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COTTON, MICHELLE; THE INDEPENDENT, 13 JANUARY 2010

Karla Black, Inverleith House, Edinburgh



Plaster, powder, paint and dirt

Reviewed by Michelle Cotton

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It has been a busy 12 months for Karla Black. This exhibition follows major solo shows in Zurich and Oxford, where much of her sculpture was made in situ and subsequently destroyed. For an artist who came to prominence in more modestly proportioned project spaces and galleries, the immediate impact of her recent museum installations has been one of scale.

Typically, Black's work involves a lot of something. Cellophane, dirt, plaster powder, petroleum jelly or paint is employed until the piece loses its edges and becomes a topography, not so much a thing enjoyed in the round, more an expanse to be travelled by looking. At Inverleith House Black, who has discussed her work's association with landscape, focuses our minds by including paintings of Scottish lakes and mountains by the late Bet Low.



Muck spreading: Karla Black's rectangle of soil, 'Left Right Left Right'

The lower levels of the building are given over to works made by pouring materials on to the gallery floor. The two main galleries are occupied by low-lying masses of loose material that leave a narrow margin at the edge of the room. They encourage a different kind of encounter with the gallery environment, making us tread around its edge with our backs to the walls and windows, looking into the space and across its level plane. Left Right Left Right is a saggy rectangle of soil patted round at the edges and flecked with colour. Its opposite number at the other end of the house is a fine carpet of yellow powder with a rush of pink, entitled Pretend to Prefer. The works' giddy colour and gestural fabrication figures an image of action and immediacy long departed from the still rooms overlooking the Royal Botanic Garden.

It is not often that contemporary art communicates such high spirits in its manufacture. Black's work is intentionally joyful in its approach to materials, colour and composition. As with the large, confetti-coloured paper sculptures that fill the galleries upstairs, these are temporary constructions vulnerable to damage or destruction in a way that defies fine-art conventions of longevity. For all that Black's work appears abstract and formal, it is made with the mindset of a conceptual artist, inferring set conditions for its display, the way it is negotiated in the gallery space and the terms by which it can be sold.

Nowhere is this more evident than in her titles. The plain but firm vocabulary mimics the utilitarian tone struck by the pharmaceutical or cosmetic products that serve as materials for the details in her work. The most succinct example is found in the playful pseudoscience of Better, a tiny puzzle of brittle material forming an uncertain pink rosette on the gallery floor. It is in fact a desiccated pool of trademarked antacids, Gaviscon Advance and Gaviscon Original, appearing perfectly crafted and perfectly accidental at the same time.

To 14 February (0131 248 2971; Rbge.org.uk/inverleith-house)