

Interview with Alexandra Metcalf

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Your most recent exhibition at Capitain Petzel features your work alongside Karla Black's. I'm curious to know how you found your way to Black's work. Where did the inspiration come from to exhibit collaboratively?

I was originally planning on showing in a group exhibition and so I was a bit surprised and delighted when the gallery suggested the duo show instead. I obviously knew Karla to be one of our foremost contemporary sculptors so I was thrilled and eager to see how our worlds could collide.

How would you describe your relationship to her practice?

Through a conversation with Barry Schawbsky, we realized we approach our work in an opposite way and so I gained an insight into her practice, as well as my own. I realized I was excited by polar feelings and I think the fact we take an opposite approach birthed a really exciting exchange and exhibition. Karla likes her work to be light and joyous, more of an action, mine is dark and very obsessive, I like polarity a lot, especially in materiality.

Did this opposition function as a kind of enabler or constraint to making?

No, I hadn't thought about it till the show was done and we discussed each other's practices. I'd go insane if I was thinking about how I might relate to another artist while I'm making work, because I have to block out as many outside influences as I can when I'm actively working on a show. I can only make what I make.

Recently I spoke to someone about Karla Black and "performing materiality," the idea that her work depicts the thing from which it's made. I'm thinking of *Another Once* (2023), for example, when I say this. Some of your work definitely goes against this narrative. Barry Schawbsky's said your work's materiality is distinct from its image content. This is clear with *Antimatter Flower* (2024), which was recently on display at Nir Altman. Could you tell me about the ideas and questions behind this piece, especially the contradiction between the noticeably "built" aspect and softer, almost kinder, image content?

Those came about by chance. I was looking at giving materials a new form and had the idea of transforming static domestic objects into oversized drooping flowers with an air of animism. I'd been working with women's stockings as butterfly wings, so repurposing them as petals felt like the perfect opposition to the rigidity of a wooden millinery block and welded steel rack. The specificity of materials emerged from tropes of nuclear America and societal gender roles of Victorian England. I was haunted by the supposedly idealistic quote of the wife's call of 'Welcome home honey' as the husband puts his hat on the coat rack as he arrives home from work. In my interpretative world, the woman's been stuck at home all day, utterly idle, going mad while expected to engage in feminine crafts such as sewing or embroidery. Meanwhile, the husband goes out to work in trade, as a welder, a machinist, or a hat maker.

The flower, drooping or not, is a popular and welcoming image. But the materials and processes used to make the flower were an exploration of gendered labor. For me, material transformation happens best when the past remains residual and haunting. So, while there's no actual hat, the ghost of the wooden mold used to make millions of hats remains. The life of the familial, interior complex seems so fragile atop these societal pedestals. I like the contrast. There are no longer people, just the ghosts of production, industry, and family. It's almost post fall-out!



Installation view, Karla Black and Alexandra Metcalf, *Captain Petzel*, Berlin, 2024. Courtesy the artists and Captain Petzel. Ph: Marjorie Brunet Plaza



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But I should also add that I'm starting to think that your work does a similar thing by treating references and concepts as materials to transform and perform. For instance, the cot sculptures or the butterfly sculpture with Maria Callas' CD on it, it conveys the idea of these symbolic figures in states of metamorphosis. Is that a fair take?

I think that's definitely true, I'm a purist in some ways. Like Karla rejoicing at her helium balloons deflating, I rejoice at all the chisels used for a woodworking project. I love traditional methods of making and will always strive to have the form related to the material in which it's made, especially the surface treatments. However, I'll play with these craft tropes, carving and inlaying buttons into wood, using buttons as another decoration rather than their intended use, a much less labor-intensive sewn appendage to a garment. I think absurdity is fun.

As for metamorphosis, yes, definitely, I think using the intended function of some objects to imply a metamorphosis or what I refer to as a coming of age as part of a life cycle is exactly on point! For example, while the butterfly is beautiful, its cane antennae are a nod to the now shorter lifespan of the once young caterpillar. It's the same with the cribs, the precarious nature of the cribs is supported by what we use at the end of life, again exemplifying the whole life cycle. I'm interested in the extremities of influence we have

over another life – a mother’s influence, the feminine life cycle, from baby through puberty to mother then death. It’s sad but playful, but humour is important to me, and a nod to art historical giants like Guber.

When I saw *Crib 2* (2023) at 15 Orient I thought it was modelled on a baby antelope or gazelle at a watering hole. The ones that get dragged into the water by crocodiles. I suppose there’s something in the bent canes that reminds me of those inverted animal knees...

{laughs} That’s amazing, yes, I looked at countless newborn animals learning to walk! I had initially planned on showing three cribs with a clearer progression of growth but I liked the pair more in the end.

The two, as opposed to three, cribs reimagine the mother-daughter dyad. In some respects they spotlight a history of gendered labour, which could be considered a recurring theme within your practice.

I think a lot of artists are at odds with the way the world defines them, rather than the other way around. Spotighting is a good term for how I approach gendered labour. I’m hesitant to refer to it as thematic, as if it’s possible to select the subject from a suite of interest. It’s there whether I’m acknowledging it or not. That’s what I’m driven to play with; this presumed default reality of certain materials and practices. I’m not interested in simply turning every societal norm on its head but some materials and traditions resonated with me deeply. Other norms I find absurd. In the studio I lean towards “the best way out is always through” approach with the majority of these processes. Spending excess time in the physical making of a thing offers me greater insight into its history and its present reality than the cold, distanced critical evaluation that I often see in revisionist histories and practices.



Alexandra Metcalf, 'Antimatter Flower', 2024, steel, iron, Buttons, wood, nylon, paint, silicone, 178 x 100 x 95 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Ginny on Frederick, London



Installation view, Alexandra Metcalf, 15 Orient, New York, 2023. Courtesy the artist and 15 Orient



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I think it's these kinds of decisions that people feel, will get. We don't have to be so solution-orientated. I recently read this line from Stuart Morgan (via Dan Fox) on Marc Camille Chaimowicz: "insistence on abandoning machismo as a mode of artistic behaviour." Simply taking a certain history and using it in your work is like giving it a dimension?

(I love Chaimowicz.)

I think solution-based thinking stops the flow of really special things from happening. For me, art shouldn't be so clearly explained but leaning more to the inexplicable. Exploring historical narratives helps me minutely understand the present as a whole, and that really excites me. I love it when aesthetics or histories get blurred.

Your paintings have been described as depicting the domestic. But the paintings in the show at Captain Petzel, most of them have a visible, discernible horizon. How do you connect landscapes and horizons with domesticity?

The home is always in relation to what's outside of it. We perceive our homes and safe spaces in contrast to the dangerous and enveloping totality of the world outside. I produced a number of cloud and atmospheric landscape paintings for my 15 Orient show, but these were intended to reference a more internal mental landscape. I was exploring more emotional or dissociative states from within. Following this with the Captain Petzel show I wanted to visualize the world that one re-enters or sees anew after this fully psychological immersion into self.



Installation view, Alexandra Metcalf, *Ginny on Frederick*, London, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Ginny on Frederick, London. Photography by Stephen James



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You've just opened an immersive show at Ginny on Frederick.

The show was my first full installation and build out of a space. I absolutely loved having full creative freedom, even architecturally. I'd use these Harry Gordon dresses as references in earlier paintings I exhibited at 15 Orient. I knew I wanted to revisit this archive of paper dresses and found this was the perfect time. England and its history have always influenced my work heavily and here I was able to focus on the Youth Quake explosion of the sixties. I wanted it to feel like a time capsule, and a clash of historical periods, I feel it achieved that.

There was an overall subdued sadness in the space when all the colors and materials finally came together, which I loved. Aren't all reflections and memories coloured with a malaise? Initially I had intended on making a witch staircase, a phenomenal historic oddity in which the treads would alternate. People believed a witch would not be able to ascend or descend such staircases. In the end the poetic gesture of the staircase was enough, and the suggestion of an attic became the piece.

Alexandra Metcalf (b. 1992, London, UK) works in painting and sculpture, reinterpreting the history of gendered labor through antiquated ornamental traditions. Metcalf considers the way historic counter-culture movements shape aesthetics, the intense patterns and coloring of her paintings representing domestic landscapes that are full of anxiety and populated by hysteric women. Metcalf mythologizes a dramatic descent into madness through exaggerated, yet self-aware images related to historically established notions of femininity. One could see this as a satire of literary tropes or an attempt to paint the heightened levels of dramatic tension characteristic of operatic storytelling, where most things are to be seen in parenthesis. Her fascination with craft is coupled with attempts to regenerate labor intensive mediums that have been historically seen as masculine, among them stained-glass, bronze casting and hand-crafted woodwork.

Metcalf graduated from the Chelsea College of Art and Design, London and Rhode Island School of Design, Providence. Metcalf's works have recently been exhibited at 15 Orient Gallery, New York; Kunsthalle Zürich, Champ Lacombe, Biarritz; Fitzpatrick Gallery, Paris; LOMEX, New York and Ginny on Frederick, London.