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OPENINGS

KELLY AKASHI

SUZANNE HUDSON



Kelly Akashi, *Finger Figure (detail)*, 2016, bronze, copper, brass, anodized aluminum wire, 28 × 28 × 44".

KELLY AKASHI titled her most recent solo show at Ghebaly Gallery in Los Angeles, in 2016, "Being as a Thing." As names go, it was an especially good one. It posited existence itself as a thing, encouraging a reading of the sculptures contained therein—so many material skins out of which Akashi slithered—as harboring independent states of being, despite emphatic registrations of origin. Hands are surrogates and metonyms, extremities that preserve in bronze the friction ridge on a fingertip; an odd, talon-like nail; or plump pockets of skin elsewhere giving way to bone. At the entry, Akashi installed *At Rest*, 2016: two bronze hands, each dangling from a rope draped over a partition and counterbalanced on the other side by another disembodied hand tethered to the same taut line. Just farther inside, *Finger Figure*, 2016, multiplied the titular appendage, the crook of one supporting a free-floating constellation of still more digits hanging from twisted wire. The work suggests the imbrication of the maker in the thing made, albeit as a distanced relationship recalled in the passage of body to cast to part-object.

From model to mold to bronze: This ancient sequence is a miniature cosmogenesis, with the fabricator wrestling form from a molten primordial inferno. Yet Akashi's surrogates are equally resonant within a lineage of countermyths traceable to Giacometti's attenuations, Duchamp's perverse supplements, and so on. Wax, for Akashi, is not just an essential component of the casting process; it stands on its own as self-immolating sculpture. Candles have been a mainstay in Akashi's work since 2012, sometimes evoked in serpentine bronze shapes that preserve the contours of the igneous substance that engendered them, but more often presented rather than represented. They curl in on themselves, forming brightly hued knots and blobs, or stand erect as blocky columns; sometimes they grow like parasites off of a wreath or pool to snugly fill a glass bowl. They may hang from the ceiling in interlocking chains, as in *Tangle 3*, 2015, or adorn a chandelier, as in *Candle Filter Structure (Axis Mundi)*, 2015, at LA's Château Shatto gallery. In all instances, they sweat when lit, their deliquescence a ritual memorialized by dripped traces. These cast-off patterns become focal elements of Akashi's installations, resinous excrement granted aesthetic status; yet they also alert viewers to the fact of a candle's having been present at some earlier point and having undergone irrevocable alteration. The "when" of this ceremony has shifted from site to site, as the candles in one show may remain unlit for weeks, while in another they might be melted away by the end of opening day, the expiration of the only candles for a specific work (e.g., in London in 2016, when Akashi showed her *Downtime Machine* sculptures, 2014–, at the David Roberts Art Foundation). The parameters for use notwithstanding, all of Akashi's wax sculptures put whomever Akashi nominates as the "host" in charge of their display—the artist herself or a curator, gallerist, or collector—in the position of steward of experience

rather than custodian of objects, unless one maintains these changeable works in a state of unchanging prolepsis, totems of perpetual futurity.

In Akashi's oeuvre, longevity is nowhere assumed. Impermanence takes scintillant form in her effervescent glassworks, which taunt her with their fragility in the course of blowing them. Her photograms index these strange vessels as otherworldly shapes, warped by filters and rendered nearly ectoplasmic. Positioned on tabletops, where they are clustered like votive offerings in intricate display vignettes, they tempt the seismic gods. A ride in a hot car trunk is enough to soften and deform them. Akashi, a graduate of Otis College of Art and Design and the University of Southern California and an LA native, seems drawn to a site-specific eschatology of earthquake and heat wave, with her choices of material admitting corporeal precarity within the aspirant safety of the white cube.



Kelly Akashi, *Activity Table*, 2016, cherrywood, wax, glass, wicks, 40 × 72 × 63".

Given her penchant for material mobilizations of risk and uncertainty, it's not surprising that Akashi's art often entails suspension as the physical correlate of suspense. *At Rest* and *Finger Figure* are only two of many works by Akashi in which objects hang or dangle—ungrounded, unstable, at rest only provisionally, if at all. *Ring*, 2015, shown in Charlie White's curatorial endeavor "SOGTFO" at Ghebaly two years ago, was a large bronze donut that appeared more than heavy enough to snap the rope that encircled it, its hypothetically imminent free fall not unrelated to our own. For her contribution to the Hammer Museum's 2016 edition of *Made in LA*, "a, the, though, only," Akashi insinuated a group of sculptures, collectively nominated *Eat Me*, into the courtyard. Here, too, cast bronze hands pulled on cords, though this time their counterweights were cast rubber forms. Draped from the building's architecture like an oversize necklace, a lovely pink amulet—ostensibly doubling a decomposing onion and also summoning the exquisite contours of a seashell—unapologetically looked most like genitalia. Although this object appears fixed in photographs documenting the show, as does the knotted, open-weave, nest-like form that rounded out Akashi's contribution, each participated fully in the ambient environment: They swayed in the breeze, hoisted above eye level but just near enough to make their visceral materiality the precondition for a stymied tactility. Out of viewers' reach, they were also out of Akashi's, stirred by wind and compromised by slackening wire, gravity, and exposure to the elements outdoors.

These agentless operations and nonsentient energies are as much a part of Akashi's craft—where craftsmanship alternately figures as process, nominal subject, and makeshift cosmology—as the lungfuls of air that conjure her glass objects. The title of *Five Breaths Piercing a Wall*, 2015, a glass halo in coruscating colors, embedded in gallery drywall, suggests that the sculpture is formed by breath. This is a chestnut of the medium, life breathed into something exogenous, the proverbial clay. There *are* enlivening forces at work here, an animation of inert matter, as in our most atavistic conceptions of sculpture. But the transubstantiation by which Pygmalion supposedly bestows subjectivity on his feminine ideal (in fact, he's just turning one kind of object into another) is divested of magic, reimagined around a different politics. Instead of the static binary of creator and subaltern creation, we find a physics of friability and contingency, nonhierarchical concatenations of elements that act on and with one another in ways that can't be predetermined. As propositions, Akashi's works are both/and rather than either/or.

She herself is everywhere and nowhere in her art. *Figure 14 or My Alphabet*, 2014–15, the long table that anchored her exhibition "&" at New York's Tomorrow gallery in 2015–16, displayed her fingernail clippings, antique beads, wood, alabaster, and so much else, histories sloughed off and reaggregated. That work, like

the more recent arrangements at Ghebaly—newly stacked higher, as towers that recall shelves in Akashi's studio, where things were long kept before being deployed for public presentation—shows glass to be permeable to light and, more broadly, art necessarily beholden to separation, then penetration from without. Akashi wrote, for “&”: “You are the Objects that grew up around Me for the past few years. I named you My Alphabet and hung you on the wall as a relic of last year. You are scorched and broken like our world. . . . Can't help but love to watch you grow. I was your mother after all.” What Akashi models here is something like the intentionality of care, and an intimacy that is also an otherness.

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