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ENCLAVE REVIEW

Karl Burke and Maud Cotter: The Air They Capture Is Different The MAC, Belfast Sarah Kelleher

Just over a year old, the MAC is a multi-purpose arts centre folded into a corner of the redeveloped St. Anne's Square. It is a striking building characterized by soaring internal volumes and acute angles, which offers two idiosyncratic and wildly different gallery spaces. One of these is a hall of a scale that lends itself to the display of massive sculpture, with a small alcove lit by a full-length window. The other exhibition suite is an ensemble of three rooms, or a single large space with two subsidiaries: one a skinny, towering triangle, the other a stubby anteroom. Each is again punctuated by a vertical slice of window. Interiors of such deliberate eccentricity can prove difficult for both artist and curator – there can be practical difficulties with hanging or lighting, or the work can simply be upstaged by the architecture and fail to make an impact. In curatorial terms, then, the choice of a two-person show with Karl Burke and Maud Cotter

was an inspired one. Both artists are concerned with framing, containing and measuring space in different but satisfyingly complimentary ways. Burke's steel vectors simultaneously cut through and frame space, drawing our attention to the complexities of the architecture, while Cotter's sculptures work to make space tangible, as air or as atmosphere, by harnessing light or drawing our attention to its subtle, shifting movements.

For example, Cotter's *Once More With Feeling* (2013), a scaled-up wastepaper bin that stands like a skinny Claes Oldenburg, is composed of a delicately linear frame tipped in pale pink and complete with its own super-sized bin bag made from cloudily translucent plastic. The material quality of the 'bag' is the most compelling element of the piece, specifically the way in which the air and light contained within gains a certain density. The plastic billows gently in the shifting air currents created by the viewer's movements around the work, so that at times it almost pulsates slightly, like an opalescent jellyfish held in a tank, while nevertheless remaining obstinately literal in its waste basket-ness. Perhaps more successful is *A Solution Is in the Room/4*, (2013) which also plays with opacity and transparency, this time using ribbons of corrugated cardboard layered into spheres. Two of these spheres sit facing each other in slim neon orange frames, like a pair of fat babies in highchairs, while the honeycomb structure of the cardboard allows a shimmer of the vivid orange to glow through the airy bulk of each form.

As a counterpoint to the allusive whimsicality of Cotter's two pieces, Karl Burke's *Taking a Line* (2012), a fold-out screen made of bisected mild steel frames that march across the concrete floor of the massive space, is resolutely abstract and linear. Moving around the work, the viewer is presented with a shifting series of visual effects, as the intersecting bars of Burke's concertinaed structure appear to expand and contract. It is a simple and fantastically effective piece that literalizes planes and lines and eloquently dramatizes the dimensions of the gallery. Burke's take on the severe language of high Minimalism is, at times, inflected with a certain bone-dry wit, as in *Arrangements 4* (2013), where two shallow open-ended rectangles leant against the gallery wall become an abbreviated frame, surrounding nothing. However, his linear compositions are most successful when exploiting the architectural conceits of acute angles and wedges.

Sited in the upper gallery, Burke's *Poetics of Space* (2013) is composed of two lofty rectangular steel frames – each bent at an angle and with squared-off corners – and frames a pathway from the entrance of the small anteroom to the tall slice of window diagonally opposite. With great economy of means, Burke's minimal arrangement exerts a subtle

tyranny over the viewer, compressing our experience of the space, almost herding or funneling the viewer to the far corner of the room. This type of work, extending drawing into three-dimensional space, is not new: it was explored by Marcel Duchamp with his *Mile of String* in 1942, by Eva Hesse in the 1960s, and by Gego, Gordon Matta-Clark and Fred Sandback in the 1970s. But Burke's ascetic sculptures are nonetheless elegantly effective, particularly when drawing our attention to the ways in which architecture directs or dictates our movements.

In contrast to Burke's steely abstraction, Cotter's sculptures almost flaunt their domestic origins in the form of bins, sieves or vessels, which she then expands in scale or reduces to whip thin frames. *Measure* (2013) recalls a line drawing of a pint glass in flamboyant Schiaparelli pink, the spare graphic form made of mild steel so slender it almost quivers as the viewer walks around the piece. Her idiosyncratic containers also draw the viewer's attention to air, as a substance or an element suffused with light. *Capture* (2012-2013), for example, is again a riff on the shape of a wastepaper basket, this time with a small plastic bag of water caught like a lens or a jewel at its base. The bag of water catches and holds the daylight, but the piece also creates drama with shadow play – the fine metal and transparent, fluid-filled sack casting a shadow almost denser than its own material presence. Her use of fizzing neon accents provokes strange and almost surreal optical effects. *Capture* is sprayed a stinging Day-Glo yellow, which oddly flattens the sculpture, so that it appears that the

skeletal structure almost reverts back to a drawing in two dimensions, as if scribbled over a photo of the interior.

For all of the visual effects detailed above, *The Air They Capture Is Different* is a resolutely serious show, which, although beautifully choreographed, verges on the ascetic. However, both artists' conceptual explorations of internal volume or the architectural interior are absorbing, and bring to mind the French theorist Henri Lefebvre's model of space, which counters the commonly held notion that space consists of the empty areas between objects, or, 'that empty space is prior to whatever ends up filling it' (*The Production of Space*, 1974). Burke and Cotter's works don't so much occupy space or contain a spatial volume, as themselves hold, demarcate, and structure space as both volume and atmospheric medium. Rather than space being something that we experience passively, these two sculptors, in their best moments, make the viewer physically conscious of its presence. They offer us, in the words of Juhani Pallasmaa, a 'strengthened sense of [the] materiality and hapticity, texture and weight, density of space and materialized light' (*The Eyes of the Skin*, 2005).

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The Air They Capture is Different, MAC, Belfast (2013). Installation shot. Foreground: Maud Cotter: *a solution is in the room / 4* (2013). Mild steel, card, paint. Background: Karl Burke: *Taking a Line* (2012). Mild steel, paint. Photo by Jordan Hutchings.