

# Kunstraum Dornbirn

# Sophie Hirsch



# Sophie Hirsch *Child's Play*

## Overview

Sophie Hirsch at  
Kunstraum Dornbirn

Press preview Wednesday, 12 March 2025, 10:30 a.m.

Artist talk Friday, 14 March 2025, 2 p.m.

Exhibition duration 14 March until 9 June 2025

„Dornbirn Vernissage-Triathlon“ – Opening

Joint opening event on Thursday, 13 March 2025:

- 6 p.m. FLATZ Museum | Centre for Photography
- 7 p.m. Kunstraum Dornbirn
- 8 p.m. designforum Vorarlberg at CampusVäre

After-Work-Tour

Thursdays at 6 p.m.

8 May and 5 June 2025

Download press images

→ [kunstraumdornbirn.at](https://kunstraumdornbirn.at)

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**Sophie Hirsch** invites us to an encounter with ourselves at **Kunstraum Dornbirn**. Entering the former assembly hall, we find ourselves looking into our innermost being. A huge, two-part sculptural image hangs from a height of around six metres. Our first impression is that we are gazing at a close-up of motionless, glued-together fascia or flesh streaked with fat: cream-coloured, shiny silicone, hand-moulded, parasitically connected with a rich red fabric, each part three by four metres. Eyelets puncture the layers at points, providing openings for round steel chains and tension springs. The impression is violent and fascinating at the same time: a range of intimate emotions unfolds – shocking and brutal, beautiful and repulsive, irresistible and attractive.

The exhibition's title, **"Child's Play"**, reinforces this individual experience of ambivalence. Hirsch dissects the relationship between psyche and body in an aesthetically appealing way, exposing the inner dissonances of being human as systemic and culturally conditioned, arising from socialisation and, above all, fluid. Her sculptures quote functional mechanisms of bodily experience and self-care. Hirsch finds both a discursive field and quotable forms in the teachings of Joseph Pilates. Hard foam rollers for massaging the fasciae become decorative elements. Massage balls are filled with concrete and counterbalance one another. The loss of their original function reduces them to functioning as quotations. They turn into symbols, counteracted by the sheer carnality of the silicone.

**"Child's Play" at Kunstraum Dornbirn marks an important step in Hirsch's artistic development.** For the first time, she explores her characteristic themes beyond the dimensions of wall works, furniture-like objects or installations that can be physically handled by one person. Here she has developed an installation specially conceived for the location, based on modular scaffolding as sculptural material, display, support and room sketch.

**Sophie Hirsch** invites us to an encounter with ourselves at **Kunstraum Dornbirn**. Whether the encounter should be taken as a playful exploration or a confrontational juxtaposition is up to us. Entering the historic assembly hall, we look directly into our innermost selves. A huge sculptural image in two parts hangs from a height of around six metres. Our first impression is that we are gazing at a close-up of glued-together fascia or fat-covered flesh: cream-coloured, shiny silicone, hand-moulded, parasitically connected to a rich red fabric, each part measuring three by four metres. Eyelets puncture the layers at points, providing openings for round steel chains and tension springs. The heavy hanging shreds are anchored to the floor, hung, lashed and bound to the supporting scaffolding. The impression is violent and fascinating at the same time: a range of intimate emotions unfolds – shocking and brutal, beautiful and repulsive, irresistible and attractive.

This complex ambivalence dominates our entrance into “Child's Play”. The exhibition title is a semantic setting that reinforces the individual experience of ambivalence. The idiom “child's play” means something very easy, the antithesis of the “seriousness of life”. Children's play is an almost fictional space worth protecting. But, in view of the hanging carnality of Hirsch's opulent object-like painting, where else could we be except smack in the seriousness of life? All the more so when the work invokes themes like fetishes, passion, vulnerability and violence, particularly directed against female bodies or bodies deviating from the norm? The fascinating aesthetic of the objects helps us to overcome the brutality conjured up by the mind games and images. The shiny surface of the silicone has such an intense tactile appeal that it is hard to resist. Drawn ineluctably in, the trusting fearlessness of a will to explore, grasp and conceptualise surmounts the initial shock of culturally formed recognition. The sensual is successfully established as a means of experience and knowledge, through which Hirsch cancels out the distance between us and art.

Conceived as an experimental setup, the installation marks an important step in Hirsch's artistic development. The starting point is the exhibition space's specific architectural conditions. For the first time, Hirsch explores her characteristic themes beyond the dimensions of wall works, furniture-like objects or installations that can be physically handled by one person. In addition to the hard factors, such as the spatial dimensions and rows of windows, the history of the former assembly hall and its connection to inatura, the interactive natural history museum opposite it, are important for the installation. This result is an interplay of location, space, audience profile and artistic work. Allusions to playground design with frameworks and pathways provide opportunities for discovery.

The entire composition, with its materials such as fascia rollers and tension springs, its balanced suspensions and balancing of tension and pressure, tells of motion and simultaneous motionlessness.

“Child’s Play” consists of three framework complexes, identical in the system of their modular parts, but developed into different constructions. The first structure spreads out into the space, providing a frame for smaller silicone works hanging on chains attached to the side arms. Further back is a lower structure that serially repeats a frame of scaffolding rods. Threaded through each horizontal rod are round steel chains, with small massage balls hanging from the ends. A brutal intervention fills these balls with cement and they are anchored to steel eyebolts and attached to the chains. The balls seem to hold one another in balance, preventing the chains from slipping through the rods. In the far corner of the room a construction rises up whose shape is reminiscent of a grandstand. Reaching a height of seven metres at its highest point and measuring around 3.6 metres in width and almost five metres in length, it dominates the space. Its rods, which look like steps, are covered with numerous red fascia rollers.

The scaffolding parts are industrial products that appear fragile within the monumental space owing to their size and greyness, while at the same time developing a body of their own. Room sketches, they also serve as frame and support, thus still displaying their original function. Their role oscillates between exhibition display and exhibited work itself. They are an integral part of a temporary installation: at the end of the exhibition, the connecting elements will be returned to their original use as scaffolding and excluded from the fund of materials elevated to the status of art.

Using scaffolding as a sculptural material has long had a steady place in Hirsch’s art. One example is the works in the exhibition “Structural Integration” at 83 Pitt Street, New York City (2017). Here the artist creates a fragile balance in frameworks with tension springs held taut by pieces of concrete. The title refers to the “structural integration” method developed in the 1950s, aiming to optimise the body’s structure through fascia treatment and training of movement sequences to support pain-free movement. The exercise equipment developed by Joseph Pilates in the 1920s, such as the “Chair” or the “Reformer”, also finds its way into Hirsch’s balancing of sculptural building blocks, then as now. For Hirsch, Pilates’ teachings provide a discursive field for physical revitalisation, metaphorically unfolding the theme of balance through stretching and strengthening.

Another aspect these methods have in common is an all-encompassing claim that mental well-being and harmony are part of physical training: nothing less than the Greek idea of a Paideia for the holistic development of human being is here the inspiration. More than 50 years after Pilates' death, the enduring enthusiasm for his method is closely linked to our permanent availability today, the search for stable work-life balances, the constant exhibiting and judging of our own actions and appearance – not only around the clock in social media but also (still) in systematically discriminatory patriarchal-capitalist structures and precarious workplaces. With the steadily mounting pressure on the individual in an atomised society, holistic methods and mindfulness training are becoming an unprecedented global trend, promising a cure-all. This contributes massively to the systemic exhaustion plaguing many social groups (ironically running counter to the methods' aims). Anyone can "practise" at home using YouTube – so if you can't cope, it's your own fault, isn't it? The ironclad, unattainable goal is the Greek ideal: harmony of body and mind. Child's play, surely, in this day and age!

Hirsch dissects this relationship between psyche and body in a way that exposes the inner dissonances of being human as systemic and culturally conditioned, arising from socialisation and, above all, fluid. She searches for a path of radical acceptance to integrate these differences and ambivalences. Her highly aesthetic structures quote functional mechanisms of self-care and bodily experience. The furniture-like sculptures employ fascia rollers and massage balls as what they are, namely aids for relaxing the muscles and loosening blockages in the fascial tissue surrounding muscles, organs and nerves. Using a fascia roller can be a painful process, to which people consciously and repeatedly subject themselves to achieve relief and improvement. It could be read as a metaphor for life. Hirsch's silicone works seem close to such painful experiences, for at first sight they can be shocking. The most beautiful moment lies in overcoming this brief shock: when, at second glance, what innerly holds us together becomes marvellous, sensual and desirable, and we can let this curiosity and emotion take hold of us.

In "Child's Play", fascia rollers and massage balls are stripped of their original function, as they can no longer be so used in the scaffolding constructions. Now decorative elements employed as quotations, they become symbols, counteracted at the same time by the sheer carnality of the silicone elements. By moulding a plaster surface, the silicone functions as a memory for traces of the artist's body. The resultant structures are eerily familiar to us because they reflect what physically holds us together. Between the devices,

elements and frameworks, these works lay out a formal and substantial representation of our selves.

Flesh and blood, even as imitations, have long been an integral part of various narratives in art, across genders and media. At the same time, they are still subject to taboos that have been regularly scrutinised, transgressed and explored anew, increasingly since the 1970s by positions read as female. Hirsch's works in red fabric and silicone are reminiscent of flesh, fascial tissue and blood, but are not imitations. They are something of their own. Yet they still treat the entire range of reference narratively and tangibly: blood as the universal substance of life, as the quintessence of the living body, the untouchable interior. Oscillating between artificial and organic, Hirsch evokes the fascination of the authentic and underpins this experience with spaces of existential possibility that feed back into our reality.

### Short biography

**Sophie Hirsch** was born in 1986 in Vienna, where she lives and works today. She studied Sculpture and Multimedia at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna from 2006-2011 and at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 2004-2006, specializing in photography and sculpture.

### About us

Kunstraum Dornbirn was founded in 1987 as a non-profit association with the aim of presenting and communicating contemporary art. Since 2003, the exhibitions have found ideal conditions for the showing of large-scale installations in the historic assembly hall of the former Rüscher-Werke, a machine factory in Dornbirn's Municipal Gardens (Stadtgarten). The quality of the architecture in its original, raw state offers space for the presentation of current trends in international art. We show established, internationally renowned artists and newer positions in about four exhibitions every year.

The exhibition history of Kunstraum Dornbirn is marked by international artists such as Toni Schmale (2024), Chiharu Shiota (2023), Monika Sosnowska and Robert Kuśmirowski (both 2022), Tony Oursler (2021), Atelier Van Lishout and Claudia Comte (both 2020), Hans Op de Beek (2017), Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg (2016), Berlinde de Bruyckere (2015), Not Vital and Tue Greenford (both 2012), Jan Kopp (2010) and Mark Dion (2008), and Austrian artists such as Judith Fegerl (2023), Peter Sandbichler (2021), Bernd Oppl (2019), Thomas Feuerstein (2018) and Roman Signer (2008).

### Location and infrastructure

Vorarlberg is located in the four-country region around Lake Constance, with fast routes to and a lively exchange with Germany, Switzerland and Liechtenstein as well as other parts of Austria. The region is not only scenically attractive for tourism but can also boast the further appeal of the most diverse institutions' dense and high-quality cultural activities in the performing and visual arts.

The large brick assembly hall was built on the grounds of the Rüscher-Werke in 1893. In 1999/2000, the area was redesigned as municipal gardens in an international landscape planning competition. The re-design preserved important buildings of the Rüscher-Werke such as the assembly hall and created an urban recreational and cultural site. With a length of 30 metres and a width of 14 metres, the hall measures a total area of 420 m².

### Support

**The exhibition programme is realized thanks to the support of our subsidy providers, sponsors and project partners!**

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