

A Plastic Ruin in a Chroma-Green Landscape

An introduction to 'Moving Forward, Into, Under and Behind,' an onsite exhibition by Claudia Dunes.

Four sculptures lean against a green-screen wall like tired colonnades. Underneath, a white sheet collects a scattering of cement dust. At first sight, the four monoliths look like weathered columns uplifted from a ruin. Seemingly dense and heavy, and placed behind the vitrine of Window Gallery, the scene brings to mind a museum of historic relics. On closer viewing, a kind of sculptural double entendre can be seen. Like set design for theatre, artist Claudia Dunes' sculpted polystyrene forms stand in for pillars of concrete.

Dunes abandons the dictum of a 'truth to materials'. Like the faux porticos of McMansions, she brings these forms into being with a playful mimicry, sculpting one material to resemble another. Concrete, which is thought to embody strength and resilience and is the preferred material for building ever-lasting structures, is here imitated by a plastic thing that endures even longer. They are like ruins precisely in their resistance to decompose. With these forms, Dunes is reluctant to distinguish between the original and the copy, and in turn, what is natural and what is unnatural. Her project re-thinks the terms of nature after collapsing the nature–culture divide. It accepts the universal validity of synthetic materials like polystyrene as part of the natural world.

This new materialism, a turning towards the 'agency of things' or 'vibrant matter', is motivated by the need to reconsider the chronic overproduction and impact of 'stuff' that organises contemporary life. For this reason, it could be said that Dunes presents a natural scenery, one that is enmeshed by the social and economic structures of industrial production, a plastic ruin in a chroma-green landscape. But this is not to elide the propensity for some materials to impact

negatively on the body of Gaia. The project is about the varying time-scales and the different lives of matter. Everything turns to compost eventually, but the time it takes is an important difference. If it takes too long, if it's unnecessarily robust, then it is a form of failure on the part of the process or material.

To think of the failure of a material is to think in terms of shortcomings, underachievements or incomplete things. It brings to mind something substandard, clumsy and prone to toppling. But there is a different kind of failure at the other end of the spectrum: a type of construction that outlives its intended use-by date. It can be an overachieving building, bridge or bath-house, or any construction that exploits more resources and labour than necessary. Building a fortress in the wilderness, for example, is a poor option for the nomad who is better to carry a tent. It is a failure by way of frivolity or excess.

In this way, Dunes' installation points to the entropic nature of matter. Her objects register in the same way as those aggregates of plastics which form themselves into bejewelled clumps in the subterranean depths of the ocean. Referencing an archaeological ruin, she exposes our schizophrenic relationship to perishing things. Her polystyrene forms, in their enduring composition, bring decay to a standstill and eliminate the threat of an organic end to life.

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