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The attraction of small mysteries

I find that my normal preference for works of art is that they should be large.

I like paintings on a grand scale – let's fill that wall; I like sculptures to be at least as big as I am, or preferably a whole lot bigger. If it's photography I have a disinclination to peer at small prints, however exquisite. I like them to be blown up – huge – in the way favoured by Andreas Gurski. In my own work I always tend to want to make stuff larger than is often practical.

It was interesting therefore to look at the work of Swedish artist Nina Canell, recently showing at the Camden Arts Centre, whose work had been recommended to me precisely because of what she manages to achieve on a smaller, more intimate scale. Even the largest of her pieces could be measured by the span of your arms. Their impact was drawn not from their size but from the thoughtful manipulation of the materials, which led viewers to see familiar objects and familiar surroundings in a new way. While that is often said of contemporary art, in this case it was actually true. Among what was a strong collection, I found, somewhat to my surprise, it was the smaller pieces that I found the most interesting.

Canell's art encompasses science and illusion. One of the most fascinating of the works simply comprised seven somewhat bent steel nails hanging improbably from the wall. They clung together without any apparent form of support. In fact it was done through the power of magnetism. The normal gallery instruction not to touch the art works seemed particularly important in this case – one little nudge and it looked as if the whole piece would go skittering to the floor.



Also intriguing was a single drinking glass set on a piece of carpet, and containing what? I spent a long time looking at it and could not decide. The wall information said "coagulated air", which is what it looked like. The piece of carpet on which it was displayed stopped one getting close enough really to inspect the contents, so it had the effect of making me question what I was seeing. Were the forms inside the glass slightly changing as I looked? Was there vapour coming off the contents or were my eyes playing tricks? I tried to find a scientific explanation; could it be essentially dry ice in the glass and, if so, how was it kept refrigerated? I have since Googled it, to find most commentators have accepted the description at face value. "The artist has placed coagulated air in a glass." Come on, air is not blood, it doesn't coagulate naturally. One site said it was an industrially produced material, which may well be true but still didn't shed any light on what it was actually made of.



In the exhibition Canell also showed a fascination with electric cables. One piece, no bigger than a pork knuckle, was displayed on a pedestal. It looked like an animal or human body part. Here you could get close to look at the intricacy of the wires that were leading nowhere. The outer covering of the cable had been cut back, the insulating layer so revealed, looked like fat under skin.

Other cables were displayed in tanks reminiscent of those used for preserved specimens. Each piece of cable was supported as though precious, but, by cutting it up and placing it within water, its function had been destroyed. The effect of the glass and water meant that, depending on position, it sometimes looked as though the tanks contained multiple pieces rather than just the one.





One of the more puzzling was a small tank by the wall apparently holding a piece of computer cable. Yet when you looked inside, the tank was empty. I spent a long time looking at this piece before finally working out that it was not done with mirrors but the cable was stuck to the wall behind.

The exhibition did not entirely remove my preference for larger works. There was one work which featured pieces of chewing gum again on a carpet. This was influenced by Canell seeing an archeological exhibition which had included a piece of pitch from 20000 year ago which still bore the marks of ancient teeth. I too would have found that interesting; I can see that the work could have been intended to make us more conscious of our chewing gum strewn environment. However, visually I did not feel it worked partly because the individual pieces of chewing gum were simply too small to examine, or perhaps I needed better spectacles. I was not entirely convinced by the work that comprised shredded socks.

It is rare that in any exhibition you like every single piece; for me this was worth visiting just to look at the nails taking no more than a square foot of wall, just hanging there, held in place by what appeared to be magic. And I would still dearly like to know how she made coagulated air.