

# Under the Spell of Sculptor Kelly Akashi's Eerie, Tactile Elegance

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Kelly Akashi, "Feel Me," (2017)

KYLE KNODELL

There is an eerie loveliness, a troubled elegance, to the work of Los Angeles-based artist Kelly Akashi. Insides and outsides are defined, then confused; materials behave as themselves, then pose as something else; objects look familiar, but perform strangely. In other words, she's a sculptor in the classic California tradition that celebrates eccentricity as a kind of instinctive intelligence. (Akashi completed her MFA at the University of Southern California in 2014; her BFA at Otis College of Art and Design in 2006.) An exhibition at SculptureCenter, her first solo institutional show, is formally tight, conceptually brainy, and materially astute—not to mention appealingly weird.

Art traditionally forbids touch (as in: look, but don't...); it is principally the territory of vision. Though visitors aren't allowed or encouraged to meddle with Akashi's sculptures, the artist offers cerebral encounters with tactility, invoking the hand as a maker of things, and as a thing made. Hands and fingers cast in bronze—her hands and fingers, one presumes—appear throughout. Amputated (loosed, freed) from the body, an appendage becomes yet another object in the world: a shape, a weight, a sign. In *Feel Me* (all

works 2017), a pair of hands is slung across the top of a tall concrete incline, tethered together by a rope. It's a balancing act: One scales up by its fingertips on one side, anchoring the other which hangs down on the other, the end of the rope wildly frayed beneath it — a cushion against the cold, rough surface of the cement.



Detail from "Feel Me," (2017)

KYLE KNODELL

Looking at Akashi's body/objects (or object/bodies) feels a bit like watching the material world sense itself, encounter itself, shift and repurpose its constituent elements, natural and otherwise. The lone cast bronze digit of Finger Figure hangs from the ceiling at the show's entrance by a bronze wire rope, and points down toward the subterranean galleries of SculptureCenter where most of her exhibition is installed. The finger casts a stubby shadow onto the floor, like a morbid sundial tracking the passing of time by the movement of light. But here, the main light source is electric, somewhat constant, so the finger and its shadow are suspended not only in space, but in time.



Long Exposure also muses on object, light, and time (titled as it is after the photo strategy of leaving the aperture open for an extended period). A round, mossy, blown-glass vessel (shaped not unlike a Japanese fishing float) is tied by a rope to a cast-bronze tree branch installed beneath a skylight. On the branches are perched what looked to be curls of metal—solar panels, we're told. The panels are slowly charged by the sunlight, which in turn charges a hidden element inside the glass vessel; duration brings illumination. The day I visited, there was no detectable glow coming from the sculpture; rather, I was struck by how difficult it was to see the bronze branch, read its details, since against the lightwell it mostly disappeared into silhouette.



Detail of "Carbon Copy," (2017)

KYLE KNODELL

Although heady and entirely graceful, there is also something decidedly macabre about Akashi's art. Severed extremities, curling candles burnt, wax drippings, hanging ropes, glass vessels flayed open like skin and half-filled with still water: the undercurrents of her installations aren't exactly violent, but carry an energy that might be called "post-event," possessing an unsettled presence somewhere between detritus and memorial. The SculptureCenter's drafty, raw-walled basement galleries always feel more like a crypt beneath a cathedral than an exhibition space, and Akashi's work makes best use of its unshakable creepiness. Down here, her oddities—candles wrapped around a bronze branch; creamy, abstract photograms made by placing her glass works onto paper; more vessels, hands, and fingers—take on the aura of relics.



Detail of "An Archive from Two Perspectives," (2017)

KYLE KNODELL

Double Penetration is a jaundiced-yellow transparent glass orb with gaping holes blown through it – like a buoy designed to sink. Long strands of rope—knotted at the top, tatty at the ends—thread through its top, wind inside its interior, then snake through its punctures, dropping limply onto a round cherrywood platform. The title tips its hat to perversity, pleasure, and the pornographic, but any transgressions are formal, straight-faced, simply demonstrating that what goes in must come out.



"An Archive from Two Perspectives," (2017) installation view

KYLE KNODELL

An Archive from Two Perspectives is installed inside the basement's central tunnel. In metaphor, as in fact, it cuts through (and to) the heart of the show. Akashi set two tall tables flush against the wall, on top of which she placed objects and materials we know well by now—bulbous-bottomed glass pieces, more long ropes—and some we don't: ortho litho film prints of tree leaves, a delicate glass funnel that bores straight through the table top. The installation is a bit like a Kelly Akashi Reader, the elements of her work laid out for closer study, though she calls it an archive, so perhaps it's more accurately understood as a repository of sorts, a time capsule for objects she's made and declared things of the past.



"Image of Two Things," (2017)

KYLE KNODELL

In one of Akashi's weirdest moves, a bronze finger with a torn-up nail pokes out the top of a pale blue glass funnel lying on the Archive table. Out its rear extends a generous tail of rope—a bizarre creature, unnatural if logically constructed. A hole occasions one of two conditions: emptiness, or occupation. (Nature abhors a vacuum; art despises a lost opportunity.) With this piece, Akashi seems to signal a future phase of all this collapse: Out of the old come new beings, new beginnings, new unearthly concoctions.



**"Finger Figure," (2017)**

KYLE KNODELL

**Kelly Akashi: Long Exposure**

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*Through December 18*

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