

GALERIE FONSWELTERS

Olga Balema

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Q&A with Olga Balema

Kari Rittenbach: What is the title for the new exhibition?

Olga Balema: There's no title – I don't think there will be one. When I did the first installation of these sculptures in Paris I grouped the panels together in different configurations. I'm not sure yet how it will translate to Amsterdam.

How are the sculptures grouped – by color?

A few are grouped by color, but there's not a strict organizational system. There is one column all in pink, but a lot of them were mixed up; the combinations of color, texture, and shape were determined by the structure of the space where they were shown.

The idea was to disperse the panels throughout the space so that they covered most of it, in some way or another.

And the original clusters or groups will remain together? That is, one set of panels = one sculpture?

Yes. Grouped in this way, the sculptures retain the memory of the original space. But in Amsterdam they will be installed in a much smaller space.

How much smaller?

It has lower ceilings, and a lot less surface area. It is more of a modern space, with a crazy door that was done by Joep van Lieshout. This door is a dark green fiberglass on the outside and a teal fiberglass inside and it has a very strange, biomorphic shape.

Wow, does it have a texture?

No.

So it will be a very new context for these sculptures. The space where you originally showed them had a baroque or Italianate interior-

It had a lot of flourishes. It had a big mirror.

Did it have a hardwood floor or parquet?

The floor was concrete. And the space itself was on the first floor.

In Amsterdam, the green door is the entrance from the street?

Yeah, you pass through it to enter the main exhibition. It is a bit of a foyer but also used as gallery space.

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This space is smaller, but it is not enclosed. Thinking about padded rooms and isolation cells and some of the ideas through which these sculptures developed – I'd thought of them as somehow insulating the interior space. Will the experience change if the room is a passageway?

There will also be fewer works.

And you are repeating the same body of work rather than precisely the same pieces. Perhaps that is how we should talk about it. Would you describe the installation as modular?

At first I imagined them as modular, but now they've become fixed – in a way. Do you know what I mean?

By their groupings?

Yes.

Modularity also works that way—certain fixed elements cannot be changed, only their overall configuration. You can make a super long sofa, for example, if you stack multiple “center” pieces together.

The panel is the element that can't be changed.

So the grouping (of panels) is the starting point. Maybe you will put together different groups to create a slightly different tension.

I think the panels will be more densely installed, certainly they will be dispersed floor to ceiling. I will have to see what happens.

In 2017 you wrote the exhibition text for *None of the beauty of the landscape can reach her pupils anymore* and you started it by describing what it feels like to have a body- or sense-memory of a place. I wasn't thinking about it that way at the time, but now I have noticed this idea relates to several different bodies of my work where place memory plays a big role in terms of when works are shown again and also how they become works in the first place. I make all of these different elements in my studio, but they only become sculpture or show up as a work once they are installed in space.

Yes. That's an extremely delicate aspect of your work. Now I'm thinking about the sculpture you showed in the backyard of the apartment building on Essex Street for the Claude Balls show Manhattan last summer. When we saw it again in your studio a few weeks ago, I almost didn't recognize it.

Exactly.

Maybe it was shoved into the corner, but the way you situate elements for “display,” and how they occupy space, is really very fragile. This mode of arrangement seems to trace a kind of body or mental movement, or maybe serve as a stress point, or create a moment of focus. But we should get back to these wall-based sculptures. Do you want to talk about how you started? I remember that all of the coverings—various synthetic fabrics—

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are either stamped with an animal skin texture (“faux”), or printed with a wood grain, all in pastel colors.

The pleather panels approximate snake skin or ostrich and there is one that looks like a wood grain. They are all very ostentatious colors I would say, bright pinks. Orange, chartreuse.

They are materials that you might find in interior spaces, even the pleather I mean, like maybe a nightclub setting. They also remind me of goatskin and shagreen, and how those materials implied luxury in twentieth-century furniture design—Jean-Michel Frank for Hermès in the 1920s. I’ve seen wallpapers made from dyed silk in certain ultra-bourgeois environments (in Milan). There’s supposed to be something soothing about sumptuous interiority. And the warmth of wood paneling—you can find all of these references, skewered, in your panels.

And also: these panels cannot stand, right? They need the wall. I remember thinking that their quasi-modularity, and scale, marked a shift in your practice.

Before this work I made the biomorphic attachment pieces, which were shown in Paris also. Those mostly needed the support of the wall also—to lean on, or attach to—and were very colorful. They altered the interior space by rounding out the corners.

A kind of softening?

Yes, some kind of softening—that was somehow menacing or anxiety provoking as well. This feeling carries over into *None of the Beauty of the landscape can reach her pupils anymore*. You have a hard time focusing on one piece, or another.

And purposely, the installation is not an all-over treatment. This work actually leaves things exposed. Down to the individual panels, I mean—sometimes smaller elements puncture or erupt through the fabric and pleather coverings.

They have splits in them.

Some panels are “laminated” in two different materials or have something jutting from the surface or else poking back in. I see this as either an earnest attempt at full coverage that can never be achieved; or, on the other hand, a desire to unveil—to pull back the cover.

I never thought about it that way

The way you first installed the panels in Paris drew my attention to the height of that space. The work was going up the walls. Perhaps that is what made me so aware of their lack of structure, their inability to stand. The panels really hug the walls and the ceiling. They seem almost shy.

They are hung over the top of the room’s flourishes –ornamental trims and crown mouldings. They cling to this little bit of positionality and are not flush against the wall, nor particularly flat. There is a feeling that maybe they are going to fall off...

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As sculpture, the panels are very dependent on the architecture.

They are.

For me, they have a lot to say about interior space—even psychological interiority.

The wallflower dispersal expresses a certain timidity that makes me think about the grandeur or publicness of certain spaces and the intimacy or privateness of others, and how these are variously organized. That is an unresolved element of modernism, with real psychic effects! It will be interesting to see how this work adapts to the space in Amsterdam, which has a very rectangular shape and also functions as a passageway directly from the street.

Which also brings us to site-specificity. Your work usually takes place within the space of its installation and, for example, at the time that you occupy the space together with it.

Yes, it comes together in response to the architecture of a space.

At the same time, you can show a piece in more than one kind of space. This may be different for the floor works because they in fact create their own space...

They do. And they literally index the footsteps and the movements of people across them.

Do these wall-based panels encourage people to move through a given space differently, or at least be more conscious of that movement? Who or what is being padded; protected?

The title of the Paris exhibition, *None of the beauty of the landscape can reach her pupils any more*, is a quotation from a novel by Elfrieda Jelinek. At a certain point, a character in the book was shocked by something that happened to her so much that she temporarily lost the ability to perceive the outside world. When I was working on the show, I connected these panel pieces to a feeling of being trapped in one's own interiority—to the point that the outside does not register.

Pulling away from perception, from exteriority. I do think these pieces have a “blunting” effect. I’m also thinking about how people design their interior spaces to safeguard their own vision—their own world—from outside influence. An attempt at sheltering, or a desire for control. Whereas landscapes are infinite, expansive, exposed, sublime. They produce the need for fortification.

Still, I don't necessarily have a point when I am making something. The idea was definitely present while I was working; these panels can protect you from sound or soften concrete, etc. The space in Paris where they were shown was not a domestic space. It had all these stylish accents, glamour, there was a big mirror. The panels, having such bright colors, kind of interrupted that. They are not necessarily very relaxing. They are not tasteful. They are pink.

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About the artist:

Olga Balema (Ukraine, 1984) is an artist who currently lives in New York. She makes sculptures. One of the major concerns of her work is form, another material. Another is paying attention to where and how things go into a space. Sometimes the work can be called site respondent, other times it responds only to itself. Her work has been exhibited at Camden Art Center, London, UK; Swiss Institute, New York, US; CAPC, Bordeaux, FR; Whitney Museum for American Art, New York, US; Kunsthalle Basel, Basel, CH. Balema's work is in the collections of among others the Whitney Museum, New York; Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; Centre National des Arts Plasticique, FR and Fondation d'Enterprise Galeries Lafayette, FR.