor for, the human body around which vital fluid flows.

Memory also serves as guide in Doris Salcedo's designs, as in the case of her installation *Atrabiliarios* (1993). Through a parchment membrane, we can just make out shoes, which she collected, of people who disappeared in Colombia as a result of the civil war and drug trafficking. Ignasi Aballí also alludes to the fleeting nature of time with the evidence of traces of dust in his installation *Enciclopèdia* (1994). Materials which have as many connotations of meaning as the leather of old shoes or are as ephemeral as dust speak of the passage of time, remembering, and absence.

The ideas of 'home' and 'intimacy' are explored by artists such as Gregor Schneider and Absalon. With works that include a marked performativity, they critically remake concepts such as 'place' and 'living space'. Since 1985, Schneider has made constant interventions in his family house near Cologne: he has moved walls and duplicated boundaries in a labyrinthine and distressing constructivist architecture which can evoke the texts of the literature of the absurd, such as the work of Franz Kafka. As for Absalon, his cellular living spaces, which the artist situated in various cities, contain the minimum elements for life. They are made in white, and ergonomically shaped, and the artist (also dressed in white) interacts with them, recalling minimalism performance. This work thus shares its formal efficiency with that of Pep Agut when he creates the volume of a domestic space through the materialisation of the light which floods through it.

Closing the exhibition, Michelangelo Pistoletto's work *Architettura dello Specchio* (1990) presents a large mirror divided into four parts and framed in golden wood, which reminds us of the paradox of the reflective surface. Although it sends all possible images back to us, its 'transparent' materiality is deceptively intangible.

From January 2018, and associated with the ideas of 'living space' and 'city', works by Pep Agut and Jordi Colomer will be added to the final part of the exhibition.

Exhibition organised and produced by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona MACBA

Curator

Antònia M. Perelló

Related publication

The MACBA Collection. Selected Works brings together almost 200 outstanding works held in the museum's Collection. Texts by Ferran Barenblit, Chris Dercon, Ainhoa Grandes, Ivo Mesquita and Antònia M. Perelló. Barcelona: MACBA, 2017.

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Plaça dels Àngels, 1
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