

“*STRETCH*” is a comprehensive retrospective of work by artist Alexandra Bircken, showing both early and new site-specific pieces. A fundamental parameter of her work is experimentation with materials, with the body as a key point of departure. Her multi-layered, meticulously-constructed sculptures explore skin as covering, as an organ and a cellular structure, but also as a boundary between inside and outside. Materials used in her objects are notable for their strikingly diverse, often contradictory qualities: plaster models, waxes, mannequin fragments and pieces of clothing stand in for body parts; structures packed with wool are used as set pieces and interwoven with one another.

Bircken’s (b. 1967, lives in Cologne) works captivate with their aurally charged material presence and uncanny conjuring of the human body and its protective coverings, be it fabric or architecture. *Walking House* (2016), for example, has the look of an archaic treehouse or – as the title suggests – a modular, apparently mobile domicile. The angular, structural piece stands in stark contrast to the soft, flowing forms found in the recent coarse-weave, woolen textile/ornament *Cocoon Club* (2016).

Museum Abteiberg will be showing around sixty works by the artist in the large temporary exhibition hall and open exhibition area at the street level. Visitors to the exhibition will be confronted with various sculptures resembling human figures draped on stairs, standing or lying in pose. These figurative works are put in relation to the machine as a man-made apparatus or instrument of power. Topics such as the claim to dominance and protection associated with motorcycle clothing and motorcycles, or the protective pretensions of weapons come to the fore through visible traces of injury – as seen in the figures made of motorcycle clothing, for example. Machines, weapons and two motorcycles are decontextualized with cuts.

This exhibition, which was realized in cooperation with the Kunstverein in Hannover (where it was shown September 30 – November 27, 2016), is the first public showing of early objects and sketches developed at the interface between fashion and art. The shop “*Alex*” (Cologne) is an artwork started by Bircken in 2003. The artist had previously trained as a fashion designer at St. Martins College in London, where she taught for many years and made a name for herself with her fashion label “Faridi,” among other projects. Her early accessories also show a distinct, artistic interest in objects and spaces. Alexandra Bircken developed large-scale, site-specific interventions that illuminate the interplay between man and machine, as well as figures or robots in space. The exhibition parcours as a spatial world of protagonists and formal transformations shifts focus to the visitors themselves and their own relationship to time and the world.

Alexandra Birken’s work has recently been featured in museums including Museum Boijmans Van

Beuningen Rotterdam (2014) and The Hepworth Wakefield (2014). Previous exhibitions include those at the Kunstverein in Hamburg (2012), Studio Voltaire in London (2011), and the Kölnischer Kunstverein (2010). The exhibition “*STRETCH*” was realized in conjunction with the Kunstverein Hannover and creates different spatial situations at both locations. A new monograph of Alexandra Bircken’s work will also be published as part of the exhibition tour.

The Museum Abteiberg exhibition and artist’s publication are made possible with generous support from Sparda Bank West’s Foundation for Art, Culture and Social Affairs. The exhibition will close with a finissage concert proposed by Alexandra Bircken for the multimedia Ensemblia Festival in Mönchengladbach.

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