

Soft Armor Garance Früh
February 4th — April 1st, 2023

"[...] love responds angrily, wielding erotic paradox as a weapon."¹

— Anne Carson

It starts with the drop of a glove. A finger then slips under the edge of a shoulder guard, undoing its fastenings and letting it fall to the floor. A helmet is removed and carefully placed in the corner as the undressing continues. A hair ribbon is slowly pulled from its support and hung on a protruding hook. The cuirass is lifted up and over the head before embracing the wall, keeping the traces of a perfectly delineated torso. Knee and elbow protection pads disperse themselves throughout the space whilst the final layer, the second skin, scarred and embellished, is stretched across the window, concealing and revealing. An armor, a soft one, is dismantled and disseminated in the space. Power is transformed into softness whilst preserving its strength.

Rendering virile systems docile and impotent, Garance Früh questions the dichotomies between protection and defense, between the vulnerable and the aggressive. From the exhibition's title to the sculptures themselves, spontaneous surrealist associations that necessarily evoke sensation (of empathy? repulsion? desire?) are at play here.² Her work is one of provocation that assembles objects and materials to embody contradiction.

Sports equipment, toys, and childish accessories are deconstructed, resurfaced, molded, transformed and combined, confusing that which is fragile with that which is not. The erotic always lingers. In *Coquille*, a groin protector is inverted, cradled and accompanied by playful accessories. As for *Tendre*, the leg of a plastic children's table is recreated in smoky ceramic mounted, erect, on the wall, yet embellished by small details that blur elements of various genitalia. A ripped (in the muscular sense) carapace becomes limpid (*Soft Armor*), a scanty garment disguises itself as a disfigured playmat (*Sans titre*), and a glove offers a flower to its viewer (*L'attraper et l'éclore*). The choices of material, form and surface are closely related to the body. And the rose-tinted lens through which we perceive it all is less one of optimism than it is one of regression and desire. Because "if cuteness is a 'realm of erotic regulation [...] that offers' protection' from violence and exploitation', it is clearly also a way of bringing that sexuality out."³

Looking beyond human tactics, Garance Früh draws on the defense mechanisms and symbolism of other species, notably the infamous carnivorous plant, the Venus flytrap. Attracting its prey through its form and capacity to mimic the scents of harmless flowers, this passive plant becomes active once stimulated. With its evocative appearance and name, borrowed from the goddess of love and beauty, this plant symbolizes the erotic as power, a key idea to understanding Garance Früh's work.⁴ With the hue that fills the space and the diaphanous veil stretched across the window, it is as if we were in the belly of the beast— at once its stimulant and its prey.

Protection through cuteness, through softening, through mimicry and through defense are at the heart of "*Soft Armor*". When discussing the exhibition with Garance Früh, we somehow arrived at the absurd French expression 'se faire violence' – literally meaning 'to

do violence to oneself', an expression that roughly translates the idea of acting against one's desires in order to do what is best for oneself. Should not preservation trump violence? Particularly when it comes to one's own desires and needs? "Soft Armor" can be considered as the antithesis to said expression, in that it enacts a necessary dismantling of systems in which violence and the suppression of desire have prevailed.

Perhaps an extract of Jean Genet's poem "Un Chant d'amour" could have eloquently resumed what we experience through Garance Früh's work:

This form that keeps you so pure
is of a rose. Preserve it.
The evening already reveals you
and you appear to me (all clothes removed)
wrapped in your sheets or standing against a wall.⁵

The rose (in color and form), the protection, the purity (innocence? regressivity?), the eroticism, the revealing, the undressing, the enveloping, the wall: five lines that take us on a journey through desire, vulnerability and power. A journey not far off from that experienced in the exhibition.

Katia Porro

1 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, Princeton University Press, 2014.

2 Lucy Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction", in *Changing essays in art criticism*, E.P. Dutton & Co., 1971.

3 Lori Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics," in *Documents of Contemporary Art: The Cute*, ed. Sianne Ngai, Whitechapel Gallery, 2022.

4 Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power," in *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House*, Penguin Classics, 2018.

5 Jean Genet, "Un Chant d'Amour," dans *Le condamné à mort et autres poèmes*, Gallimard, 1999. Translated from the French.

Garance Früh

In Garance Früh's practice, the body is seen as a place of resistance and docility. Her sculptures and installations question the social, intimate and erotic forces affecting the body. In order to dismantle these mechanisms, she deconstructs the objects that seem to protect, stimulate or constrain, while imagining a reconfiguration bodies and their functions. Eroticism encompasses her works in their textures and finishes. Soft or supple elements with a cute aesthetic are then added, creating tensions within the forms between power and desire, submission and domination.

Her solo exhibition "Soft Armor" plunges the viewer into a dismantled system where power is transformed into softness whilst exuding its strength.

Garance Früh was born in France in 1992. She graduated from the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam in 2018 and from ENSAPC in Cergy in 2020. She has recently exhibited her work at Forde (Geneva); IVECO NU (Noisy-le-Sec); and BQ Berlin.

The exhibition "Soft Armor" was realized in partnership with Moly-Sabata Résidence d'artistes/Fondation Albert Gleizes.