

COLD TRAILS

Steph Holl-Trieu and Sophia Rohwetter on Nairy Baghramian and Sarah Rapson at Secession, Vienna



"Nairy Baghramian: Breath Holding Spell," Secession, Vienna, 2021–22, installation view

Contemporary life is marked by a tension between the pressure that we encounter from the outside, from our environments, and that which foment within, to which we submit ourselves. The consequences of enduring this condition tend to manifest both psychologically and physically. These can be detected in the work of Nairy Baghramian and Sarah Rapson, who recently had simultaneous exhibitions at the Vienna Secession. Researcher Steph Holl-Trieu and writer and researcher Sophia Rohwetter visited the exhibitions, writing that if Rapson's work doubts the reliability of the object, language, and art history, Baghramian's sculptures question their own material integrity.

If one were to follow the arguably misleading idea of the topographic model of the psyche, then Sarah Rapson's basement exhibition "Ode to Psyche" at the Vienna Secession would unequivocally be the site of the unconscious. There is a handwritten note (partially illegible but which seems to read "object a that lack") that might refer to Lacan's notion of the unattainable object of desire, and the light in the last room, where Rapson's new series of monochrome paintings is exhibited, is switched off. In a dark corner, a black-and-white photograph of the museum André Masson described as the "Sistine Chapel of Impressionism" recalls a time when Claude Monet's murals at the Musée de l'Orangerie were

deprived of any natural lighting. “When the light is off the painting is off,” reads the exhibition pamphlet. “Down in the basement down on the couch [...] this is no place for a painting. This is a place for a film,” it continues.

In the first room, this film, *galerie galerie/session* (2021), runs on a loop of undeclared length, unmarking its beginning and end. Mobile phone footage of the monochromes is intercut with recurring scenes of a person (perhaps Rapson in disguise) approaching entrances (to a house, a tent) and relapsing to their outsides (the street, a land art site) over and over again. Punk and piano music accompany these short scenes in a staccato rhythm. Every loop seems new, negating its own possibility of repetition. Recycling scenes from older video works, the film creates an almost hallucinatory feeling, an uncertainty about whether it is the video that is projecting or oneself. “Film has the power to come back and show you something as if it’s a dream,” Rapson recently said in an interview.¹ But elsewhere in this exhibition, she notes, “There is no subtext to art, it’s not like a dream. It’s a session.” Maybe one on the couch?

“Ode to Psyche” refers to John Keats’s expanded sonnet of the same name, on the myth of Psyche, a mortal woman turned goddess. The equivocal meaning of the word “psyche” might have appealed to Rapson, since she likes to lace her work with linguistic ambiguity. In a sound piece playing inside the men’s bathroom, the artist repeats a modified version of the famous lyrics from *The Doors*: “You know that it would be untrue / You know that I would be a liar / If I was to say to you / Man, we couldn’t get much higher.” The work’s title, *Lyre* (2021), might be both a phonetic play on the word “liar” and a reference to

the ancient Greek stringed instrument played by Psyche’s lover, Cupid. Not only do Keats’s poetry and punk share a rhyme scheme (ABAB); for Rapson, both also represent romantic movements. One feels inclined to continue singing “Come on, baby, light my fire” upon finding the artist’s book Rapson commissioned for this exhibition: an edition of matchbooks, one of them bearing Freud’s address, Berggasse 19.

Throughout the show, traces of its production – a misprint of the exhibition booklet, a business card of Rapson’s New York gallery, Essex Street – call to mind the material reality of art. Glass vitrines showcase scrawled notes and worn printed matter. In the first vitrine, a slowly paling three-page document poses as a historical source, but, upon reading, it proves to be a cut and condensed account of Western art history. Sentences and paragraphs have been replaced (or repressed?) by ampersands. The name Lucien Freud appears on various paper sheets, as if it were a handwriting exercise that, repeated often enough, might transform the name of the painter into that of the psychoanalyst. Displacement and condensation. Scraps of art reviews and exhibition views are scattered around, clippings from art market columns are wrapped around wooden sticks that are taped together and lean against the wall. Art history as a cut-up poem, a technique of language. All these traces are only part of a dysfunctional map or index. And yet they are followed. It is a method Rapson has called “melancholic strata-gem”: in order to possess a lost object, one has to treat an object one still fully possesses as if this object were already lost. The paradox of the lost object (again, *petit a*) points to one of the many figures of absence in Rapson’s work, whether a lack of women in art history books or the use of

what Rapson refers to as "no materials," such as soot, dirt, and earth pigment.

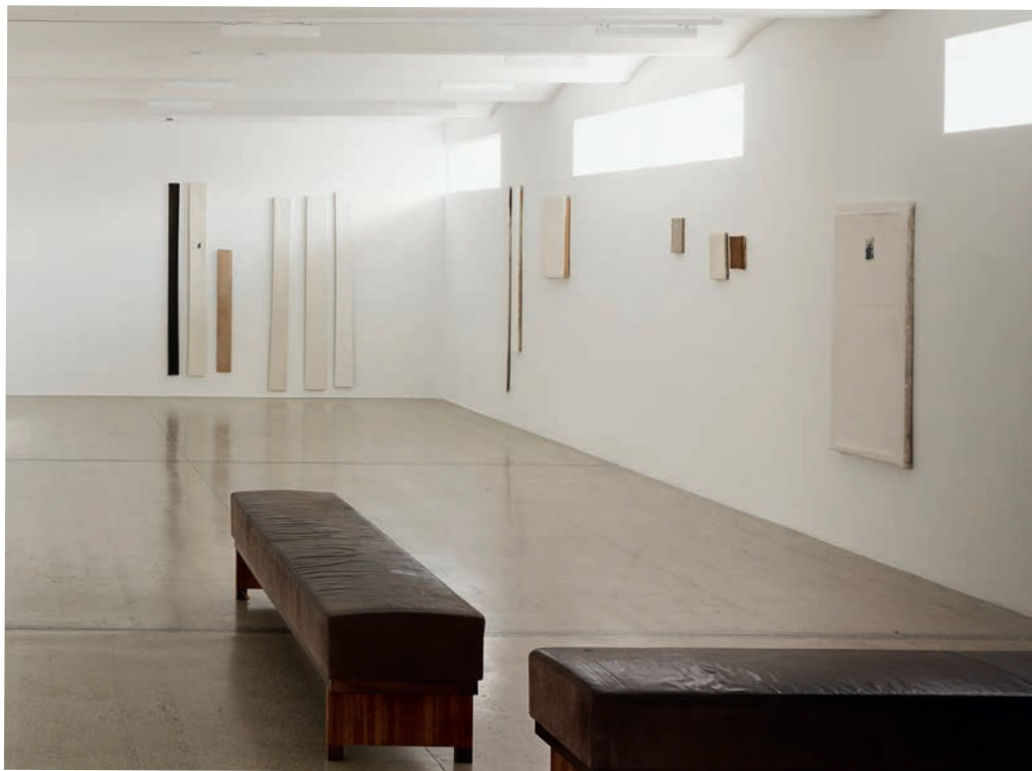
Up in the main exhibition hall, one encounters new and old work by Nairy Baghramian, mostly sculptures that, as she says, are "supposed to help articulate the doubt concerning their viability." If Rapson's work doubts the reliability of the object, language, and art history, Baghramian's sculptures question their own material integrity.

The artist has orchestrated a series of fragmented tubular sculptures that populate the room's corners and edges. Running parallel to the floor and walls, their glass bodies are held together by zinc-coated metal braces and joints made of kneaded lumps of colored epoxy resin. These *Dwindlers* (2018–21) evoke the image of a skeletonized structure devoid of any flesh or muscle. It's unclear whether they are exoskeletons nearing anthropomorphization or human figures abstracted to structural frames. One would assume the latter, considering Baghramian's previous works in which shapes of human body parts are transformed into architectural elements that renegotiate the spaces they occupy and call into question their own orientation and integrity. Although the *Dwindlers*' unevenly tinted glass surfaces and metal legs suggest a language of the organic, they might well be read as an assemblage of industrial detritus. What is the object that has undergone the process of dwindling, of decay and decline? Was it something else that previously used these structures as conduits and has now disappeared, or have these *Dwindlers* themselves shrunk in size, or lost their function?

Their disembowelment finds its inverse in the work *Deep Furrow* (2021). A group of five sculptural elements made of cast aluminum and wax mounted on chromed steel has retreated to the

right-side wall of the exhibition space, a sixth part installed further away. They, too, could be joints or limbs of a larger corporeal ensemble, but of which body? The title insinuates an impression made onto the surface of an object, skin or landscape – marks left by another, perhaps stronger material. But the work itself expresses the opposite – it's a crowd of bloated figures. Their outward-facing side shields the work in a metallic impermeability, while the other exposes smooth bellies made of wax. If, at first glance, *Deep Furrow* appears as a dense mass against which the fragile *Dwindlers* can only shatter, a look at its soft backside complicates the dichotomy between vulnerability and strength. Neither is ever solely or fully occupied by any body. Instead, the relation between these works points to the need to constantly question the perception of bodily formations and their ability to withstand environmental pressures.

Sometimes, an embodied being has to resist stress erupting from its inside rather than fend off external forces. This seems to be at stake in the powder-coated aluminum cast *Breath Holding Spell* (2018). It resembles a boiler with a relief valve sealed by the wall, a vessel that has been denied the ability to vent or discharge what it contains. A breath-holding spell describes a medical condition wherein a child responds to a painful or traumatic event, frustration, or anger with a sudden cessation of breathing. These spells often cause children to lose consciousness and pass out. The artwork's pendant, *Breathing Spell* (2017), has escaped outside as if to catch its breath. Adorning the Secession's exterior wall, it disguises itself as an oversized ashtray. The *Spells* form brackets around the inside and outside of the museum, remaining ambiguous about whether the museal



infrastructure supports the sculpture, or whether it's the other way around, or whether the system of support has collapsed altogether, as seen in the *Dwindlers*.

As one wonders about these disparate figures, a photograph of a fragmented onyx-colored tool forms a punctum. What is the function of *The Pincher* (2017)? Is it an instrument that might be used to ward off a looming disaster, or is it perhaps a destructive technology itself? Similar to the traces and hints in Rapson's basement show, the photograph pretends to be a decryption device, waiting to be used to decode the scene. Yet this promise is withheld; the viewer is held in a state of suspense. If, here, suspense is enacted through a series of ambivalent abstractions, it does so in the basement through the dynamics of repression and negation (in a vitrine, hidden under an image of a Richard Long clay floor sculpture, one of Rapson's ink scribbles reads "Art

is not philosophy"). These hints never fully materialize as traces or signifiers, or, if they do, they lack what they aim to say. In both exhibitions, empty wall mounts point to this lack or absence: on the main floor, one finds two chromed steel cylinders from which parts of *Deep Furrow* seem to have broken off; in the basement, nails on the walls carry no paintings. The unconscious is not a place; it is fundamentally a formulation of negativity that holds the sometimes paradoxical status of only being describable in terms of what it is not, or what is not there.

"Nairy Baghramian: Breath Holding Spell" and "Sarah Rapson: Ode to Psyche," Secession, Vienna, both November 20, 2021–February 20, 2022.

Notes

- 1 "Meet the Artist: Sarah Rapson," Museum for Preventive Imagination – Editorial, uploaded January 27, 2021, <https://www.museomacro.it/extra/video/meet-the-artist-sarah-rapson/>.