

IN THE STUDIO



Nina Canell Sculptor

‘The work lies in how the thought process emerges with the material’

By KAREN WRIGHT
Portrait by OLIVER MARK

Nina Canell's light-filled studio in Berlin seems a long way from Växjö, Sweden, where she was born in 1979. She remembers growing up in the countryside – “thick forest and the occasional lake” – far from this kind of urban environment.

She has lived in Berlin for four years, moving here from Dublin with Robin Watkins, her husband and now artistic collaborator, and Otto, their young son. “I bought a studio before I got the living space.” The studio, previously a doctor's surgery, has been transformed. The small rooms, including four bathrooms, are now converted into a bright open space which overlook a train track. She enjoys the movement of the trains, which create activity in a still environment.

Canell's sculpture often deals with the idea of the ephemeral. “I like the process of bringing the periphery to the centre.” There is a modesty of scale in Canell's sculptures, and although they allude to scientific phenomenon – electricity, magnetism or water, there is a low-tech quality about them, a dreaminess that denies a heavy-handed rigour. “For me, the work doesn't lie in resolving the process. It lies in how the thought process emerges with the material.”

Today the studio is quite empty. “I just came back from a long trip to Mexico, and before that I was finishing the Camden [Art Centre, London] show, so here it's only just fragments of ideas”.

It is therefore not surprising to see a space full of potential – “experiments” in various stages of completion. She enjoys the scale of this space, “being quite a small place to produce things”. On the floor lie a group of ceramic

Lightbulb moment: Nina Canell in her Berlin studio

glasses in various shades of purple, mementoes of a residency in New York City. They were made in the late 1800s, she explains, and are part of lightning conductors. “Ornamental objects that may also serve a certain purpose.” They still show the evidence that electricity had surged through them. She points to a damaged conductor, testimony to a lightning strike.

A tangle of Ethernet cords lies nearby, another vestige of an idea that may or may not be realized. “Some things that have been here for ages that I don't know why they're still lying here, but I guess I have some faith that something will happen!”

Another of Canell's works involved electricity or a lack of it – impelling a group of 10 collectors to share ownership of a work. “I constructed these synchronised blackouts that would happen unannounced. Every month there would be one blackout happening at the same time in all their houses.”

Canell has to go off to pick up her son from his nursery. He is two years old and speaks Swedish and English, and is picking up a bit of German. Will they stay in Berlin? “It's a super-good place to work in and I like the sleepiness of it in some ways.”

Nina Canell: Near Here, Baltic, Newcastle upon Tyne (0191 261 3830) 18 April to 20 July