

A Glimpse of the Setting Remains

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Rebecca Ackroyd
Agata Ingarden
Diane Severin Nguyen
Cezary Poniatowski

curated by
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What lasts and what fades over time?

A drill bit ignited by burning napalm attempts to pierce a disc, but it shrivels into a spiral folding back on itself, twisting as it does so (*Wilting Helix*, 2019). A massive lock of hair is suspended in a plastic bag filled with water. We imagine it thrashing around convulsively, like a goldfish in thrall to the pressures of the liquid (*Liquid Isolation*, 2019). A latex glove reveals the outline of a finger covered in layers of matter difficult to identify (*If Revolution Is a Sickness*, 2020). An injury is revealed in the porosity of its synthetic surface, showing a burn which is still hot (*Her Charismatic Agony*, 2020). There is always a palpable tension holding together the emotional fabric that underpins **Diane Severin Nguyen's** images, a sense of suspension and destruction that manifests itself the very moment the artist captures the amalgam of materials she uses and the natural phenomena she triggers within her tight framing. It is a physical, plastic, elastic tension. A seductive and repulsive impulse that captures provisional and transforming states, invading the limits of the photographic medium itself. Nguyen's approach to image-making is visceral; her close-up inspections reveal intimate views of scenarios that the artist recreates in her studio using elements that are as carefully juxtaposed as they are based on the ephemeral and the precarious. These are sets that could fit into the palm of your hand. "I like approaching photography as a set of limitations, and also as something problematic. It forces me to begin artmaking from a non-safe space." Her images hybridize the organic with the synthetic and always toy with notions of abstraction: they are abject and alien mysteries, where seductive light and glossy colors deny the sense of destruction that led to their creation. That is why they are "documents," remnants of a process of pain and pleasure, subtended as they are by an emotional and invisible architecture that manipulates us as we observe them.

Whether focused on the body in relation to its life processes or on technology as an extension of the body itself, or on the home as an element of refuge and protection, **Agata Ingarden's** research is always interested in the relationship between inside and outside and in the spaces that create disorientation between a domestic sphere—"where everything is in its place"—and a wilder, growing condition—"where nothing is in its place." Direct testimony of these are offered by *Rooftop glamour* and *Coffee break* (both 2022): two new productions conceived specifically for the exhibition and part of *The hours of dog series*. Like an organism that adapts and multiplies, the artist's work expands to fill the space that constitutes it. In the works on display, the stratification and accumulation of oyster shells seems to feed the volumetric and material proliferation of the upper part of the sculpture itself. It is the proliferation of a physical, but also social and "manufactured" space, it inevitably clashes with the natural element, exploring the relationships between human beings and their inventions. Inspired by the predominantly modernist architecture that characterizes the buildings in the northern suburbs of Paris (where the artist lives and works), the inside of the sculptures consists of a skeleton framework which, once covered by the organic element, loses all architectural connotations. What remains is a small window, a glimmer of intimacy, a domestic arena of family affection. A yellow, UV light inside it pulses dimly. "Each oyster is like a flat within an expanding building; a mass but not a community; a proximity and a separation at the same time." A cascade of office curtains serves as a support, shading and pushing the sculpture upwards. "For me, these works are like floating buildings: fleshy clouds, blinding streaks of sky, city skylines."

Resembling a reptile lying motionless, *Derealization* (2020) by **Cezary Poniatowski** is made from an upside-down carpet sewn together with zip ties, revealing the inner part as the only visible membrane of a structureless volume. Two torches emerge from it, like binocular lenses scrutinizing the surroundings. In *Domestication* (2020), on the other hand, the fabric is entangled behind a composition of geometric shapes covered in synthetic leather. Two black rubber medicine balls settle between the cracks like traces of memory captured in now-invisible contours. These sculptures incorporate what may be considered the generative motifs of Poniatowski's research: the drive towards a distorted and upside-down perspective that plays with the "prism" of memory and a sense of emptiness that refers to the sphere of the unconscious; the inclination towards "peeking" that, according to the artist, toys with our instincts, creating tension and disorientation while enhancing the wild, primordial character of the works; the evocative symbolism of the material that takes its shape in almost spectral sculptural presences. Largely informed by the cultural heritage of his native Poland, the artist's practice makes extensive use of the blockboard, synthetic leather and upholstery foam that were once used to cover, insulate and soundproof the front doors in housing structures in the former Eastern Bloc, as well as carpets that date back to the Socialist era in Central Europe. The bas-relief *Untitled* (2022) radiates the sense of abandonment that for the artist originates from a "tormented craft." Here the cavities and bulges augment the underlying anxieties of the material, blending into layers that are both aggressive and soothing. The sound dimension remains silent, as if the noise was locked inside the relief, inaudible. "My art acts as a distorting mirror that focuses on existential threads, where stories pulsate beneath the skin." Sometimes these stories come alive with isolated, self-enclosed characters, like in *Red Sand* (2022), where four figures covered in red sand sit at the edge of a terracotta vase: out-of-scale witnesses to subcutaneous tension, "an almost suspenseful moment of waiting for something that doesn't want to come."

Like wall-mounted vents or drainage systems, **Rebecca Ackroyd's** *Fillet* and *Fingers Deep* drawings (both 2020) evoke a feeling of crossing over and exploring the psychology of space as well as domestic and urban architecture in relation to "feeling" in a body and its vital functions. "I like the idea that architecture retains a sense of its past occupants." Just like the artist's painting and sculpture work—expressed generously in dreamlike installation environments that confront stark realities—the pastel works on display here (part of an ongoing series) are fleeting fragments of a broader conversation, traces of memories pervaded by a sense of abandonment in which an overtly feminine element shines through in both form and flesh tones against purple backgrounds. Balanced between abstraction and figuration, these works evoke and accentuate the relationship between interior and exterior spaces, and between the bodies within them: they recall portions of human skeletons and work their way into the most remote corners like domestic ruins, caught between a state of impermanence and the persistence of a personal and collective memory, between the dusty tones of pastel and the torn edges of paper. The reference to seductive hyper-femininity is instead echoed in *Soft Engine 5* (2019), which offers itself to the eye as an immersion in thick locks of hair: red waves that settle against a potential landscape where a central detail opens up a fertile and almost threatening glimpse.