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OPENINGS

Michael Archer on Karla Black

THERE ARE MANY TERMS in the lexicon of *not quite*: tentative, provisional, diffident. None of these describe Karla Black. To be sure, there is a natural fragility to her base materials (brown paper, sugar paper, cellophane, glass, polyethylene), and much that she applies to their surfaces is amorphous (chalk and plaster dust, petroleum jelly, makeup, foot spray, hair spray). But the spatial command of her work is authoritative. This has been so from the start of Black's career, when she focused on performance. I first encountered her at this stage, at the end of the 1990s; she was a student at the Glasgow School of Art, where she had made a video of herself grappling with a large quantity of bread dough. Speaking of this work now, Black acknowledges the important example provided by the performances of Bobby Baker, which are structured around endlessly repeated domestic activities such as cooking and cleaning. Black was, like Baker, a literal presence in her own work at this point. What has happened in the years since is a kind of withdrawal—not just of her physical body but of anything that could be read as a direct allusion to bodily form. Yet the effect of this disappearance has been to encourage a more active involvement for the rest of us as we engage with the works' ambiguities, stratifications, and spatial orderings.

As in her early performances, the impact of feminism on art remains important for Black. It is significant less for its formal legacy than for its wide-ranging critique of the hierarchies of value and the entrenched positions on practice and interpretation that had hitherto held sway. Part of what makes Black's work so compelling is the deft manner in which she accepts the achievements of 1970s feminism while at the same time taunting us, playing to the very stereotypes of male and female activity that feminism so ably deconstructed. A glance at her titles hints at this contestation of gender roles—*Opportunities for Girls*, 2006, *Pleasers Don't Decide*, *Home Rule* (both 2007), *Division Isn't*, *Division Is*, *The opposite of the body is the world* (all 2008). Black has told me that the last title was chosen, in part, as a response to an article that likened her work to that of iconic female artists such as Louise Bourgeois. What dissatisfies Black about such comparisons is their emphasis on her work as a bodily and physical *object*, whereas her consistent aim is to hold any possibility of formal resolution at bay. When we spoke at Tate Britain in January during the installation of *Wish List*, 2008 (a work she contributed to the group show "Strange Solution," on view through April 13), Black was struggling with the institutional mandate to nail strips of wood to the gallery floor in order to mark out a safety zone around the work. This boundary would, she knew, tend to objectify the piece and detract from a viewer's ability to encounter the work as a moment of cessation in an otherwise continuous flow of human actions, material procedures, and visual transformations. In the same way, Black knows that it is all too easy for us to succumb to anthropomorphism, to invest objects with psychological weight and imagine them as agents of meaning within some weakly surrealistic narrative fantasy. She is not interested in inviting such behavior. It would be restrictive and a wholly inadequate aim for her practice

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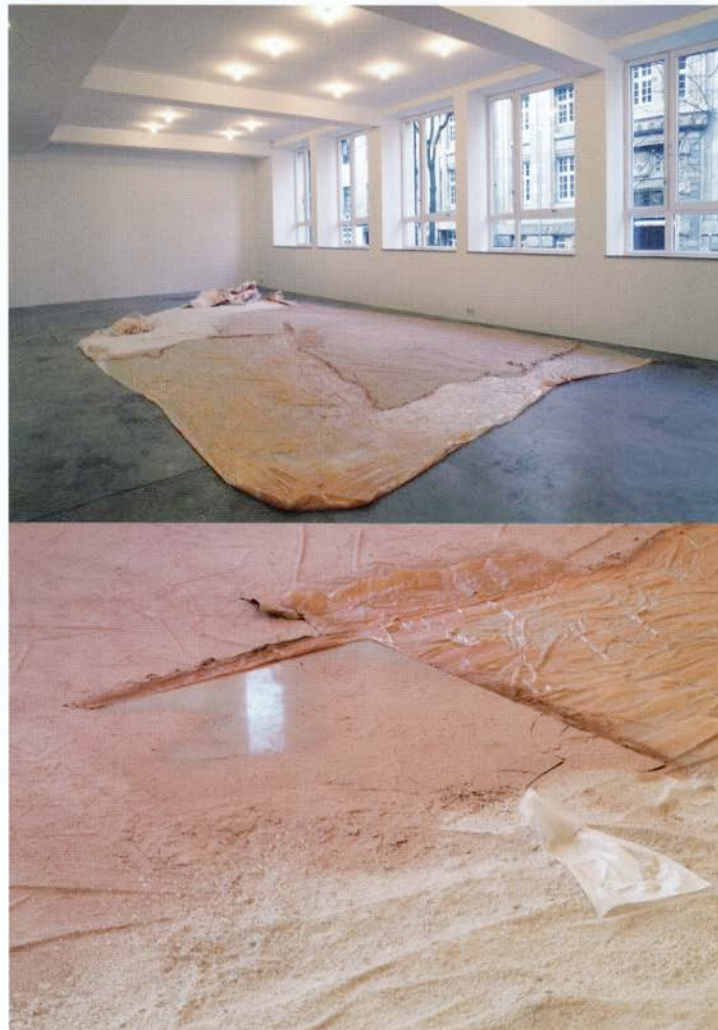
Opposite page: **Karla Black, *Wish List*, 2008**, sugar paper, chalk, ribbon, hair gel, nail polish, plaster, paint, petroleum jelly, polyethylene, and rubber gloves. Installation view, Tate Britain, London, 2008. Photo: Thierry Bal. This page: **Karla Black, *Division Isn't*, 2008**, paper, paint, chalk, polyethylene, and Sellotape. Installation view, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne. Photo: Lothar Schnepf.



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Above: View of "Karla Black," 2008, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne. From left: *Division Is*, 2008, sugar paper, concealer stick, spray tan, and cardboard. *Division Is*, 2008, brown paper, paint, cardboard, and face powder. Photo: Lothar Schnepf. Below: *Karla Black, Expressions are hurting, move outside*, 2008, cellophane, Sellotape, petroleum jelly, paint, plaster powder, glass, polyethylene bags, concealer stick, lip gloss, hair conditioner, bath cream, tracing paper, glitter hair spray, and lipstick. Installation views, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne. Photos: Lothar Schnepf.



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(which, she insists, for all its refusal to fix form, should nevertheless be understood as essentially sculptural).

This is not to say that Black rejects all psychological associations surrounding her practice. When she does touch on this realm, though, she speaks less of the Freudian dream-work than of the object relations of Melanie Klein. In other words, what is of interest to Black is a state of potential, prior to any establishment of meaning or structural rigidity. She operates, as she writes in the statement accompanying her show at Galerie Gisela Capitain in Cologne this past January, in an environment where things are “almost” or “only just.” The stuff out of which her sculptures are fashioned is either implacably contingent—face powder, say—or detritus. And as with Klein, for whom the main players in the establishment of relations with the external world were mother and child, Black’s materially diverse art puts her in conversation with all those parents from whom she can’t escape (though, given the history of modern art, they are for the most part fathers rather than mothers). The positions of her pieces within the gallery—where they might cover large areas of the floor, hang from the ceiling, or struggle upward into space—invoke a range of postwar practices, from the spatial extension of Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman to the dispersed, multipart works of process art. For example, the hanging curtain of *Division Isn’t*, a large sheet of brown paper painted with white acrylic and then stained pink with chalk dust, divided the space at Gisela Capitain in a way that implied the physical constrictions of a Bruce Nauman corridor as much as the absurd material experimentations of Eva Hesse. *Wish List* is constructed of sheets of sugar paper held together with hair gel, superglue, and nail polish and then creased, folded, crumpled, and twisted into an opulent swag that is suspended from the ceiling, hammocklike, by two strips of ribbon. Rubbed with chalk dust and plaster, its largely pink surface supports a glop of petroleum jelly colored with yellow acrylic, and the shredded remains of two household rubber gloves, one pink and the other yellow. The assemblage defies fears of expressiveness, of that mausoleum of macho risk-taking we call Abstract Expressionism, of public gesture.

In Black’s open and critical engagement with art history, questions as to what is being made, and when the process of making can be said either to begin or to conclude, are invigorated with renewed importance. One side of *Division Isn’t* is pink because *Wish List* was made on top of it in the studio; *Wish List* itself developed out of a previous set of five works, all titled *Opportunities for Girls*. And upon future reinstallations of Black’s works, the precise configuration and

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disposition of the materials within space will change, even if the titles persist. This aspect allies Black with artistic siblings as well as parents—one thinks of fellow Glasgow artist Cathy Wilkes, whose groupings of diverse elements never find definitive arrangement. Within these complex conversations among peers and predecessors, Black reconfigures the range of expressive values normally associated with the materials she deploys. Far from being trapped in an argument bounded by the prescriptions of gender specificity, the nail polish, hair spray, toothpaste, eye shadow, and other substances marking the linoleum surface of *The opposite of the body is the world* allude not to a narrow obsession with the feminine body’s prettiness and appeal but more broadly and forcefully to art’s affective power, its decorative qualities, its dissembling, its illusions and lies. □

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