

Obscured in **Nina**
Canell's weird
 science is a
 metaphor
 for the
 pleasures
 of
 beholding
 art

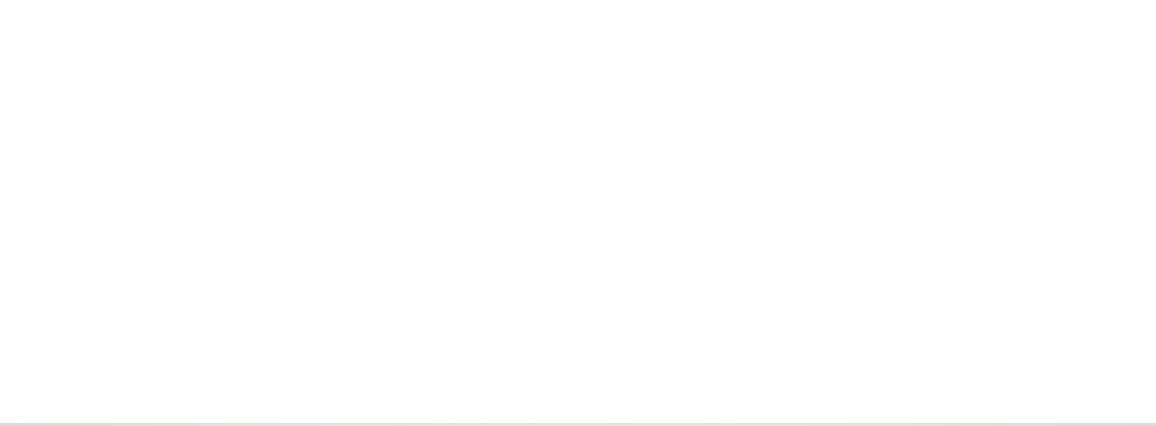


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 WORDS: CHRIS SHARP

It seems to be an unwritten rule that any work of art featuring water is bound to enchant. Maybe it has something to do with how unstable, fleeting and formless a substance it is, and consequently how consummately it contradicts the old Latin aphorism *ars longa, vita brevis*.

The work of Berlin-based Swedish artist Nina Canell is certainly no exception to the water/enchantment axiom – especially given that it is preoccupied with precisely the quality that generally does make water so captivating: its constant transformation. Take *Five Kinds of Water*, Canell's recent solo exhibition at the Hamburg Kunstverein: one work, *Perpetuum Mobile (2400 KG)* (2009), starred water both as a material – or rather substance – and as agent of transformation. In this work, the liquid contained in a round tin tub is made to disperse throughout the air by way of ultrasound: a mechanism vibrates so rapidly that it turns the water into a mist, and the mist in turn gradually permeates and hardens a nearby collection of cement bags into concrete. As if to underline the hidden, sonic nature of the work, the process is periodically amplified and broadcast throughout the space by loudspeakers.

Perpetuum Mobile... bears out a claim often made about Canell's work, as existing 'somewhere between object and event'.



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In fact, many of the artist's pieces seem to be less sculptures than eccentric science experiments conducted with flea market dreck and spare parts, or demonstrations of an obscure, questionable nature, inspired by such démodé ideas as Sir William Crookes's conception of radiation as a state of matter, demonstrated in Canell's use of waveforms (those within or outside human perception) as a sculptural material in her prizewinning Art Statement at last summer's Art Basel. And while there's much to be said about the ungainly and highly textured beauty of these works, sometimes just figuring out how they function or what they are doing can become a metaphor for the joy of looking at art, the way that, say, the teleological unfolding of Fischli & Weiss's *The Way Things Go* (1987) – a not-so-distant relative of Canell's beguiling concoctions – is a joy to behold and puzzle through.

Take for instance *Anatomy of Dirt in Quiet Water* (2008). Also featuring water, this bit of weird science, which is arrayed along the floor in the form of speakers, pipes, cords and a ramshackle wooden armature, presents three different ways to amplify the sound of a small piece of wood, which turns via an electric motor atop a piece of vertical plumbing: first directly, then through a bowl of water and finally through transformation into flickering light. Any mystification with regard to meaning is eclipsed by the initial mystification of what this piece is actually *doing*. But the *wherefore*, the motivation for this piece, aside from discreetly enacting a series of phenomenological transformations, seems to belong to the private logic typically reserved for the truly driven, the eccentric or the certifiably mad.

While there is a mood of playful, let's-see-if-this-works experimentation to what Canell does – comparable to the dry and understated glee of Roman Signer's often explosive let's-see-what-happens sculptures – such playfulness is coherently unified by a very individual formal vocabulary, replete with certain motifs,

along an axis of a specific set of interests which are informed by the materials she uses. From the recurrent, nonlinguistic use of neon – a gas contained in glass tubing, and which interests Canell for just that reason – to various kinds of electric, small-fry machinery, to conductors such as bones and water, and finally to sound, which is harnessed and manifested in any number of ways with her regular collaborator, experimental musician Robin Watkins, the materials have a way of coming back time and again.

I am tempted to say that a common trope is the conjunction of the organic with the inorganic, but given Canell's oddly earthy sensibility and her penchant for analogue artefact, everything she touches tends to take on a weirdly organic allure. A torn scrap of green plastic bag held against a wall by the air blown from a small black electric fan atop a plunger (*Sleep Machine*, 2008) should not look natural, or somehow wholesome, as neither should her sculptural, earthbound constellations, composed of pots overflowing with mists, or her medleys of amorphous neon and various and sundry objects. And yet her work betrays none of the chilly remoteness often known to dog the use of technology in art. It is marked by a tactile and, inevitably, human warmth.

That said, something inhuman, if not mystical, would seem to be astir in Canell's inspired tinkering. Of the optical order of composed invocations, or ritualistic arrangement, the sculptures blur into a kind of scientific or materialistic shamanism, without, however, getting bogged down in heavy symbolism. If Beuys or any Arte Povera artists ever cast a shadow over Canell's practice, they do so from a healthy distance, largely limiting their penumbral presence to a series of visual cues. But this is not to say the work doesn't court such charmed ambiguity – which, along with other things (see above), manages successfully to draw and keep many a bewitched viewer under Canell's spell. •

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Perpetuum Mobile (2400 KG), 2009,
water, bucket, steel, cement, mist-machine, amplifier, hydrophone.
Courtesy the artist and Konrad Fischer Galerie, Berlin & Düsseldorf

Sleep Machine, 2008,
broom handle, plastic bag, electric fan, cable.
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin

Winter Work, 2009,
stick, stone, neon, 2000 V, 130 x 45 x 15 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Mother's Tankstation, Dublin

To Be Hidden and So Invisible (21000 Hz), 2009,
sublimated watermelon, speaker, function generator,
amplifier, cable, wood, 23 x 92 x 26 cm.
Private collection, Vincenza