

Quilting Points

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The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art inaugurates its biennial artists' award with a show marked by the idea of transference

BY EN LIANG KHONG

Vienna-based sculptor Toni Schmale has been thinking a lot lately about 'transitional objects', the term coined by psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott in 1953 for the items that young children seize as tools for psychological comfort: dolls, stuffed toys, even blankets. On a recent Wednesday, I followed Schmale around her installation at Gateshead's Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, for which she's created her own 'family' of 'transitional objects', she explains. It's a punishing constellation that reaches out to the inner machine. 'Nothing can make you believe we harbor nostalgia for factory work but a modern gym', Mark Greif writes in his mischievous 2004 essay in *n+1*, 'Against Exercise'. And just so, Schmale's objects dissolve the last vestiges of industry – a language of pulleys, racks, levers – into their simplest elements, rearranging them into compositions that invoke, in equal measure, exercise and BDSM equipment, finished with a military-black polish.



Toni Schmale,
waltraud, 2016,
BALTIC Artists'
Award 2017,
installation view,
BALTIC Centre
for
Contemporary
Art, Gateshead.
Courtesy: © 2017
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photograph:
John McKenzie

Schmale's sculptural production in *The Good Enough Mother* (2017) and *waltraud* (2016), in which industrial remnants are resurrected in stone and metal as sexually-charged silhouettes of guillotines and treadmills (minus the gym bunnies), find an admirer and clear echo in her former tutor Monica Bonvicini. This year, the Baltic has asked Bonvicini, along with Mike Nelson, Pedro Cabrita Reis and Lorna Simpson (all established artists with strong links to the art centre) to each nominate an artist for its inaugural biennial artists' award, receiving GBP£25,000 to create new work, along with a GBP£5,000

fee.

Dominating the Baltic's vast, warehouse-like upper gallery, Mexican artist Jose Dávila (chosen by Reis) has installed *The weaker has conquered the stronger* (2017) which calls on the rhythms and materials of construction and architecture and produces an unsettling transformation of the functional into a gravity-defying illusion. A steel cable plunges through the floor, shoots back up to the ceiling and seems to visibly strain as it ties together iron girders, boulders of sandstone, and a red latex balloon into an impossible concatenation of events. Dávila likes to 'subvert the logical experience of things', he tells me – his closed-loop structure takes an anxiety-inducing moment of drama (the balloon swaying ever so slightly under a mass of rock, suspended in mid-air) and freezes it.



Jose Dávila, *The weaker has conquered the stronger*, 2017, BALTIC Artists' Award 2017, installation view, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead. Courtesy: © 2017

BALTIC; photograph: John McKenzie

Dávila, who is currently based in Guadalajara, started on a series of photographic cut-out works in the late 1990s, in which he stripped out landmarks from their surrounding landscapes, leaving a gaping white void. This sense of negative space is flipped in recent compositions in which found, raw materials – glass, marble and concrete – are strapped into a precise perimeter. The blank spaces created between the components of *The Weaker Has Conquered the Stronger* are filled with the phobia of physical threat, the idea that the whole thing might come crashing down on you. At the same time, this hovering megalith also wants to ground you in an appreciation of place and time: the girders reference the industrial history of Gateshead, and Dávila has made sure to source the sandstone from a local quarry.

Dávila's mass effect renders Eric N. Mack's installation, which occupies the other half of the gallery, even more fragile and weightless. The New York-based artist (chosen by Simpson) collages the traces of everyday, domestic labour – a knotted brass bedframe, crumpled tent cover, splattered clothes – into a rag-tag, painterly blur: 'a transference of utility' as he sees it. A performer, dressed in a toga of vividly patterned fabrics, drifts through the installation. Mack quilts a contorted fragment of fencing into the ruffles and flourishes of a bed skirt in *The opposite of the pedestal is the grave* (2017), while stained fabrics are stitched up with a slice of dried orange and a sequined dragon in *Implied Reebok or Desire for the Northeast Groover* (2016), playfully curved into the contours of the Reebok 'cross check' logo. He draws inspiration from Sam Gilliam's drape paintings, and continually thinks about how 'absorption, the depth within the fabric, the staining' all manifest within his own work.