

Rebecca Ackroyd: House Fire



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Review by Cleo Roberts

Lodged in the entrance of a former Skittle Salon in Norwich, the home of Outpost gallery, are the hips of a nude female. Projecting themselves through the gallery's open doors, 'We have your children' (2017), is a striking start to Rebecca Ackroyd's solo show, 'House Fire'. The pale freckly skin of this section of toned abdomen is covered in part by the woman's hands dressed in comical furry gloves – significantly the parts of gorilla costume eschewed by the Guerilla Girls. The grotesque rubbery black nails on one hand grab at the woman's crotch, a body part that reoccurs in the artist's work, and as if disembodied, feel aggressive, possessive, and sexually deviant. Donald Trump's infamous assertion about 'pussy grabbing' comes to mind.

The tufts of acrylic fur, which sprout from these hands cover the figure's pubic area, find reiteration in the chalk and oil pastel drawing, 'Her maker' (2017) pinned to the entrance wall of the gallery's inner 'home' space. In this surreal child-like drawing a series of standing metal pipes, not dissimilar to the artist's previous sculptural work 'Allure' (2014), seemingly grow from two clumps of black hair. A plaque on the central pipe, filled with a spongy brain creation reads, 'No Questions Asked', and sets the tone for the viewer's experience of the rest of the room – an intrusion on Ackroyd's intimate thoughts and her self-analysis.

This autobiography is cold, claustrophobic and alienating for the viewer. The chintzy carpet floor 'The wife' (2017), lifted from a pub and therefore permeated with splashes of beer, wine and soft drinks, creates a somber base for the room. It intentionally fuses with the six works installed upon it, as if spawning them. Anthropomorphising the carpet into a wife fits this sense of birth and furthermore reflects on the escapism of pub culture, which the artist has always observed. Reading pubs as masculine places, the artist thinks through the role of women and societal expectations, which can limit female achievement.

There is an intense melancholia, which marks these thoughts. 'Distant hope, distant dreams' (2017), a steel tombstone-esque sculpture with a single rose cut-out placed in front of a cluster of baby pink



perspex cylinders with triangular hats - the turrets of a lost princess castle, is mournful. The cut rose on the tomb falls towards the ground and wilts, emphasizing the artist's latent sense of disappointment, and voicing her skepticism of the 'happily ever after' fairytale ending she sees as framing female experience. 'Warm belly' (2017) picks up on this disillusionment and anxiety. From its façade, this is a solid house, modeled from aluminum and steel sheets painted black has an austere appearance. The artist however exposes the structures vulnerability and at its back reveals pools of flesh coloured paraffin wax. Much like a fungal growth, these forms appear to subsist and feed on the house, and will presumably lead to its demise.

Ackroyd's intrigue and preoccupation with fire is made more explicit in 'She awoke, another time' (2017), a neighbouring black house lit with tea lights, which generates a series of burnt paper letters akin to a plume of smoke. From its roof top the letters fall into a messy pile on the floor, and with their curled shape and black spots show the artist's method, and somewhat reclaims her childhood anxiety of fire. This is, she believes, a response to her ritual of packing a bag every evening to take with her should there have been a fire and her father's insistence on planning fire escape routes whenever the family travelled.

This catharsis places the viewer at a distance. Throughout the show there is an uneasy feeling of encroaching on the artist's private world, and certain pieces feel as though they are an in-joke reserved for the artist and her family. Re-addressing this balance, and engaging the audience with more generosity would be helpful, as might a consistency in aesthetic. The floor sculptures and works on paper are challenged to integrate and work independently of each other, dividing the gallery space into what appeared like two shows. This is in part Ackroyd's intention. As she described to me, the show was 'led by the ideas of creating a friction'. In exposing the viewer to such diverse works in this confined gallery space, Ackroyd certainly achieves this objective.