

ALICE AMATI

SOPHIE BIRCH AND RACHEL YOUN
FIGURES OF SPEECH

A prologue and one act press release by Vanessa Murrell.

PROLOGUE: A “NARRATOR” tells us about Sophie Birch’s oil paintings and Rachel Youn’s kinetic sculptures. The artworks of both meet in a decontextualisation of their reference points, creating metaphors that challenge our sensory experiences.

ACT I: The works begin to speak to each other, asserting their own identity. Youn’s sculptures as “FIGURES”, Birch’s paintings as “SPEECH”.

PROLOGUE

[Scene: Alice Amati gallery. Figures of Speech by Sophie Birch and Rachel Youn. 7 March - 12 April, 2025. 27 Warren Street, W1T 5NB, London]

NARRATOR:

Figures of Speech provides a framework for exploring how ‘language’, whether through vibration or pigment, can reveal more than it signals.

Birch’s paintings examine the unseen forces that shape aural and tactile perception. One of her main investigations is around sound, where elements like the ear’s cochlea (which processes vibrations) and the lateral line (an animal hearing sensor) inspire her works. Her layered paintings are made through tactile marks, using time as a medium for transformation.

While Birch’s brushstrokes simulate finger-painted surfaces, Rachel Youn’s sculptures are made from machines built to touch. Youn sources them second-hand, drawn to their functional failure: designed to replicate human fingers, they were never good enough. Youn’s kinetic sculptures use artificial orchids and real dried flower stems, both existing in a state of controlled perfection, untouched by decay in an illusion of desirable beauty. Yet, they are also subjected to relentless motion, enduring the mechanical torment their works impose.

Both artists share an engagement in radical decontextualisation of their points of departure: one dismantles didactic anatomical imagery, the other repurposes massage machines and exercise platforms. In both cases, the reference points become unrecognisable in the final works. For Birch, the anatomical inspiration is transformed into an ambiguous landscape with a great evocative capacity. In the case of Youn, the functionality of their machines is transformed by mixing them with natural or natural-like and human elements to create kinetic sculptures. The results of both creative processes turn the decontextualisation they share into almost opposite cognitive challenges. In Birch’s case, the sensuality of the images could stimulate imaginations of atmospheric phenomena and in Youn’s, the strangeness of the combined elements in loops strains our imagination with erotic resonances and absurd humour. The spectators therefore access the experience of harmony (Birch) and dissonance (Youn) from these trajectories of decontextualisation.

ALICE AMATI

ACT I

[Scene: Alice Amati gallery. The walls hang Sophie Birch's oil paintings. The colours and layers pulse, barely contained. Nearby, Rachel Youn's kinetic sculptures hum and whirr. They look at each other as if they want to "speak," and then they do.]

FIGURES:

(The orchids tap softly against the wall and then against each other)

Do you think my arms are too slow?

Can you see how they move, looping, always under control?

This is restraint. Are you restrained, too?

SPEECH:

Restraint? I am expansion!

(The paint marks look like speech bubbles, as if about to jump out)

Do you see this?

FIGURES:

Your movement stays stuck on your surface.

You gather light, but keep it trapped.

I pull, twist. I'm not afraid of moving.

SPEECH:

Do you think I'm trapped?

Each layer is time. Each one, a conversation.

Cochleas, cross-sections of ears—sound, vibration.

Can you hear what's inside?

FIGURES:

I only hear the noise of my movements.

SPEECH:

And movement makes you alive?

Everything spins, but you're lost in motion.

Look at me. I'm not afraid to stay in one place.

FIGURES:

(Moves like a possessed spirit)

Pink flowers, my body's always blooming.

But you—You say you're unafraid to stay still,
yet your paint betrays you! It breaks, reforms.

SPEECH:

I've got pinks in me, too.

I've got warmth, sunrise...

FIGURES:

You're like a weather system!

I was a quick fix for their bodies,

until I wasn't. I couldn't replace a person,

so I became something else.

ALICE AMATI

SPEECH:

My hearing center's shifting—
becoming something else, too.
My marks ripple, like the skin of an amphibious.
I am 'exploding,' perhaps 'flowering',
like you—hard to say.

FIGURES:

Sit pretty, they say. Smile, be pleasant.
(Hips gyrating, accelerating)
I've been designed to perform.

SPEECH:

And I've been designed to perform
... the image of hearing.

FIGURES:

(Tendrils reaching out, like a swamp creature)
I look harmless—soft, like moss.
But I twist, I trap. I'm a shaking monster.

SPEECH:

Cover up! I see the lacquer tray under your skirt.
(Layers of paint become translucent)

FIGURES:

Do you see the milky plastic nodules beneath me?
(Creeping across the wall, insect-like)
Your chrysalis is peeling, too!

SPEECH:

There's a flood of something!
Like the yolk of an egg spilling—
My body vibrates...sound waves, the swell of music...
Sirius! Starbells! Flames! Eyeballs! Webbing!
A sudden rush of something natural.

FIGURES:

That rush of artificial touch.
(performing the pressure of someone's fingers)
Resonance, vibration, eroticism!
Exhaustion, submission, servitude!
Simulation, exoticism, hysteria!
Objectification, obscurity, womanhood!
Tricks, traps, tradition... repetition!

SPEECH:

Allusion.
Illusion.
All of it.
Both of us.



ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Sophie Birch (b. 1992, Littlehampton, UK) lives and works in London, UK. She holds a BA in Fine Art: Painting from the Wimbledon College of Art, London (2014) and completed The Drawing Year at The Royal Drawing School, London (2019). Recent exhibitions include: 'Twofold Vision', Baert Gallery, Los Angeles (2024); 'Panta Rhei', Alice Amati, London, UK (2024); 'In Praise of Shadows', Melzi Fine Art, Milan, Italy (2024); 'A Painting Show', Staffordshire Street Gallery, London, UK (2024); 'Fruit and French Windows', Calcio Gallery, London, UK (2023); 'felt cute, might delete later', Arusha Contemporary, London, UK (2023); 'Hawthorn and the Feast of Julian', Arusha Contemporary, New York, US (2023); 'Nobody's Home', Andrea Festa Fine Art, Rome (online) (2023); 'Primeval', Unit 1 Gallery, London, UK (2023); 'Folding Thresholds', dARTS, Paynes Wharf, London, UK (2022); 'OVERSPILL', Terrace Gallery, London, UK (2022); 'Separate Ways Together', 11 Sydney Mews, London, UK (2022) and 'A Plot, Hatched by Two', Yorkton Workshops, London, UK (2022). She was a part of the Dumfries House Residency in Scotland in 2023, and was shortlisted for the Contemporary British Painting Prize in 2022.

Rachel Youn (Rachel Youn (b. 1994, Abington, PA) is an American artist working across sculpture and installation. They received their BFA from the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis and completed their MFA at Yale School of Art in New Haven, CT (2024). Recent solo exhibitions include: 'Pleasure Circuit', Soy Capitán, Berlin, DE (2024); 'Well-Adjusted', Night Gallery, Los Angeles, CA (2023); 'No Pain No Gain', Sargent's Daughters, New York (2022); 'Revival', Soy Capitán, Berlin, DE (2022); 'Greener than grass', Truman State University Art Gallery, Kirksville, MO (2022); 'Underparty', HAIR + NAILS, Minneapolis, MN (2021). Selected group shows include: 'A Garden of Promise and Dissent', The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT (2024); 'Freshly For You', HAIR + NAILS, New York, NY (2024); 'Gone Fishin', ILY2, Portland, OR (2024); 'A Thousand Plateaus', SHRINE, New York (2024); 'Flawless Waltz', Soy Capitán, Berlin, DE (2024); 'Summer Camp', Sargent's Daughters, New York (2024); 'The Last Laugh', PODIUM, Hong Kong (2024); 'Perfect Trouble: Queering Culturenature', Wave Hill, New York (2024); 'Gestures of Resistance', LINSEED and A.I., London, UK (2023); 'The Butterfly Effect', Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, IT (2023); 'Hot Spot', Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, IT (2022). Youn is a recipient of the Lighthouse Works Fellowship, Vermont Studio Center Fellowship and the 2020 Great Rivers Biennial Award. They are represented by Sargent's Daughters and Soy Capitán.

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Alice Amati is a contemporary art gallery established in Fitzrovia in June 2023. The gallery is committed to fostering artists at the early stages of their career by often providing the opportunity for their first solo show in the city and a supportive context for artistic explorations and career development. Concerned with encouraging transnational dialogues around topical questions within society and art, Alice Amati brings together British and International artists through a challenging, experimental and rigorous exhibitions programme. Joining a cohort of young and established galleries in the burgeoning artistic scene of Fitzrovia, Alice Amati operates as a platform for new voices in the contemporary global artistic scene with a strong commitment to research, collaboration and diverse practices.

For more information, sales enquiries, interview and image requests please contact: info@aliceamati.com