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NEUENSCHWANDER, SIMONE; ALEANA EGAN – KUNSTHALLE BASEL, CATALOGUE TEXT, 2008

Amazement and speechlessness – these are the reactions on first sight of Aleana Egan’s five-meter-high sculpture standing in the centre of the Oberlichtsaal at Kunsthalle Basel. Its formal structure cannot be easily categorized – maybe an oversized toy building brick, the reproduction of an archaic architectural element or a scaled-up model. The idea for the piece came to Egan after she had visited the space, and is a direct response to the historic hall, its neoclassical style and the metal rods spanning the hall that provide structural support to the domed skylight. The sculpture is entitled *Stage of Concern*¹ and is made of rough grey cement covering an underlying wooden construction. Its rugged, uneven surface contrasts with the classical appearance of the hall, which itself possesses a sculptural quality. Nevertheless, Egan’s sculpture is by no means crude or simply ‘formless’: in fact it rises up elegantly inside the space in harmonious proportion to its surroundings, entering into a dialogue with the height and impressive architecture of the hall due to its massive dimensions. On the steep rear face of the sculpture there is a large area of pale pink cement that lends the object a vulnerable corporality; it heightens the impression of a form clothed in multiple layers – the sculpture bares its skin like a body exposed at the neckline of a dress.

Aleana Egan’s works are based on precise observations of her immediate surroundings, which may be the landscape of her home town of Dun Laoghaire near Dublin or the specific situation of an exhibition venue. Relying on intuitive processes, she translates these observations into abstract sculptures, relief works, collages and drawings with the aid of manual techniques such as modelling, bricolage and dyeing. She frequently uses fragmented sentences from literary texts as the titles of her works, for example *ended casually in the water* (2008), a phrase borrowed from the novel *The Red and the Green* (1965) by the Anglo-Irish writer Iris Murdoch and the title of a delicate structure suspended between two pillars in the Neue Nationalgalerie as part of the 5th Berlin Biennial, or *We sat down where we had sat before*, the title of the exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel which comes from Murdoch’s novel *The Sea, the Sea* (1978). This use of literature and its relation to abstract forms reflects the artist’s keen interest in the non-linguistic description of experience. Thereby the lines selected from the literary texts often describe a physical action or movement that is given abstract expression in the form and materiality of the artworks. Egan’s works could be called compressed images of memory: they refer to re-imagined moods of individual moments of experience without claiming to represent these exactly and show them as independent artistic forms.

The two large-scale sculptural reliefs *Prospect* and *Terrace* were conceived in relation to the architecture of the Oberlichtsaal. During the preparation of her show, Egan became very interested in the Kunsthalle building, above all in a design for the interior of the Oberlichtsaal by the architect Johann Jakob Stehlin. Dating from 1868/72, it features two sets of wooden double doors, which Stehlin originally designed to open the hall onto the two smaller, adjacent rooms in a representative manner. The shape of the two relief works echoes the design of these doors, which includes an arched wooden panel above each lintel. Hung

¹ All the works by Aleana Egan at Kunsthalle Basel referred to here are from 2008.

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closely together on the wall, the works recall the doors in terms of their size, however the arched lines are set inside the upright rectangular shape of the reliefs and run in opposite directions: in one the line curves downwards from the top edge of the rectangle, in the other it curves upwards from the bottom edge. The curved lines thus evoke a corresponding and at the same time contrasting form. Egan entitled two drawings related to these works *Silver swimming pool forwards* and *Silver swimming pool backwards*, a literal reference to the forward and backward movements involved in swimming. These contrasting linear compositions suggest physical movement, a quality that can also be discerned in the large relief works; as such they include and record an accumulation of personal observations made by the artist.

Egan's sculptural reliefs are all produced from cardboard, which she cuts into strips, sticks together with adhesive tape and then coats with paint and decofill. The materiality of the works seems to oscillate between the firmness of welded steel struts and the fragility of delicate paper works. The accentuation of the hanging of these pieces – on copper nails visibly attached to the wall – is also important as an indication of the flow and tension of the material; the idea of working with and against gravity at the same time is suggested, so that the objects assume the material characteristics of cast-off clothing or cut-out negative forms. The material properties of Egan's sculptures are hard to define: the instinctive reflex to take hold of the works and explore their tactile qualities reflects a primal (childlike) desire to comprehend a thing through touch.

The title of another relief work, *Flou*, in the second room of the exhibition, refers to a perceptual experience described by the Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov in his autobiography *Speak, Memory: A Memoir* (1951). Nabokov uses the French word 'flou' (Eng. blurred, out of focus, fuzzy) to describe being able to hear colours in the period before he falls asleep, or to perceive them in combination with other sensory perceptions: 'At times, however, my photisms take on a rather soothing *flou* quality, and then I see – projected, as it were, upon the inside of the eyelid – gray figures walking between beehives, or small black parrots gradually vanishing among mountain snows, or a mauve remoteness melting beyond moving masts.'² Nabokov's work often dealt with the theory of synesthesia, and many of his characters have a distinct 'sensory appetite'. In the context of art history, synesthesia is associated among others with Wassily Kandinsky, who regarded colours not just as visual but also as auditory sensations, and in his paintings ascribed colours to sounds. Egan's works do not explicitly deal with such synesthetic associations, however the perception of formal structures and colours and their subjective interpretation is characteristic of her practice. The work *Flou* represents the quest for a form that simultaneously reveals its own process of destruction: the rectangular frame of the structure is broken open and the bottom line points in a slight curve towards the floor.

Egan also explores the themes of memory and language in her ongoing *Readings* project. For some time she has been asking friends and relatives to select some of their favourite texts and to read these out loud. She organizes these readings both as film pieces recorded in staged settings and as performances before an audience. At Kunsthalle Basel, Egan is showing the two video works *Helen* and *Harry*. The first of these is

² Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: A Memoir* (1951), Everyman's Library, London, 1999, p. 21.

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staged in a disparate interior that has been carefully arranged by the artist and includes some of her own artworks and other props. Here, Egan's mother reads extracts from two books by Iris Murdoch. In her novels, the writer often makes reference to her home country of Ireland, to which she had an ambivalent relationship, as well as to interpersonal relations, with the aid of detailed landscape descriptions that involve colours and other sensory impressions. Among other text passages, Helen reads a sentence from *The Red and the Green* (1965): 'The road on which Finglas stood, or from which, conscious of a certain superiority over the other houses, it withdrew, was clean and very quiet, seeming always full of grey luminous light from the sea, which could be seen and indeed heard at the foot of the hill where the road ended casually in the water and the pavement turned into yellow rocks, folded and wrinkled and shining with crystalline facets.'³ Within both the interior of the video piece and the space in which the viewer stands, reading aloud – as an act whereby what is said becomes an image in our mind's eye – creates an evocative landscape: the grey luminous light and the sound of the sea might really be envisaged and heard.

The video works can be seen in relation to Egan's sculptural pieces: like these, the videos store memories and present them in a different form. Due to the large number of existing texts and the fact that the selection is made by the readers themselves, the *Readings* project has the potential to be constantly incorporating new contents and references. The artist also repeatedly asks the readers to read other personal texts at a later date. This possibility of a structure that is continually transforming is also found in Egan's new sculptures made of metal rods, which are also on show in the exhibition. Leaning precariously against the wall, sometimes overlapping or set next to one another, these objects (all of which are *Untitled*) can be endlessly rearranged to create a large number of possible drawings within the space. In a similar manner, the texts chosen by her friends and family also modify and influence Egan's own work: *grey luminous light from the sea (a structure for readings)* (2008), for example, the title of a filigree pavilion made of iron bars that is also on show at the 5th Berlin Biennial, is borrowed from the very excerpt that Helen is reading out loud in the video work. The exchange and appropriation of external influences is an important part of Egan's creative process and enables continual development in her work.

The *Readings* comprise sensitive portraits that show the subjects in an intimate moment of reading out loud and reveal their individual gestures. The use of literature offers an indirect approach to the portrayal of the readers, and the texts that mean so much to them represent their personality in a both foreign and familiar language. The representation or description of an individual form or inner feeling through other means can also be experienced in the perception of Egan's sculptures: these often seem to have a life of their own, an individual character – as for example the relief work *Personality* with its melancholically drooping, contracting structure.

In their formation and materiality, Egan's works hold the potential of constantly changing motion. As in the case of the large cement sculpture, they do not adhere to a clearly definable form; instead their perception varies between fixed structures and variable drawings within the space. In the video piece *Harry*, a friend of

³ Iris Murdoch, *The Red and the Green* (1965), Vintage Classics, London, 2002, p. 9.

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Egan's reads aloud a passage from Henry Miller's novel *Tropic of Cancer* (1934): 'I love everything that flows, everything that has time in it and becoming, that brings us back to the beginning where there is never end: the violence of the prophets, the obscenity that is ecstasy, the wisdom of the fanatic, the priest with his rubber litany, the foul words of the whore, the spittle that floats away in the gutter, the milk of the breast and the bitter honey that pours from the womb, all that is fluid, melting, dissolute and dissolvent, all the pus and dirt that in flowing is purified, that loses its sense of origin, that makes the great circuit toward death and dissolution. The great incestuous wish is to flow on, one with time, to merge the great image of the beyond with the here and now.'⁴In the context of Egan's exhibition, the physical and metaphoric poetics of the text, which Harry reads out loud in a rhythmically balanced voice, becomes incorporated into the formation of images that touch on universal themes. The motif of flowing and transition – of time, language, human emotions and obsessions, as well as of material – appears repeatedly. These themes are also set against the backdrop of the memory of the Irish Sea, throughout Egan's work.

⁴ Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), Book Club Associates, London, 1982, p. 256.