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“Anna Sew Hoy & Diedrick Brackens
at Various Small Fires”

by Aaron Horst

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There’s a tension in Anna Sew Hoy’s work between compositional strangeness and casual-seeming mess. Whether or not this vexes you as a viewer depends, I suppose, on your level of tolerance for ambiguous states, or for objects that exist somewhere in the space between the clumsy hand and the graceful mind. Sew Hoy’s latest show at Various Small Fires, *The Wettest Letter*, continued in the vein that the artist has mined for years—mutable stoneware frozen by firing, augmented with fabric and leather accessorizing that suggest the expression of identity as a contradictory state, both endless and formative.

If ambiguity, by definition, needn’t cohere, then the risk of vagueness is one Sew Hoy seems comfortable taking. A corollary to this approach is that her resulting works, often pitched to a nebulous scale somewhere between art and bodily object, invite a high level of projection from the viewer. *Blood Moon Breastplate* (all works 2019)—a frontal, layered disc of fired clay, with bits of denim and repurposed scrunchies gripping projecting “hooks” of clay on the face—alludes to an awkward kind of wearability. A softer, inner oval of red flocking suggests bodily softness, even as the dimension, shape, and ostensible

weight of the piece all conspire against the actuality of wear.

Within the gallery, Sew Hoy’s pieces alternated between wall and “pedestal” (no-nonsense arrangements of cinder block) mounts, though others, like *Accumulation Entropy II* and *Veiled Orb* were simply piled or plopped directly on the ground. *Orb* muddled its evocative central form—a faceted orb of fired clay with a beguiling, black-glazed interior—with cast-over leather netting. *Comfort Soft (Bobbi)* spoke to *Veiled Orb* from across the room with t-shirts wrapping its fired clay arched form, and an interior pool of orange ping pong balls. Sports, athleticism, and allusions to battle were only a few of the loose thematic threads here, dropping and appearing so casually as to culminate in a gauzy suggestion of latent physicality.

Thrown Shade I similarly took a beguiling central object—a black mirror, surrounded by a thick cord of denim and corduroy—and cast over it a droopy piece of black lace. The reference to “throwing shade”—drag parlance for being rude (or honest!)—was funny, if clumsy. *Face’s Place* and *Cheeky Kid* each featured similarly placed, and seemingly precariously balanced, mounds of fired clay perched within rounded openings on each disk’s face—these openings were connected by limp cords of suede and silk. The mounds might have been breasts, hands, or protozoa, but to Sew Hoy’s credit they came off, somehow, as mysteriously alive.

The courtyard at Various Small Fires—stark white walls, usually ablaze in the L.A. sun, and Turf Terminator-style gravel—can feel either appropriately shorn of distraction or annihilatingly barebones, and Sew Hoy’s five works here got a bit swallowed up by their context. Never quite formidable (even anti-monumental) as objects,

her pieces came off as awkwardly domestic. If *Psychic Grotto Birdbath*, *First Position* did indeed do double duty as both birdbath and sculptural object, *Within, within III* was, appreciably, somewhere between bird hospice, bird tomb, and termite mound. *Accumulation Entropy I* consisted of a handful of used electronics partially embedded in a husk of plaster—a kind of contemporary economic hairball, clotting various kinds of waste together, like a landed snippet of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. As art, *Accumulation Entropy I* had the curious function of performative debasement, if not the added magic of transmuting value in the form of a salable object where none was previously divined.



Sew Hoy's combinatory play—heavy stoneware with lightweight fabric, the historicizing weight of ceramic form plagued by of-the-moment detritus—can easily fall down a relational rabbit hole, feeling random here and purposeful there. Though, this is in its own way a perverse approximation of the forming of identity, to which Sew Hoy's titles alluded. According to the press release, Sew Hoy's title came via a riddle, told to her by artist Liz Larner. "What is the wettest letter of the alphabet? Answer: the C." Liquid suggests many states—moving, buoyant, ruminative, uncontained—and Sew Hoy's output, always shifting, resides somewhere therein. Diedrick Brackens, by contrast, in *unholy ghosts*, an exhibition of his weavings showing alongside

Sew Hoy at *Various Small Fires*, finds narrative in liquidity.

Brackens' hanging threads in *immersion circle* (all works 2019) had the disturbing air of liquid—whether blood or water—dripping from a dark, supine figure in the upper third of the composition. A black bear, or dragon-like figure with yellow threads loosely outlining its face, crawled over a shoreline to the bottom right, perhaps departing from the water that buoyed the figure above. A less narrative threesome of works hung together nearby—*nuclear sum*, *braided gate*, and *tongue and teeth form first*—each containing crisscrossing lines and a similar three panel structure. While the warps on each included static red and blue lines running top to bottom on either side, the wefts varied between colored and black threads, forming shapes suggestive of genetic or algorithmic coding.

Though Brackens and Sew Hoy traffic, loosely, in similar languages of bodily identity and intimacy, Sew Hoy's is a wandering, evasive thematic where Brackens' tends towards the plaintive, cerebral, and narrative. Both foregrounded a messiness of process, evinced as much in Brackens' loose threads and uneven cuts of fabric (see *look spit out*) as in Sew Hoy's pile of sand and computer parts (*Accumulation Entropy II*), and this hurried quality can come off as a self-conscious refusal of technical prowess. The theme of the body, as an unknowable and beguiling entity, despite its intimate familiarity, is fitting—something to be approached, sketched out, but never fixed.