

Resistance to Melting

My partner always has to stop me playing with candles at restaurants. I love picking at the hot wax, making it pour out faster, but I always wind up making a mess. So when I saw Koitila's new works, covered in wax I swooned a bit. They call to me and speak a language deep inside our subconscious. For thousands of years humans had only the light of a candle, or a lamp to ward off the night, the dark, and all the scary creatures real or imagined just outside the door. Wax is still something familiar to most of us even if we only use candles to enhance the mood, seduce a lover, or pray to a deity. It is not usually seen as a sculptural material, it easily breaks and gets dirty, it is not a permanent coating, it seems temporary, and a bit transgressive. When we think of wax as a sculptural material it is usually seen as the stage before an object is cast in bronze. The lost wax method of casting is a simple one, an original object (usually clay) is placed in a plaster mould, and then a wax version is cast. The wax is then embedded in plaster and burnt out, leaving an empty space for hot metal. Koitila often leaves her pieces in what might seem the intermediary state, but they are truly finished. There is nothing undone about them.

What is equally disturbing about her works, are the things that she encases in wax; a hang man's noose, a ball of barb wire, or a metal chain. These found readymade objects call back to Duchamp and his fondness for erotically charging objects by his selection and placement of them. His *A Bruit Secret (With Hidden Noise, 1916)* is an assisted readymade whereby he took a ball of string and sandwiched it between two brass plates. Before the string was sealed in, he asked Walter Arensberg (a collector and friend) to place something inside the center of the ball of string so that when the work was shaken it would rattle. Duchamp asked Arensberg never to tell him or anyone else what was inside. Secrets are erotic by their very nature as is pouring a bit of hot wax on the chest of a lover, as long as you don't burn them. Koitila uses wax to allude to the inherent violence of covering and concealing while at the same time hinting at its healing and 'forgiving' quality. Her series of white wax balls is called *Under the duvet*, where lovers are often found.

Koitila winds strand of barbed wire into balls before covering them in wax. They come as solo works like *Metates* (2015) or as part of a whole installation as in *Emulsion* (2015), and bring vibrant pigment into her palate. *Metates* is dark, almost blue black and is ominous and lurking while the *Emulsion* works are brightly coloured (but veiled in wax), and form a garden of thorns, some bright green, others orange or yellow, all set in thickets of brown and grey. It is as if the wall of thorns surrounding the mythic Sleeping Beauty has been transformed, not by a prince, but Koitila who has fought those dangerous barbs and struggled to bring them back to us as treasure. There is such a palpable tension to these works, as if the constrained wire could burst out of the caressing wax at any moment. The works exist and thrive in that fragile wax. Yet her monumental ball *Earth* (2018, 120 cm) is cast in bronze and is situated in the wilds of a Swedish (Skulptur i Pilane, Sweden) landscape. The ball has been patinated a dark brown or black, and then a green verdigris races across it like split or thrown wax. The wax works look light and airy while *Earth* sinks into the world under its own massive weight (ca 300 kilos). It looks as if it has fallen from the sky and might have crushed lone hill walker under its weight as it landed.

It is the potential for danger that makes *Frozen Failure* (2013) so uncomfortable to look at. The work comprises a group of rope nooses that hang from a wooden beam, a private failure, or perhaps is it a state failure we are looking at. Many countries still use this barbaric method of punishment and sadly many young men use it on themselves (men commit over 75% of all suicides). Koitila confronts us with their and our own mortality. Equally disturbing is her *Breath* (2018) where white wax joins a clear plastic mouthpiece from a snorkel to a white bone (a plaster cast of a human bone). Any attempt to make the mouthpiece function is doomed to failure, breathing in is impossible, and just looking at it catches our breath. The artwork could belong to an unknown group of first nations people, or a museum for pre-Columbian artifacts. It has a strange and dark power to it, which suggests the suffocation of the nooses.

These works compliment other sculptures like *Oxymoron* (2014) from her *Time that Remains* exhibition. In this sculpture Koitila has placed 21 huge burnt wooden matches in a perfect circle that reminds us of a sun, or a clock, but a very odd one, one not based on the regular

24 hours. Each stick is blackened at the end, as if it had been set alight by some giant or troll with a neatness disorder. It speaks of chaos, fire, disruption, and yet is so perfectly anal. In its tidiness it references another work in that show *Ouroboros*, a classical Greek image of a serpent eating its own tail meant to depict the cyclic nature of the seasons, if not time or life itself. Koitila's circle is made up of small plaster objects that look like human vertebrae placed in an anatomically impossible yoga pose. She based the plaster objects on a found flint stone, which she thought looked like a finger. Equally bone-like are the stones that she has found and strung together forming a cross between vertebrae and the double helix form of DNA. Koitila's *DNA* and *DNA2* (2013) are strung together, not by nucleotide molecules (made up of phosphates, sugars and nitrogen) but black nylon cord and primary coloured plastic stoppers. The contrast between the natural colour of the stones and the man made materials is jarring, and speaks of the models made by Watson and Crick (1953) that first enlightened the world of DNA's structure.

Koitila takes universals and makes them very personal. Her visual language is quirky and very much her own, yet it has the power to speak to us regardless of which language we come to it from. The use of throw away materials or those that seem to have been found in a rubble heap - broken Plexiglass, plaster, ash and salt (in the work *Crash of Air*, 2015) – all melt our resistance to the seductive way she has with these most unlikely and unpromising artistic media.

Michael Petry, 2018