

# Rebecca Ackroyd

BY MATTHEW MCLEAN



Rebecca Ackroyd,  
‘Taken Care’, 2015,  
exhibition view

Glimpsed through a doorway down a long, first-floor corridor, Rebecca Ackroyd’s solo show, ‘Taken Care’, looked like a surreal natural history museum diorama. Five huge, white, freestanding figures were arrayed across a single room. Headless and armless it is hard to attribute a gender to them, although I registered them as women; their most distinctive characteristic is their swollen behinds, pointedly directed towards the incoming viewer. (One squat figure in a corner closely faces the wall, so the buttocks are all you see, whichever direction you approach from). Though static, their legs are slanted apart, with a swaggering contrapposto. They convey the sense of striding with all the alien power and improbable grace of a herd of giraffes traversing a plain.

Revolve around the figures and each sculpture reveals an empty centre: two (Tucker Upper 1-2, all works 2015) have their inner voids fronted with horizontal bars, like exposed rib-cases, while three Giver Bearers (1-3) – the necks of which are elongated until they reach the ceiling, like stovepipes – have hollow bellies filled with coal.

The plaster bandage is bumpily applied to the surfaces, like damp tissue clasped between the palms. You can’t see the chicken wire the bandage is draped over, but some foggy memory of classroom constructions reminds you that it is underneath. This unseen material resonates with the wiry texture of the other sculptural series displayed here: rectangular box-forms comprising steel bars, about the thickness of the rods that comprise shop baskets, mounted on tall plinths of welded rebar. Slabs of crumbly Jesmonite coloured in acrylic patches of chalk-white, piss-yellow, lilac and brick-red form little walls around the metal, making each one a strange shelter: part doll-house, part bird cage, part puppet-theatre. The relative dimensions of plinth to box means each stands just above waist height, proportions not dissimilar to the ratio of body to building in Louise Bourgeois’s series of paintings, ‘Femme Maison’ (Woman House, 1946–47).

Something about that place on the body just above the hips brings back a muscle-memory of washing-up at the sink – the wire boxes, in turn, suddenly registered as dish-racks, filled with the clatter of plates. Because the great motherless Chantal Akerman died the same week I visited this show, I found myself thinking of the title character of her film *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) – the ritual of washing and drying in the main character’s tragic, tedious life; the way her address is also her biography, her house, her self; the way she takes care of her son in one sense and ‘takes care’ of her final client in another. One sculpture (Kettle Breaker) actually features wonky plates and saucers, cast from wax; wax fragments of unknown faces – a nose, an ear, an un-kissed mouth – sprout from others in the series.

Apparently, Ackroyd made the works in the show at her parents’ house. Because of the quantity of white plaster, and the size of the figures, I imagine that house as grand, stucco-ed, a little dilapidated (a dish-rack implies no dishwasher), perhaps hard to heat. I think about how a home is meant to be warm – ‘hearth and home’, we say, or sing ‘Keep the Home Fires Burning’. Ackroyd’s oven-women, transporting coals within themselves, unlit, convey a truth about home that is both sentimental and complex: that it’s not just a place but a fate, not only something we leave behind but something we take with us, somewhere we can’t go back to and, for the same reason, can never leave.

Or: ‘So much of who we are / is from who first taught us how to love,’ as Kelis puts it on the album *FOOD* (2014): another work about love and kitchens. With this show, Ackroyd (just out of art school) raised the issue of inheritance and origins, in a double-sense: for it is not just Bourgeois’s inspiration that is evoked in the work, but a host of other influences: Isa Genken, Rachel Harrison, Mike Kelley, Niki de Saint Phalle, Rebecca Warren, Franz West. I could go on. Yet Ackroyd managed to make a show that also looked like itself, earnest and difficult and tender and oddly painful, which (like of all us) came from somewhere, and (like some of us) seems to be heading somewhere new.