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The Promise of Moving Things

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Nina Canell, *Treetops, Hillsides and Ditches*, 2011, mastic gum and logs, dimensions variable

A series of four exhibitions curated by Chris Sharp, 'The Registry of Promise' explores humankind's changing relationship to the world at a time when impending economic and ecological disaster have, for many, eroded the belief in progress. The first exhibition, titled 'The Promise of Melancholy and Ecology' was held in July at Fondazione Giuliani in Rome, and addressed our problematic relation to nature, while the second, 'The Promise of Multiple Temporalities' (which closed in September), at Parc Saint Léger, Pougues-les-Eaux, questioned the concepts of linear time and progress. 'The Promise of Moving Things' at Crédac is the third chapter in the series. Highlighting the fatal consequences of environmental devastation, it portrays a post-apocalyptic universe devoid of human activity, in which only alien, mutant objects are able to survive.

Reflecting the diverse influences – from Surrealism through Animism to Object-Oriented Ontology – that inform much current object-based art, the exhibition incorporates a number of pieces in which objects seem to take on human traits and emotions. In Michael E. Smith's *Untitled* (2014), the motor of a handheld circular saw has been implanted in the front section of a welding mask. The pairing of these incongruous objects evokes the Comte de Lautréamont's famous description of an encounter between an umbrella and a sewing-machine that so inspired the Surrealists. However, by embedding the saw in the mask, the artist also conflates two conflicting forces, aggression and protection – an allusion, perhaps, to the often fraught relations between individuals or states. Meanwhile, in Mandla Reuter's installation *The Agreement, Vienna* (2011), a wardrobe unsettles the supposedly secure environment of the exhibition space by hovering in mid-air.

Other works muddle the very definition of the object. Smith's second piece, also *Untitled* (2014), consists of a black wire harness ripped out of a car that snakes and curls like viscous entrails across the ceiling at the entrance to the exhibition. Like Antoine Nessi's *Unknown Organs* (2014) – a collection of grotesque steel, aluminium and brass sculptures evoking mechanized body parts – Smith's harness has more of an affinity with the 'thing' described by W.J.T. Mitchell in his book *What do Pictures Want?* (2005) than with such discrete, readily identifiable objects as wardrobes. As Mitchell writes: "Things" are no longer passively waiting for a concept, theory, or sovereign subject to arrange them in ordered ranks of objecthood. "The Thing" rears its head – a rough beast or sci-fi monster, a repressed returnee, an obdurate materiality.' The monstrous hybrid sculptures by Smith and Nessi likewise resist classification.

Most striking of all however, are those works that query anthropocentric thinking. Nina Canell's sculpture *Treetops, Hillsides and Ditches* (2011) consists of four upright shafts of wood, on the upper ends of which the artist has spread lumps of mastic gum that imperceptibly ooze down the logs over the course of the exhibition. The gum forms furrows, grooves and hill-like protuberances, testifying to the artist's interest in processes such as gravity and entropy, which lie beyond human control. Although this exhibition does not focus on a particular philosophical movement, Object-Oriented Ontology has its place here: its emphasis on objects and their interactions with each other seems particularly relevant not only to Canell's piece, but also to Alexander Gutke's film *Auto-scope* (2012). Here, a piece of film embarks on a journey that takes it through the interior of a projector out into the world, over the snowy landscape in which the projector is installed and back again to the point from which it began. As the celluloid interacts with its environment, the viewer looks on, seeing what an object 'perceives'.

Tying together these different approaches to the object, Hans Schabus's *Konstruktion des Himmels* (Celestial Construction, 1994) consists of balls of wax of different colours and sizes scattered around the pool of light cast by an architect's lamp lying on its side. The wax balls are a reference to the constellation *Apparatus Sculptoris* (Sculptor's Studio), identified by the 18th-century astronomer Nicolas Louis de Lacaille. Yet, grouped around the recumbent lamp, the balls also evoke the more prosaic scenario of a game during which the lamp was knocked down. Their positioning is moreover entirely at the discretion of the curator, who thereby superimposes his own vision of the constellation *Apparatus Sculptoris* – and hence of a sculptor's studio – onto that of De Lacaille. The piece formulates the question raised by all the works in the exhibition: are the properties and qualities we attribute to them merely our projections, or are they inherent in the objects themselves?

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