

Saskia Doherty
with Louise Bourgeois
+ Stanya Kahn
Coffee in the morgue

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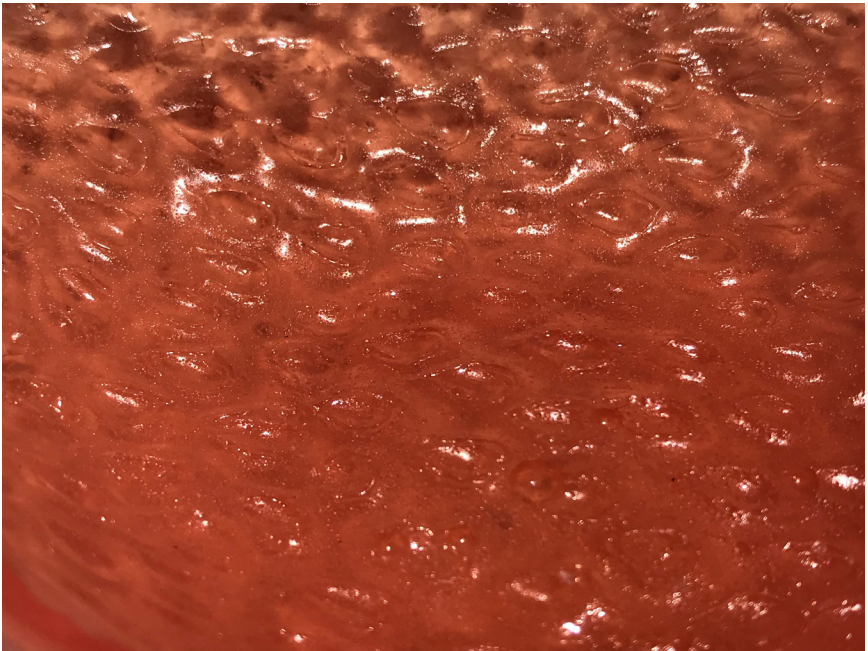
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Saskia Doherty
with Louise Bourgeois + Stanya Kahn
Curated by Madé Spencer-Castle
Coffee in the Morgue
29.11.17—23.12.17



Edge of body rimmed with something brittle
Imagined as hull, or two parts with seam
Salmon bakes in the bricks my belly swells
I am imbibed by ants and mosquitos
Here for reminiscence, the first scent

Smoking a Corona and driving me back to the city
He explains to me the difference between archaeol-
ogy and geology
One contains no humans
Just daddy's hands, a golden parachute
The smell of metal makes me feel sick

She ate in the morgue
Complained about the coffee, opines to me a lin-
eage
A fiction about embalming
A suppressant against erection
Grinding eggshells and sculling vinegar

I thought of the strawberry in the house by the
hospital
Hyacinths in the yard and first blue October
I ate it whole, leaves and all
Failed to make a distinction: chicken scratching
In search of the grain, eyes straining

As anacrusis she filled in my memory, the buzzing
in her ear
The hand that drained the ether from lacustrine
darkness
Like organs leeching in the heat
I sleep with hair over, covers pulled up
Shielded from the buzzing that threatens my kilter

He keeps a bear head in the roof
The roof of his head is golden
He shot a snake he
Came face to face with a white muzzle on a white
background
He felt fear for the only time in his life

Lens finds a face in darkness
And I registered something metallic in the wipe
In shadows on a hot day, in lashes and moustaches
But I have learned to swallow those aversions
A force of blushful habit

She told me about him as I bit the apple
A clear sweet syrup dried
I dreamed of another man's house last night, seep-
ing earthwards in the middle
Every time I come here I am met with prickly pear
and sticky sweet
Takeaways for the year ahead

His son pulled a rifle in the dining hall
Second hand carbon rustling arms
For a moment it points in my direction
Embracing, mouths open I think of boars
I smell salmon, I think of bears

Internal contradictions are rife in Saskia Doherty's *Coffee in the morgue*. But rather than working against one another, vying for a single position of supremacy, these contradictions simply exist, communicating the way in which we internalise and live with inherited traumas while also existing as finite individuals. Materially Doherty's works mimic these traits insofar as they appear to be very delicate, but often take regeneration as their thematic. Elsewhere in the exhibition, sculptures present concurrently abject and opulent sensibilities that talk to Doherty's exploration of the body as a site of reproduction but also as a site of pleasure and sensuality. Ultimately, Doherty works from personal experiences, choosing to combine mnemonic cues that, ironically, culminate in what she calls, 'the futility of articulation.' Relinquishing any desire to narrate, Doherty has elected to present a concise collection of materially driven works that beckon the viewer to feel — physically and mentally — all while working within the confines of the visual.

Take for instance a plaster cast of the artist's arm composed of tobacco leaves and set with PVA glue. As an a-historical piece, the work is a self-contained paradox of regeneration and deterioration: the cast is an object association with healing; the tobacco leaves, in contrast, connote the degeneration of the body. Doherty recalls the smell of the cigars her biological father would smoke while driving her home. A geologist by trade, he would recount stories about his profession in a fashion that Doherty noted was extremely detached. Indeed, these stories encapsulated the difficult relationship Doherty had with her father insofar as he used geology to justify a distance

from humans. In its entirety, the piece is extremely fragile, both metaphorically and materially, and this fragility is observed elsewhere in the exhibition. These pieces and others in *Coffee in the morgue* are derived from Doherty's past experiences. However, Doherty takes pain to emphasise that, though they come out of memory, they stand on their own. And it is through her selection of evocative materials that she is able to create works that her audience can associate with.

The parallel between Doherty's work and the work of Stanya Kahn rests in both artists' capacity to effortlessly weave personal traumas — be they significant or superficial — with the poetics of a fluid representational manner that exists in antithesis to the documentary style. In the video *Sandra* (2009), Kahn communicates the variable nature of narratives filtered through one generation to the next. Interspersed between a morbidly comical scene of Kahn's mother, Sandra, detailing the arrangements for her own funeral are a number of scenes where Sandra recalls past experiences that, narrated with extreme confidence, nonetheless can not be verified as 'truth.' In the same vein, Doherty's work considers the capacity of time to augment narrative whilst also relying upon the fragility of her materials to speak to this intangibility. Doherty loosely recalls her grandmother cooking ox tongues by casting moulds of prickly pear with ballistics gel. As such, the narrative goes through a number of tangential transformations, eventually resulting in small, yellow gels that are ambiguous as tongue or prickly pear, but which speak to the impossibility of chronology.

The inclusion of Louise Bourgeois's *Bed I* (1997), considers a sensibility of historical feminist practice that Doherty has built upon. Though it is safe to say that Bourgeois's second wave feminism has largely been superseded by more progressive, intersectional forms of feminism, it is her evocation of touch and sensuality that links her practice to Doherty's. An emphasis upon touch and feel is palpable in *Bed I*. The fleshy lips shrouded in the blanket's comforting arc suggest a certain domesticity that is not at odds with the sensual. In the same vein, Doherty's work pushes the boundaries of preconceived schisms to reconcile the body with the thematic of ancestry that does not preclude the body as a conduit for sensuality. The artist presents a strawberry 'skin', that is abject in its evocation of deteriorating flesh. Culturally, however, the fruit is associated with sexuality and romance but is also evocative of the confectionary that tempted us as children, and Doherty has pointed out that strawberries are unusual in that, with their seeds on their surfaces, they are essentially inverted sex organs. Thus, this single work presents sensuality, reproduction and food by way of its reference point, but its visual referencing of human flesh also evokes notions of decomposition. Indeed, this single object represents what Doherty calls 'the failure of categories' insofar as it neatly harbours a number of thematics that overlap and inform one another but which, semantically, exist in opposition.

Certainly, food is a favoured mnemonic device of Doherty's. As a subject matter, it collapses and holds, combining collective and personal histories that Doherty evokes through non-traditional representa-

tion, that might be typified by the strawberry 'skin' and prickly pear 'tongues'. In addition to the skin and tongues, Doherty presents two whittled apple branches resting against the wall of the gallery. Though devoid of fruit, the branches nonetheless speak to the potential of food production that represents regeneration. On the other hand, the symbol of the apple connotes, amongst other things, the notion of sin in the biblical sense. This regenerate/degenerate binary metaphorises Doherty's experiences of personal histories as simultaneously comforting and difficult to reconcile. With their leg-like branch formations and nodules that resemble nipples, the association between the branches and the body is reinforced. In addition, the haphazardness of preservation is entwined in Doherty's presentation of the material. Shellac has been painted onto sections where Doherty has cut off the lateral branches, yet the wood will continue to deteriorate, changing colour from green to dark brown throughout the duration of the exhibition. As such, the notion of futility comes into effect. But with this futility also comes a sense of emancipation where the viewer is given permission to experience rather than grasp.

Perhaps the biggest contradiction contained in the works of *Coffee in the morgue* is that Doherty's work is extremely tactile but must be felt from afar and without touching. However, rather than creating a division between sight and feel, Doherty's works evoke a sense of touch through familiar visual tropes, trusting in a common set of associations that her audience is able to make on their own. In this sense, her practice must not convey the entirety of personal experience, but

can present fragments that overlap with the personal histories of others. Doherty's work refuses to articulate a personal history. Contained but tangential, these works feel through history, privileging sensibility over reason.

Amelia Winata is a Melbourne-based writer and curator.

Coffee in the morgue presents a new suite of discrete sculptures by Saskia Doherty, presented alongside works by Louise Bourgeois and Stanya Kahn. This project forms part of Bus Projects' *With Compliments* series, that explores the way Australian artists locate their work within an international dialogue.

Referencing forensic and funereal techniques, Saskia Doherty's sculptures draw on personal and familial memories to create a set of objects embodying anxiety, care, denial and desire.

Louise Bourgeois appears courtesy of a private collection, Melbourne.

Stanya Kahn is represented by Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles.

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Saskia Doherty is an artist and writer whose work takes form primarily as sculpture, drawing, text, and sound. Saskia has participated in exhibitions and events at organisations including Monash University Museum of Art, Tophane-i Amire Arts and Culture Centre [Istanbul], the National Gallery of Victoria, the National Art School [Sydney], TarraWarra Museum of Modern Art and West Space. Saskia lives and works in Naarm Melbourne on the unceded sovereign land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation.

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