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Out There

Siobhán Hapaska has a wild, slippery imagination; one that complicates time frames and disrupts similitude with the kind of ease....

Siobhán Hapaska has a wild, slippery imagination; one that complicates time frames and disrupts similitude with the kind of ease you'd normally associate with dreaming. Visually disparate but thematically coherent, her sculptures play with heightened perceptual states, shifts in atmosphere and discordant connections. References to either physical or mental transportation are abundant:

'I believe people are always travelling somewhere', she has said, 'even if it's only aspirational'. 1

By Jennifer Higgin

In his novel *Slowness*, Milan Kundera explores culturally determined relationships to movement and speed - how the velocity at which we move through the world affects the way we interact with both other people and ourselves. In response to his wife's criticism of how fast some vehicles travel, the narrator asks: 'what could I say? Maybe this: the man hunched over his motorcycle can focus only on the present instant of his flight; he is caught in a fragment of time cut off from both the past and the future; he is wrenched from the continuity of time; he is outside time; in other words he is in a state of ecstasy...'. Kundera's suggestion that an intense movement towards the future isn't simply a desire to be somewhere else more quickly, but a catalyst for an enhanced awareness of the present, is one that finds echoes in the work of Hapaska. For her, travel is a complicated metaphorical springboard - a movement within a discursive space, a flight of fancy, or the relationship that might develop between 'the cold impersonality of technology with the flames of ecstasy'. 3 *Far* (1994) was first shown at Hapaska's solo show, 'Saint Christopher's Legless' at the ICA in London in 1995-6. It's a good example of Kundera's 'fragment of time' - a fibreglass sculpture of something solid that's dissolved or drifted from its recognisable form, an abstracted amalgam of a motorbike and rider that looks as if it were created from the disparate origins of sun-polished bones and new cars. Shaped into a single, almost organic entity, something of the concentration or disembodiment of speed is paradoxically revealed in the sculpture's stillness and lack of detail. The future is never present - unreachable but not unthinkable. *Far*'s trajectory towards an unattainable destination describes this conundrum, a frustrated, uneasy unity between the push and pull of individual desire (Why do people want to go so fast and so far? Why are cars and motorbikes built to break speed limits?) and collective restriction (expense, laws, cultural fear of death).

Here (1995), a very strange, very comfortable, slightly fetishistic fibreglass and sheepskin bed develops this Sisyphean freedom-through-containment thesis from a different viewpoint. It doesn't pretend to go anywhere. Quite the opposite in fact - it's a proposition, a monument to empiricism and perhaps the only really ironic piece Hapaska has ever made, a sculpture that comes with directions for use but which actually just gives you permission to relax enough to believe in the sensations and responses of your own body and mind. Here is a sculpture that is incomplete, meaningless, without a human being - strapped to the bed, allowed only to breathe through an oxygen mask and left alone, the viewer becomes a component in the sculpture's function. The oxygen saturates your blood and makes you lucid; the soothing sound of cascading liquid is provided by trickles of water that run down from the bed's perimeter to be recirculated; and the smell of lanolin from the fleece is comforting, recalling images of babies on sheepskin rugs. 'It's an object,' said Hapaska, 'that will do absolutely nothing, because you shouldn't look at a piece of art and ask "what will this piece of art do to me", it will do nothing unless you do something to it... I wanted to call it Here because it's here from within each person that the potential lies, not within the piece of art. It's a huge folly'. 4 'Experience me' it seems to say 'and tell me what I am'.

Hapaska's work posits art as an accumulator: a language that can't help but absorb objects or ideas blown into its orbit. *Stray* (1997) deals with this idea literally. A tumbleweed travels gently back and forward along a little railway track. Made in two versions, the one shown in documenta X has a polystyrene cup caught in its branches, while the other, first seen in 'Ago' at Entwistle Gallery in London, is tangled with strips of hand-painted blue paper. The ribbon and the cup are random elements in an otherwise controlled environment; desert detritus whirled by the wind into the path of the tumbleweed. Detritus of a different nature gets picked up as well - the clichés, fragments and visual sound-bites of popular culture. Hollywood images of desolation (tumbleweed blowing over cross-picked bones towards doomed homesteads) and hope (railways, pioneer spirit, wide open spaces) fuse into a melancholy meditation on the tension between the natural world and the rational one. The myth (the movement, according to Barthes, between a silent existence and an oral state) of the natural is literally made to travel a futile journey, backward and forward within an intellectually prescribed realm. Tumbleweed becomes sculpture, becomes functional - what do you want nature to do? sculpture to do? - and blurs at the intersection of the real and the imaginary.

A more abstracted variation on these ideas of both literal and metaphorical transport can be seen in three austere fibreglass structures, *Want*, *How* and *Hanker* (all 1997). Tiny blue lights puncture the exquisite opalescent surfaces, reflecting and deflecting light and meaning as they allude to space-junk, or orifices and skin, or an oyster shell - the inside of an ear, the bodies of cars, the lights of aeroplanes, distant towns at night. Absurd and beautiful as objects of desire - irrational, self-absorbed and unidentifiable - they resist singular interpretations as strongly as they encourage myriad ones. But however enigmatic these pieces might be, it's an enigma that functions not so much hermetically (which would ultimately be unsatisfying) as allusively. If the surfaces of *Want*, *How* and *Hanker* are aloof, their shapes seem to be straining towards an unspecified destination - somewhere, at least not here. Their titles are heartfelt, using the kind of words that are often associated with need, melancholy or love. This conflicting combination of words, shapes and surfaces summons a feeling of frustration, of thwarted consummation. They're beautiful, but it's a beauty that lacks completeness. They're sculptures that resist giving you anything but a state of mind.

Faith may be many things, but (not unlike art) it's rarely rational, and after the first stumbling moments of conversion, seldom prescriptive and nearly impossible to retract - official disbelief doesn't necessarily mean that individual belief is automatically withdrawn. In two sculptures made during the past two years, Hapaska has employed hyper-realism to delineate Christianity's representational, perceptual and emotional limits. Unable physically to move, but capable of inspiring a confidence in movement, *Saint Christopher* (1995), a disturbingly life-like wax sculpture of a man, leans, exhausted, against a wall. Half-naked and stained with the dust and grime of travel, his eyes are closed and his legs, worn-down stumps, poke out from beneath his robe. An ex-Patron Saint of Travel and a popular subject for populist art, St Christopher was de-canonised by the Church in 1969 due to lack of proof of his existence. Crippled and dispossessed, he's the physical manifestation of an idea no longer sanctioned as existing even in the realm of the imagination. Christianity, a way of living that is not so much dependent on proof as it on stories and mystical leaps of faith, is revealed in all its glorious inconsistency. *Saint Christopher* begs a lot of questions: are images as icons only valid when they've been approved by power structures beyond our control? How possible is it to reverse a leap of faith? And should the reversal then be described as a leap of reason?

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It could be said that the Christian church has always had a problem with the future, a place or a space that Hapaska, with her ethos of self-determination, tends to be optimistic about. It's also true that the Church takes a long time to apologise for the injustices it's committed - just think of Galileo. After making *Saint Christopher*, Hapaska turned her attention to another historical religious figure, and created a receptacle of both cultural anxiety and wish-fulfilment: *The Inquisitor* (1997), exhibited in 'Ago'. A seven-fingered but otherwise life-like robed wax figure, he sat in a darkened basement space on a Breuer Wassily chair, holding a speaker that looked like a cross between an orb and a Barbara Hepworth pebble - a marriage between the Middle Ages and that other religion, 20th-century Modernist design. The sound of a monologue emanates from the orb, switching between English and Christianity's dead language, Latin, depending on where you are in the gallery. Some words are clearer than others: '...I wish you could touch my hard, unhappy edges. I was a lump-sucker on an ocean of dust, while you will glide over wet, shimmering brooks [...] You are so advanced you will never need petrol, with your hassle-free diet which really works. You are a beautiful progressive thing but I tried to cauterise your ideas [...] I must go home now to Nos Stalgia, you will never travel through me. I am sorry'. Like *Saint Christopher*, *The Inquisitor* has his eyes closed, either praying, meditating or too guilty to look an audience in the eye - too tongue-tied or taciturn to do the talking himself. What a thought - that the evil and intolerance of the Inquisitor (both main player and victim in the malleable, often malevolent construct that is European history) might come back not to haunt us but to say sorry, not to criticise our development but to describe it as a 'beautiful progression'.

As the narrator famously observes in L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* (1953), the past is another country. It is, of course, impossible to visit without taking a lot of baggage. The two religious figures, like time-travellers, created almost shocking counterpoints to the elegant, non-fictional restraint of the other sculptures in the galleries. 'There is a massive distance', Hapaska has said, 'that needs to be travelled conceptually when you look at an abstract piece alongside a figurative piece'. 5 Like the effect that stern teachers have on a group of school-children, the presence of the figures creates a tension that would be entirely different if they were shown separately from the other sculptures. The more abstract pieces become quite wilfully abstract, and the allusions to travel and to time begin to read like a bid for freedom: an escape into a mental and physical space that's more liberated, more expressive and more beautiful than the one that preceded it.

The plaintive moan of a faghorn and the hiss and suck of a sea is emitted from the distorted, rosewood, hi-fi *Heart* (1995). As melancholy as the shape of a damaged heart suggests, the sounds, isolated and isolating, evoke images of drifting, drowning and a distant shore. However, heard and seen in conjunction with *Saint Christopher*. Here, *Far* and *Stray*, as they were for Hapaska's ICA exhibition, the singularity of *Heart*'s loneliness becomes more complicated, contextual and interactive. If *Heart* feels sad, you only have to turn and travel in a different direction, either towards the solipsism of *Here*, where the faghorn and water turn a feeling of isolation into one of liberation, or to the aspirational properties of *Far*, for which the sounds imply a destination that a rider might strain every muscle to reach. An entirely different atmosphere was evoked in the sounds that came from *Delirious* (1996), shown as part of 'Ago'. Imagine condemning the progeny of Henry Moore to the sound of a lonesome techno angel humming an Elvis song and you've got a complicated fin de siècle lament. The mutated distortion of a figure, once again made from fibreglass and pearlescent paint, is trapped in old wooden stocks as it emits the sounds of *Love Me Tender*, no longer a sweet and soulful ballad but reduced, digitised and bleak. It's a sculpture with surfaces that at once absorb, repel and splinter. Morbid, desolate and darkly funny, with its imploding languages and references, it's a slick and miserable memorial to the unstable structures of fame, Modernity and representation.

Both 'Saint Christopher's Legless' and Hapaska's installation at documenta X were lit with a delicate blue that evoked an atmosphere of twilight, that most fragile and transient of mental and physical states. Not simply a descriptive term for a time of day, twilight is also used to describe a period in which strength or importance wane, the last phase before a change is complete. It's a feeling that fills Hapaska's installations - the sense that sculpture, as we have known it, is becoming something else; that the past needs to be put to rest, and that the end of this century and the beginning of another is imminent. 'When I'm out walking', wrote Robert Walser, 'many notions, flashes of light, and lightning flashes quite of their own accord intrude and interrupt, to be carefully pondered upon'. 6 It could be the description of a wander through one of Hapaska's installations.

Sometimes it feels as though history is piled up so high behind us it can't help but occasionally topple. This is Hapaska's terrain, a place of time warps, mental journeys, displaced images and dislocated languages, and it's one she chooses to explore in a space that's no less weird than the unconscious, the past or the future - the gallery. If her work is as lacking in homogeneity, and if she employs dissimilar sounds and surfaces, it's because time and our movement through it isn't linear or one-dimensional either. Her amalgam of a peculiar realism and a streamlined biomorphic Modernism posits sculpture as signifier of a hybrid state of mind, redolent of distant histories that can't help but echo with the reverberations of the present. She plunders, rearranges and reinvents some of the tired signs of a tired century with a high-minded seriousness, a lack of reverence, and the unpredictable impulses of a slightly demonic story-teller. Hapaska once said '...living in cities, you never see a horizon, that dream territory has gone.' 7 Well, she might live in a city, but she doesn't need a horizon - she's got dream territory enough.

1. Siobhan Hapaska interviewed by Ingrid Swenson, *Siobhan Hapaska, Saint Christopher's Legless*, December 1995/18 February 1996, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, unpaginated.

2. Milan Kundera, *Slowness*, Faber and Faber, London, 1995, p.3.

3. *Ibid.*, p.4.

4. *Op. cit.* ICA Catalogue, unpaginated.

5. *Ibid.*, unpaginated.

6. Robert Walser, *The Walk, Serpent's Tail*, London, 1982, p.69.

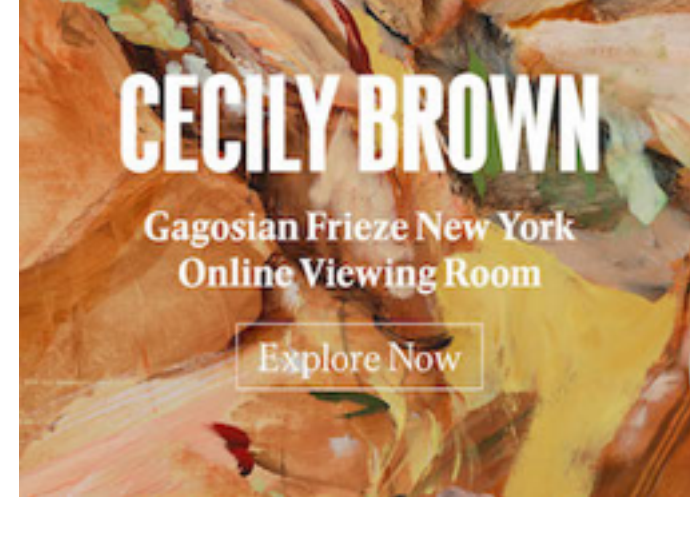
7. *Op. cit.* ICA Catalogue, unpaginated.

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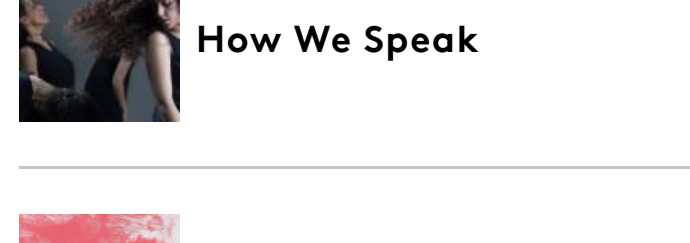
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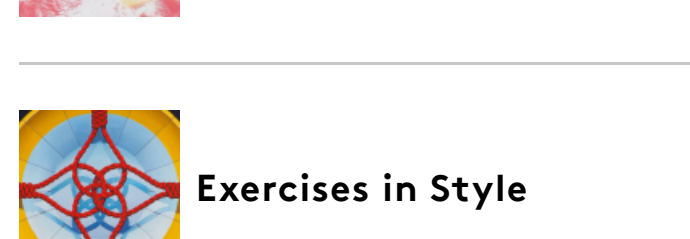
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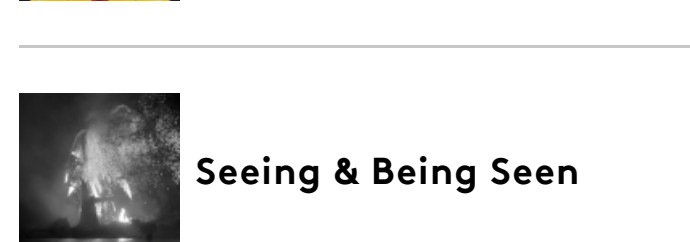
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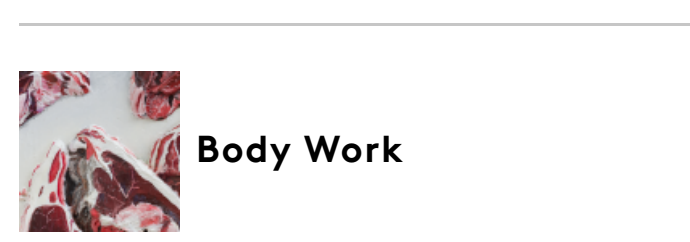
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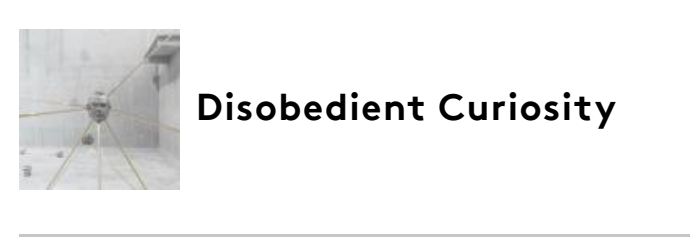
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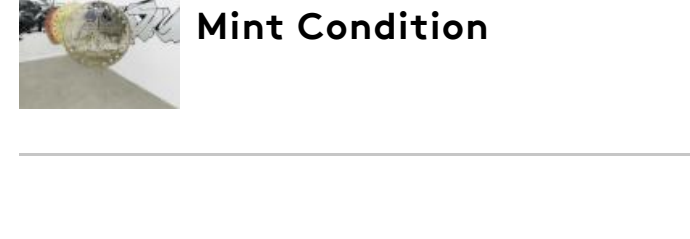
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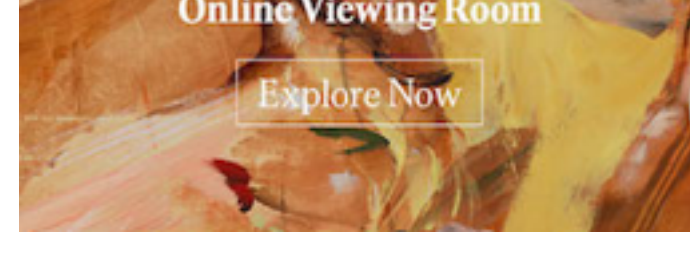


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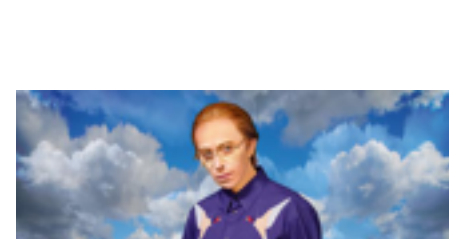


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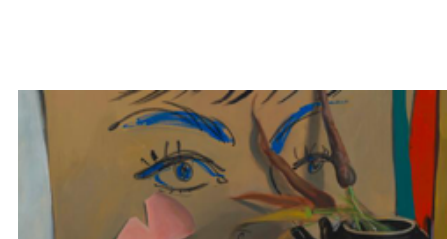
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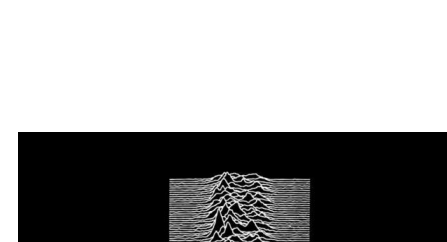
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