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Nina Canell: *Stray Warmings*, Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis, 15 February - 6 April 2013

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Nina Canell: *Stray Warmings*, installation shot; courtesy Midway Contemporary Art

Stray Warmings could not be a more apt title, readily pulling the viewer in from the frigid, ice-covered world outside the gallery. Canell, an Irish-educated Swedish native, was a well considered choice for a February show at Midway with her attentiveness to geography and history with the grace of poetic subtlety. The warmings are captured currents of electricity, contained within the conductive environment of copper. *Stray* moments of intense warmth linger in deeper reds contrasting with cooler greens in remnant copper pipes strewn on the floor or propped upright in stray pieces of concrete and brick. The industrial past lingers in the copper cables that built modern communication, and

holds a fondness for the former days of materially bound contact as we launch into unbound WiFi. Canell seeks to materially manifest, in a variety of forms, the different ways that we connect. Stray Warmings links Minnesota, Ireland, and Sweden where, for many months of the year, warmth is coveted because it is so fleeting and a relief when found. Susceptible to holiday advertising perhaps, what with St. Valentine's Day just days before I heard Nina Canell in conversation with Dieter Roelstraete, I kept finding an unseen energy either still pulsing within the object (the neon of Softer Corner and magnetism of Mender) or its remnant left in burn marks (in the small stick of Halfway Between Opposite Ends) or darker, deeper colorations within the copper found in multiple pieces. Therefore, I concluded that the overarching theme is love.



Nina Canell: The Hidden One, Function generator, cables, speaker, Collaboration with Robin Watkins, 2013; courtesy Midway Contemporary Art



Nina Canell: Remembrance (Colourless), Chewing gum, concrete, 2013; courtesy Midway Contemporary Art

In some works, energy emerges as a communicative force, maintaining a link to the copper and electricity references of twentieth-century communication networks. In Remembrance (Colourless) a piece of chewed pink gum nestles in the corner with its friend and exact concrete replica, and energy is seen or, should I say, unseen in their pairing, same yet different, in constant dialogue about materiality. Their bonded forms, so exactly replicated in each other, articulate the overall theme of interconnectivity. Canell has used gum before and refers to its associations with ruminating, mulling over something, physical proof lodged in the malleable substance that takes the imprint of connecting jaws and movement of the tongue. With the two wads of the gum / concrete pair positioned so near, chewing movements also connotes talking it out, gabbing, or having a good natter. Connection or interconnectivity is found in the flow of energy reciprocating back and forth, surging through copper cables or unseen in sound waves. Therein lies the warmth of conviviality, the loving bond.



Nina Canell: Stray Warmings, installation shot; courtesy Midway Contemporary Art

What does all this love look like? Well, in this show that really doesn't matter; much the same as in real love, looks are notwithstanding. For at first the strewn pieces of copper piping on the floor of the gallery in the work Stray Warmings might be mistaken for leftovers from some functional construction, ready for scrapping, waiting for monetary repurposing. But that which is left over, looked over, or disregarded is also that which is stumbled upon, ready to be found and have new energy pulsed through its mass and renewed. There are possible markings of hand-crafted manipulations that have made small branch-like forms, thus connecting the copper to its natural source. Partnered with slight (dis)colorations created naturally through the application of a heat source, the aesthetic is revealed in the innate essence of copper. Canell, I believe, wants the viewer to think so much about copper and its inherent qualities because it is a conduit for energy, warmth, connection, luminosity (a glow rather than illumination), and sound (those fast-moving waves that connect us).



Nina Canell: Stray Warmings, installation shot; courtesy Midway Contemporary Art



Nina Canell: Stray Warmings (detail), heated copper, stones, glass, 2013; courtesy Midway Contemporary Art

The Hidden One emits a sound so loud and at such an intense frequency that we cannot actually hear it, strain as you might to tune out the other sounds around it - it is inaudible by the adult human ear, only dogs and some children can hear it. Makes me think, what else am I missing? Again this returns to the themes of the overlooked and peripheral, but also the pomposity of the central protagonist to know and have it all. It is that singularity which is utterly crushed in this show and is what makes the warmth within it so compelling. The rugged individual, self-sufficient and alone, begins to look artificial, manufactured and preposterous because it must be cold, very cold without the energy of connection, the warmth of conduits for conversation, without two separate matters pulsing through the barriers of difference. Softer Corner, a large, soft-edged square built of copper pipes with one corner made of white neon, rests in a corner of the gallery. Neon does not have the wiring of an incandescent light bulb, but is a heating of gas only visible with an electric current. Softer and warmer, this safe and enveloping corner, away from the mainstream traffic, becomes the most desirable place to be. The neon glow, removed from its crass commercial heritage, returns to its material glory of being a noble gas nurtured by the conduits of electricity and copper, which work together to create a new light. All this productive interdependency, I can't help thinking of true love.



Nina Canell: Soft Corner, copper, neon, cable, 5000V, 2013; courtesy Midway Contemporary Art

Value is placed elsewhere in Canell's art, beyond the visible and audible realm, to be found within a tension between connection and movement, at once bonded and yet at a moment's release. Mender is the clearest representation of this beautiful relationship (love) as magnetised nails, simple household nails, dangle from each other in mutual attraction in a branch-like formation. Their bond is invisible, but as an artwork, the viewer is bound to look for their connectivity, to search for the physical, material bonding agent at the tip of the nails. Mender, truly temporal, could be instantly pulled apart; connection interfered with by human contact. Magnetism, like love, defies human logic, and depends on invisible forces that science seeks to explain. Without tangible, visible evidence the viewer is asked to suspend disbelief and doubt to return to a sense of wonder of the natural world and the trenchant world of feelings, especially the warm feelings of connection.



Nina Canell: Mender, nails, magnet, 2012, private Collection, Paris; courtesy Midway Contemporary Art



Nina Canell: Slight Heat of the Eyelid, heated copper frame, glass, 2013; courtesy Midway Contemporary Art

As counterpoint to Canell's argument, *Slight Heat of the Eyelid* offers up a fully formed, welded, 'real' artwork, a copper frame the size of a conventional easel painting sitting slightly lower than usual. The frame signifies the gaze, the outline of a space to be looked at; however, this frame is empty, and thus attempts to thwart aesthetics. But, of course, the appearance of the frame is what the viewer is drawn to aesthetically ponder. Ooh, look at the rosy hue of the shiny, bronzy copper in the upper left-hand corner; look at how it's made by overlapping copper sheets on the lower arm of the frame. The structure is cohesive, solid, and some may feel relieved to finally have something to look at (it is technically the 'last' work in the exhibition as the viewer is asked to proceed clockwise and the work is last on the list of works). But Canell is too subtle an artist to allow for a coherent progression from scraps, threads, stray bits and pieces to culminate in the bonded frame.

In fact, with the intense focus on the essence of her preferred materials, the visual and the aesthetic are denigrated in Canell's art. *Slight Heat* is a linguistic play on the title of the other piece, *Stray Warmings*, uniting these two works as a pair. Upon first glance, the frame of glistening copper looks more valuable, because it looks crafted, more visually substantial than a concept. *Slight Heat* elevates copper to art, even though a frame traditionally operates as the functional container of art rather than as art. Canell takes the title of this work from 2008 *Mother's Tankstation* exhibition in which she first used the title *Slight Heat of the Eyelid*. By mentioning the eyelid, the closed eye is referenced, and perhaps the dreaming mind, as the rapid eye movement of the dreaming state heats the eyelid. Equally as compelling is reading the closed eye as a reference to blind ethics and aesthetics as touted by Joanna Zylińska. With the removal of the judgmental power of vision, with its associations with enlightenment, blindness offers a different way to know the other that does not rely on scopically owning the other through the "masterly gaze" but utilizes "the horizontal gesture of the outstretched hands [of the blind]."

Inside the frame is nothing to look at, which again the viewer is bound to search for something, wonder what he or she is missing (like the sound they can't hear). Touching the artwork is not encouraged, but rather sensing the unseen or invisible is encouraged. Energy conduits, interconnecting and creating warmth, hold much more value than what the eye and aesthetics provide for the viewer of Canell's *Stray Warmings*.