

BQ

Alexandra Bircken *Musterung*
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Alexandra Bircken's *Musterung* returns to the artist's recurrent fixations: with insides and outsides, surfaces and volumes, bodies and machines. The works perform transformations that are less clear-cut dichotomy than moments of transition or smudging overlap. The artist's imagination creates a mobius loop linking humans to their supportive machinery as entities that can never be fully separated. Anthropomorphic and mechanical associations bear equal weight in these human-object cross pollinations.

Bircken's works begin as enquiries, each aiming to enact the smallest possible gesture to make an object's flipside apparent. Surgical procedures such as amputations, transplants, biopsies and dermabrasions are applied to inanimate things. Motorcycle gas tanks, sanded down and flipped on their axes, are repurposed as armored torsos, both container and protective shield. A wooden rocking horse is neatly dissected and hinged. Internal systems – whether single bones or entire electrical circuits – are extracted and put on display. Released of their structural function, they flop, lifeless, these useless yards of electrical intestine. Malfunction and mortality underscore many of the objects. Adaptation becomes a generative principle, if not a means of survival. A pair of fully clothed seated mannequins, meanwhile, offer a furtive glimpse of narrative.

Each work is, in a sense, a prototype, or *Muster*: a one-off proposal designed for an ambiguous purpose. The German word *Muster* derived in the 15th century from the Italian *mostrare*, meaning to display, reveal or demonstrate, itself coming from the Latin *monstrare*. By the late 15th century, *muster*, in its English usage, had evolved to mean to assemble, collect, or to meet in one place. To *pass muster*, as of the 1570s, meant to survive scrutiny and be judged fit for service, by conforming to standards of appearance or comportment, or achieving a certain level of physical fitness, a readiness for action. *Ausmusterung*, in German, is the process of weeding out, rejecting those that don't meet these standards. The meanings of words shift as they migrate between languages, or across time, but certain undertones remain; in this case, in both English and German, is the military pall of the word 'Muster'.

A *Muster* or *Musterung* can also be a pattern, however, such as those appearing in the knitted wall-hangings displayed here. Their relentless chains of tanks, guns and missiles are signs of omnipresent preoccupations, as war fills up our newsfeeds. The things that are on our minds are pictured compulsively by the stark repeating patterns of the automated knitting machine. How to escape the regimentation of these preformed patterns, this historic recurrence? A skewed insight or single sharp gesture can be enough to change direction. Or perhaps to distract through association, as with Bircken's two new bronze casts, *Lily* and *Chérie*, evidence of another ongoing constant: the sexuality and desire that human bodies both incorporate and anticipate.

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